

**THE MALE NOVELIST AND THE 'WOMAN QUESTION': GEORGE
MEREDITH'S PRESENTATION OF HIS HEROINES IN *THE EGOIST* (1879) AND
DIANA OF THE CROSSWAYS (1885)**

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ALAN NIGEL BELL

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on four early works, then three from his middle period and three from the 1890s, this dissertation explores Meredith's role as a novelist in the unfolding of a social and literary paradox, namely, that with the death of George Eliot in 1880, the dominant writers of fiction were male, and this remained the case until the advent of Virginia Woolf, while at the same time the woman's movement for emancipation in all spheres of life—domestic, commercial, professional and political—was gathering in strength and conviction. None of the late nineteenth-century male novelists—James, Hardy, Moore and Gissing, as well as Meredith—was ideologically committed to the feminist cause; in fact the very term 'feminist' did not begin to become current in England until the mid-1890s. But they were all interested in one aspect or another of the 'Woman Question', even if James was ambivalent about female emancipation, and Gissing, on the whole, was somewhat hostile. Of all these novelists, it was Meredith whose work, especially in its last two decades, most copiously reveals a profound sympathy for women and their struggles to realize their desires and ambitions, both inside and outside the home, in a patriarchal world. The dissertation therefore concentrates on his presentation of his heroines in their relationships with the men who, in one way or another, dominate them, and with whom they must negotiate, within the social and sexual conventions of the time, a *modus vivendi*—a procedure that will entail, especially in the later work, some transgression of those conventions. Chapter 1 sketches more than two centuries of development in female consciousness of severe social disadvantage, from literary observations in the mid-seventeenth century to the intensifying of political representations in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, and the rise of the woman's movement in the course of the Victorian century. The chapter includes an account of the impact on Meredith of John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), and an examination of some of his female friendships by way of illuminating the experiential component of his insights into the 'Woman Question' as reflected in his fiction and letters. His unhappy first marriage is reserved for consideration in Chapter 2, as background to the discussion of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859). This early novel, Meredith's first in the realist mode, is widely accepted as being of high quality, and is given extended treatment, together with briefer accounts of three other early works, *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1855), *Evan Harrington* (1861), and *Rhoda Fleming* (1865), and one from Meredith's middle period, *Bauchamp's Career* (1876). Two more novels of this period, *The Egoist* (1879) and *Diana of the Crossways* (1885), are generally considered to be among his best works, and their heroines are given chapters to themselves (3 and 4). Chapter 5 provides further contextualization for the changing socio-political circumstances of the 1880s and 1890s, with particular reference to that heightening of feminist consciousness represented by the short-lived 'New Woman' phenomenon, to which *Diana of the Crossways* had been considered by some to be a contribution. Brief discussion of some other 'New Woman' novels of the 80s and 90s follows, giving literary context to the heroines of Meredith's three late candidates in the genre, *One of Our Conquerors* (1891), *Lord Ormont and His*

Aminta (1894), and *The Amazing Marriage* (1895). The dissertation concludes with a glance at Meredith's influence on a few early twentieth-century novelists.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is for my mother and father, who hoped for it so much.

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NOTE ON TEXTS

References to Meredith's novels are to the Memorial Edition of 1909-11, published by Constable, London.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation may be thought to take an unfashionable interest in characterization, but it does so with L. C. Knights's famous advice in mind—that against 'treat[ing] a character as a human being' so as to maintain 'the necessary aloofness from a work of art' (1979: 285). Without such aloofness, the critic is in danger of succumbing to an illusion that will blunt his or her critical faculties. However, as John Mullan remarks in his recent book *How Novels Work*, '[n]othing is stranger or more important in our reading of novels than the sense that we are encountering real people in them.' In fact, 'the business of characterization is invariably the ordinary measure of a novelist's achievement' (2006: 79). To assiduously avoid all talk of it, as the narrative theorist Mieke Bal does in her *Narratology* (1985), on the grounds that 'no one has yet succeeded in constructing a complete and coherent theory of character . . . probably precisely because . . . [t]he character is not a human being, but it resembles one' (80), is to invite ironic comment, Mullan's 'Just so' (79).

The dissertation focuses on individual men and women in their relations with each other precisely because, as Renate Muendel notes, 'the history of individuals' is Meredith's 'main concern' (1986: 80). The social context of his time, and his personal circumstances—his family and friends, his education, reading and professional activity—served to develop in him a knowledge of men and women (both in their singularity and in their relationships), as well as the relatively advanced views on female emancipation that he strove to realize in his fiction, more notably in his later work.

It is on Meredith in his humanity, and as a reflector and explorer of humanity in his fiction, that this dissertation concentrates, rather than on any theoretical hypotheses as to the nature of fiction in general, and Meredith's in particular. To be sure, cognizance is taken of his theory of comedy as a prelude to the chapter (3) on *The Egoist*, but not in deference to E. Arthur Robinson's view that 'Meredith's fame rests primarily upon his conception of the Comic Spirit, brilliantly elaborated in the *Essay on Comedy* and exemplified in many of the novels' (quoted in Landis 1956: 17). The essay is 'astonishingly brilliant', as Priestley recognized (1926: 117), but it shares the character of much of Meredith's work in being in danger of being more brilliant than illuminating. In his discussion of the *Essay* and its applicability to the fiction, Landis clarifies with remarkable cogency the central problem with Meredith's positing of the Comic Spirit as his fictional muse. It is that in one novel after another, with the single exception of *The Egoist* ('his one undisputed success and . . . generally regarded as having been written to illustrate the principles of the *Essay*' [Landis 1956: 22]), Meredith seems unable to resist qualifying his comic vision with elements from the tragic end of the inspirational spectrum. The vision, in other words, is compromised: it is as if Meredith is too aware of the agonies of humanity, the sheer pain of being alive (which he himself increasingly experienced in more than a figurative sense as he grew older), to keep the comic mask in place. The hybridity of form that results from the incompatibles in Meredith's conception (best exemplified in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, discussed in Chapter 2) is fatal to the aesthetic unity of the work. It might be argued with Walter F. Wright (1953: v and *passim*) that this protean tendency is a source of great richness, but Landis sees it

as ‘artistic disharmony’. ‘Too often the tragedy is cheated by the comedy; too often the romance is made foolish by the irony; too often the comedy is frozen by the tragedy’ (1956: 33). And he traces the clash of literary elements to what he sees as Meredith’s inability to reconcile the warring elements in himself. A comment in Meredith’s letter to Robert Louis Stevenson of 16 April 1879, two months after he had finished *The Egoist*, provides an important clue to the connection between his personal struggles and the form of most of his fiction. ‘It is a comedy,’ he wrote, ‘with only half of me in it’ (Cline 1970: 2. 569). But he knew what he had done in the way of art: “‘The Egoist’ comes nearer than the other books to the proper degree of roundness and finish’ (Cline 1970: 2. 589); and it is because in this one instance he had managed to achieve a continuity between his conception of the Comic Spirit and his imaginative realization of the way it could operate in the environment of Patterne Hall. The ‘half of’ him that was absent from *The Egoist* was precisely the half that would have sullied the glittering comic and aesthetic achievement. The masterpiece of intricate irony, in short, was itself governed, in its evolution, by the ironies at work in its creator.

The focus on Meredith’s characterization, to put it at its simplest, is entailed by the dissertation’s title, which demands an exploration of his ‘presentation of the heroine’ as a major element in the argument. The heroines, both in themselves and in their human relationships, are rendered with extraordinary psychological subtlety, especially in the later work, and for that reason are worth as telling an examination as can be managed. ‘Since the novelist is himself a human being, there is an affinity between him and his subject-matter which is absent in many other forms of art’ (Forster 1962: 52). The affinity is well attested in, for example, the remarks by Meredith (quoted in this dissertation) as to his mother’s inspiration for his writing on women, and the sources of his very detailed conception of Diana Warwick. Knights’s point is well taken, but when a heroine such as Diana is realized with an almost Shakespearean fullness (Rosalind comes to mind), so that she lives in the reader’s consciousness as palpably as she has done in Meredith’s, an extended examination of the precise nature of her reality, and how it has been achieved, would seem to be justified. Needless to say, the most important characters, male and female, with whom the heroine interacts, and through whom her reality is illuminated, also require attention; thus, for example, Richard Feverel, Neville Beauchamp, and, above all, Sir Willoughby Patterne and Percy Dacier, are all given extensive coverage.

In bringing his characters to life (‘reveal[ing] their hidden life at its source’, in Forster’s phrase [1962: 53]), the novelist is appealing, as Forster noted, ‘to our intelligence and imagination, not merely to our curiosity’ (1962: 51). In processing our reception, as we read (and reflect), of the novelist’s presentation of human beings, we estimate the truth to life of the achievement by testing it against our own sense of how human beings behave, and why. There is an ‘emphasis on value,’ comments Forster (1962: 51), and we assent to or reject the author’s sense of value in his creations according to the preconceptions about human value we bring to our reading.¹ Above all, in this dissertation, the concern is to throw light on, and estimate, the success or otherwise of the novelist in conveying his view of the value of women, both in themselves and in the lives of men. That Meredith

was a feminist there is no doubt; but for all his rationalism and common sense as to the role of women in society, there was at times a perceptible disjunction between the beliefs he propounded and his behaviour towards the women who were closest to him. It was relatively slight as far as his quiet and gentle second wife, Marie Vulliamy, and their daughter, Mariette, were concerned—he is reported to have rather vigorously teased Marie, he had the usual concerns of a middle-class Victorian father as to Mariette's moral development, and he clearly felt the need to escape the stresses of family life in building his chalet at the back of the Box Hill cottage. 'Perhaps Meredith's second choice in marriage, as compared with his choice of heroines, provides evidence of the extreme difficulty which even sympathetic men found in rejecting the socially stereotyped female role in Victorian life' (Fowler 1973: vii). But it was his behaviour towards his first wife, Mary Ellen Nicolls, that invites more serious criticism, and it is considered in detail later in this study. Reference is also made to the effect the wrecking of his first marriage, and Meredith's painful consciousness of his own contribution to it, had on his presentation of female character. He was preoccupied all his life, for temperamental and biographical reasons, with the 'deep . . . injustice suffered by women because of constraints on their natural abilities' (Fowler 1973: v), and the knowledge that he himself had contributed, in the most intimate of human relationships, to the sum of that injustice remained to the end a powerful element in the workings of his imagination.

CHAPTER ONE

The Feminist Context

Introduction

This dissertation explores Meredith's part in a late Victorian literary paradox. A line of eminent female novelists (Jane Austen, the Brontës, Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot) was succeeded in the 1880s and 1890s by a group of no less distinguished male ones just when the feminist movement was increasing in strength and influence. As Elaine Showalter comments,

[w]hile Havelock Ellis could still praise Hardy in 1883 by comparing him to Eliot, since, as Ellis observed, 'it seems now to stand beyond question that the most serious work in English fiction . . . has been done by women', a decade later such comparisons were odious. By the 1890s women novelists were viewed as shrivelled prudes whose influence hindered a virile masculine genre. (1991: 17)¹

The men in question were George Meredith (1828-1909), Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), Henry James (1843-1916), George Moore (1852-1933) and George Gissing (1857-1903).² None of these male writers was indifferent to the feminist phenomenon. On the contrary, each of them attempted to explore in his fiction those aspects of the 'Woman Question' his temperament and convictions inclined him to consider. A contemporary feminist critic has made the obvious point that 'as male realists wrote *about*, but could not possibly write *as* New Women, their narrative points of view were necessarily different'—that is to say, inadequate to their heroines' 'subjectivity' (Heilmann 2000: 55). The 'male gaze' is deficient in explanatory power, and can be inherently a means of 'objectifying' women. Be that as it may, it is undeniably rewarding to discover the extent to which a great male novelist can overcome his gender limitations in exploring the complexities of the female sensibility; and it was Meredith who by nature, upbringing and mature experience was equipped to do so with exceptional power and penetration. In the socio-political sphere his unequivocal commitment to women's rights aligned him more closely than the other novelists with contemporary feminists, a commitment that influenced the presentation of his heroines, particularly in his later fiction. In this dissertation we shall be primarily concerned with the heroines of what are generally considered two of his greatest novels, *The Egoist* (1879) and *Diana of the Crossways* (1885). But some of his earlier novels, in particular *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), will receive attention in order to trace how his heroines evolved (though not in any simple, linear fashion) from the male-dominated Lucy Desborough, and, even more, Clare Forey, in *Richard Feverel* to the young women who reject such dominance, such as Clara Middleton and Diana Warwick. In the final chapter, we shall more briefly consider the heroines in Meredith's last three novels (other than the posthumous *Celt and Saxon* [1910]): *One of Our Conquerors* (1891), *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* (1894), and *The Amazing Marriage* (1895). It was mainly in this final decade that the 'New Woman' novelists and short story writers had their brief but exuberant flowering, and our discussion of Meredith's late fiction will be set in this context. We shall

notice, amongst other works, the novels *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), by Mona Caird (1858-1932); *The Heavenly Twins* (1894), by 'Sarah Grand' (Frances McFall, 1854-1943); and the short story collections *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords* (1894), by 'George Egerton' (Mary Chavelita Dunne, 1859-1945). The dissertation concludes with a glance towards Meredith's influence on some early twentieth-century novelists.

In general terms, the 'Woman Question' concerned the arguments for emancipating women from the public and domestic disabilities with which patriarchal systems had always burdened them, and their struggle to claim, eventually, all the civil and political rights enjoyed by men. The form taken by a specific feminist issue depended on the social class of those involved: middle-class women worried, for example, about their property rights in marriage, but the working class, and those in other classes who strove on their behalf, grappled with the severe penalties of poverty, such as the high infant mortality rate amongst mill-working mothers. But where one stood in the feminist debate depended, of course, not only on class but on one's view of woman's nature. To put the question in its negative form, what was it that supposedly disqualified women from the legal entitlements that men acquired simply by virtue of their gender? Were they genetically and mentally inferior to men, inherently weak not only in body but in morals, naturally vain and frivolous, not to be trusted outside the home, fit only to bear children and pleasure their husbands for as long as their physical attractions lasted? Or were they to be considered as angel-wives, guardians of a domestic spiritual sanctuary, as Coventry Patmore and John Ruskin would have it? Women who resisted patriarchal conditioning knew what a travesty of their sex was embodied in such enquiries, what a humiliation it was to endure an enforced dependence on the 'male idea', the complex of legal privilege, anti-feminist mythology and sheer physical force that constituted their subjection. And, of course, this was much more than a Victorian problem: by the last decades of the nineteenth century, the question of eligibility for rights and activities beyond what had always been conventionally considered the 'woman's sphere' had been canvassed in essays, poetry and fiction, by men as well as women, for two hundred years and more. But it was '[o]ne of the more remarkable accomplishments of the nineteenth century . . . both to initiate and, ultimately, to withstand the inception of a sexual revolution, commonly known as the feminist movement' (Millett 1972: 121).

A particular concern from the beginning was that of education—how to enable women to acquire one. Meredith believed that feminists should be educated before they agitated: let reason, not hysteria, prevail in applying pressure to their political masters, and they would, in time, succeed. Being deprived of an education, however, was but one aspect, though a crucial one, of the experience of 'enslavement' by men to which women, once they had found their own voices, gave such passionate expression. The enslavement was not simply metaphoric, but based in historical reality. In the early nineteenth century the English feminists learned how to agitate for women's rights from combining in anti-slavery societies. It was not difficult to associate what they were fighting to end in existing and former colonies with their situation under patriarchy. For an American like Sarah Grimké (1792-1873), who grew up in South Carolina as one of a slave-owning Quaker family, and saw what she

described as the ‘desolation and suffering’ (Schneir 1992: 35) caused by slavery, the association was natural. Space is lacking to write of her at greater length, but it is clear that this transatlantic voice was as representative of women’s plight as Wollstonecraft’s was before her. The feminist struggle has as respectable a history in the United States as it has in England, indeed a more sustained and complex one inasmuch as it has been fought on grounds of ethnicity as well as class and gender, and has had a regional intimacy with slavery that was lacking for English feminists.

By the time George Meredith was born, in 1828, and growing up in the fourth and fifth decades of the century, the feminist cause was becoming increasingly a matter of public debate. His own commitment was more than political, though later he supported, for example, the increasing demand for the franchise. It was a matter of personal conviction, underpinned by his own knowledge and experience of women. A letter he wrote in January 1905 (the day is not specified) to the editor and reviewer, Hugh W. Strong, reveals the position he held throughout his adult life:

Since I began to reflect I have been oppressed by the injustice done to women, the constraint put upon their natural aptitudes and their faculties, generally much to the degradation of the race. I have not studied them more closely than I have men, but with more affection, a deeper interest in their enfranchisement and development, being assured that women of the independent mind are needed for any sensible degree of progress. They will so educate their daughters, that these will not be instructed at the start to think themselves naturally inferior to men, because less muscular, and need not have recourse to particular arts, feline chiefly, to make their way in the world.

The letter concludes with a reference to two of Meredith’s great heroines: ‘I have no special choice among the women of my books. Perhaps I gave more colour to Diana of the Crossways and Clara Middleton of *The Egoist*, and this on account of their position’ (Cline 1970: 3. 1513). ‘Their position’ can be variously characterized, but it is perhaps best summed up as being that of young women longing for their freedom and independence, but constricted, physically, psychologically, and emotionally, by the demands made on them by dominating males in a society structured, as it always had been (notwithstanding the accession, from time to time, of female monarchs), on the principles of patriarchy. Definitions of patriarchy vary, too, but in general it means ‘a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions. . . . Patriarchy has power from men’s greater access to, and mediation of, the resources and rewards of authority structures inside and outside the home’ (Humm 1995: 200).

Some Proto-feminists

Radical feminists point not only to male domination, but also to the sexual devaluation of women and their exclusion from history. But for the patriarchal male, whose power is under threat, all feminists must seem radical—heretics against the natural male order, what a contemporary feminist has called ‘the prevailing religion of the entire planet’ (Humm 1995: 201). To go no further back in the history of feminist³ sentiment in England, it is interesting to speculate how far Diana Warwick and Clara Middleton would have concurred with Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623-1674),

‘whom Lamb loved,’ said Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own* (1998: 79), but Pepys thought ‘mad, conceited and ridiculous’ (Wynne-Davies 1992: 393). She was certainly an oddity, in her writing no less than her dress and behaviour; but in the view of Gilbert and Gubar, ‘her speculations on the meaning of femininity—in particular those dramatized in *Female Orations* (1662)—were unusually sophisticated in their acknowledgement of the complex problems posed by woman’s cultural situation’ (1985: 72). The dramatization was extraordinarily vigorous. Here is a sample. We are to imagine a crowd of women brought together to listen to a female speaker:

[W]e live and die as if we were produced from beasts, rather than from men; for men are happy, and we women are miserable; they possess all the ease, rest, pleasure, wealth, power, and fame; whereas women are restless with labour, easeless with pain, melancholy for want of pleasures, helpless for want of power, and die in oblivion, for want of fame. Nevertheless, men are so unconscionable and cruel against us that they endeavour to bar us of all sorts of liberty, and will not suffer us freely to associate amongst our own sex; but would fain bury us, in their houses or beds, as in a grave. The truth is, we live like bats or owls, labour like beasts, and die like worms. (Gilbert and Gubar 1985: 73)

Both Clara Middleton and Diana Warwick would have acknowledged the grim truth that ‘men . . . would fain bury us, in their houses or beds, as in a grave’. One way of escaping burial, other than remaining single (but that, in an impoverished family, had its own perils), was to be happily married. In *The Egoist* and *Diana of the Crossways* the heroines eventually achieve that state, though with reservations on Diana’s part. So, as it happened, did Margaret Cavendish, and so did a much admired successor (praised by Pope and Shelley, amongst others), the poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea (1661-1720). But that did not prevent the latter’s breaking out bitterly against men who expected her to conform to the type of woman they were used to.

How are we fall’n, fall’n by mistaken rules?
 And education’s, more than nature’s fools,
 Debarred from all improvements of the mind,
 And to be dull, expected and designed. . . .
 (From ‘The Introduction’. Ferguson et al. 1996: 523).

The widowed Aphra Behn (1640-89), who supported herself as a poet, playwright and novelist (her *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* [c.1688], fiercely denounced the practice of slavery) stands at the beginning of a development described by Virginia Woolf as ‘of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write’ (1998: 84). As Benstock et al. remark, ‘Aphra Behn’s great achievements were scorned and shunned in the eighteenth century, her effective catering to the lewd taste of Restoration theatre interpreted as personal immorality’ (2002: 34). But without Behn and others of her class who took to writing,

and not merely the lonely aristocrat shut up in her country house among her folios and her flatterers, . . . Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe, or Marlowe without Chaucer, or Chaucer without those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue. (Woolf 1998: 84-85)

Or, one might suggest, Meredith without his proto-feminist predecessors.⁴ Diana of the Crossways, with her bright and restless mind, did not allow herself to become one of ‘education’s fools’, and

would have agreed with Lady Mary Chudleigh (1656-1710), in her poem ‘The Ladies’ Defence’, that women must ‘read and think, and think and read again, / And on our minds bestow the utmost pain’ (Gilbert and Gubar 1985: 95). Mary Astell (1666-1731) anticipated a salient Meredithian theme in writing on the duties and injustices of marriage, notably in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest*, which appeared in 1694 under the authorship of ‘A Lover of her Sex’. It envisaged a retreat for women who wanted to cultivate their minds with philosophy, and their souls with religion. Foreshadowing Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, with its biting criticism of the suffocating triviality of women’s daily round (middle- and upper-class women, of course, with the means to spend their time on trivialities), she wished

to expel that cloud of ignorance which custom has involved us in, to furnish our minds with a stock of solid and useful knowledge, that the souls of women may no longer be the only unadorned and neglected things. . . . [Let women] busy themselves in a serious enquiry after necessary and perfective truths, something which it concerns them to know, and which tends to their real interest and perfection. . . . [S]ince God has given women as well as men intelligent souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them?’ (Gilbert and Gubar 1985: 114, 115)

Marriage as imprisonment, a lifelong trial, if not scourge, was patently the norm, and if it did not last, as Mary Yonge’s did not, because her ‘notorious libertine’ of a husband divorced her for adultery (Ferguson et al. 1996: 580), the law allowed your former spouse to claim your dowry and most of your fortune. As Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) wrote in her ‘Epistle from Mrs Yonge to Her Husband’ (written in 1724, but published only in the 1970s),

A wounded slave regains his liberty.
For wives ill used no remedy remains,
To daily racks condemned, and to eternal chains. (Ferguson et al. 1996: 580)

‘The poem’s vitriolic female speaker,’ comment Benstock et al, ‘and its contentious assertions of women’s independence and equality would no doubt have raised questions during the early eighteenth century about the author’s virtue and femininity’ (2002: 36). Questions certainly were raised, notably by Pope (who attacked her in *The Dunciad*) and Swift, about the morals of the prolific playwright, poet, essayist and novelist Eliza Haywood (c. 1690-1756), partly, no doubt, on account of her excursions into the then dubious world of acting, an experience she deployed to impressive effect in her novel *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751). This dissertation is not specifically concerned with eighteenth-century feminist fiction, but Haywood’s novel is mentioned here as being one of the first of the endless line of novels, including Meredith’s *Diana of the Crossways* and *The Amazing Marriage*, that depict a heroine’s unhappy marriage and its consequences. In fact, ‘Haywood’s depiction of a bad marriage is unique in its depth of portrayal and in its unsentimental look at the institution of marriage’ (Tobin 1997: xiii), thus anticipating fictional situations in, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, and Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, and also real-life situations, discussed below, such as Meredith’s first marriage, and Caroline Sheridan’s to George Norton.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97)

For these rebellious feminist spirits, and their successors over many decades, there lay a very difficult path of struggle against governing reactionaries and chauvinists, unable or unwilling to concede women's inherent equality with men, and their entitlement to all rights, natural and legal, that men possessed. Now, on the very threshold of the modern era, as France descended into revolution, and radicals looked forward to the promise of freedom for both men and women from their 'eternal [customary and legal] chains', Mary Wollstonecraft found herself compelled to defend her position against determined enemies. And she could look for little moral support from the works of her great French predecessors, the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment. According to Jane Rendall, 'Montesquieu throughout his work showed a profound contempt for female qualities, incorporating the dual view of women as weak, gentle and soft on the one hand, and on the other as frivolous, vain and irrational' (1985: 15). Voltaire believed that women were mentally, as well as physically, weaker than men, but had, through their exclusively domestic concerns, acquired a moral advantage—a point taken up later by the dogmatists of domesticity in England. Rousseau, on the other hand, allowed moral strength to women only if they could restrain themselves from falling into sexual corruption. The qualities that he looked for in a woman were what would make Sophie an ideal wife to Emile, and also the ideal mother: modesty, chastity and obedience in a secluded rural setting, far from the temptations that awaited the naturally weak. A crucial concern for Rousseau was that paternity should be guaranteed 'in the interests of society as a whole. The equality and freedom which the republic of the *Social Contract* (1760) offered to its citizens did not apply to women' (Rendall 1985: 17).

In progressing from her *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), through her response to Edmund Burke, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)—'[t]hat impassioned, incoherent and rambling manifesto' (Bradbrook 1982: 49)—Wollstonecraft expanded her plea for the 'natural rights' of men (deriving from God, as against mere property rights, which derive from laws of inheritance that perpetuate privilege) to one for justice and equal rights for women. She attacked Rousseau for saying that a woman is not a 'moral being' as a man is: that she is by nature inferior to man, and therefore

should never, for a moment, feel herself independent . . . she should be governed by fear to exercise her *natural* cunning, and made a coquetish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a *sweeter* companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself. . . . He [Rousseau] insinuates that truth and fortitude, the cornerstones of all human virtue, should be cultivated with certain restrictions, because, with respect to the female character, obedience is the grand lesson which ought to be impressed with unrelenting rigour. (1994: 91)

Rousseau's anti-feminist doctrine is a charter for all the tyrannical males of the nineteenth century, in real life or fiction, a perversion of the 'natural rights' he claimed as the *fons et origo* of man's inevitable release from his political chains. But it was specifically 'man' he was thinking of, as Wollstonecraft realized, and this was unacceptable. She insisted that '[w]omen . . . are no more naturally inferior than the poor are naturally ignorant. In both cases, the word is used by the powerful and privileged to hold the poor in their proper station, women in their proper sphere' (Walters 1976:

319). This was the ‘natural’ scheme of things, in the world-view of the (male) ruling classes; but as is the way of ruling classes in every time and place, those of the late eighteenth century and afterwards in Great Britain were simply rationalizing the pursuit of their own interests.

Wollstonecraft’s politically radical and sexually enterprising insistence on women’s rights did not advance her cause with the conservative, anti-French establishment (Horace Walpole called her ‘that hyena in petticoats’ [Stone 1982: 31]), even though the *Vindication*, written before its author’s breaches of convention, was paradoxically puritan in its ethic. She was herself conscious of her isolation as a feminist agitator, even though the fiction of various women writers of her time—Ann Radcliffe, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Hays and Hannah More, for example—to the extent that it reflected her own concerns gave her some encouragement. She enjoyed reading it, especially Radcliffe’s and Burney’s, and discussed it in the *Analytical Review*; but she did not believe that these novelists were necessarily feminists because they were women. She preferred the writings of the historian and educationist Catherine Macaulay, which were marked, she said, by ‘a degree of sound reason and profound thought which either through defective organs, or a mistaken education, seldom appears in female productions’ (*Analytical Review* 8, November 1790; quoted in Caine 1997: 34-35).

Wollstonecraft’s sexual indiscretions, which included bearing an illegitimate daughter, greatly damaged her reputation in the following century. As late as 1891 Millicent Garrett Fawcett was to write in her edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that ‘[i]n unravelling the curious tangle of relationships, intrigues, suicides and attempted suicides of the remarkable group of personalities to whom Mary Wollstonecraft belonged one is sickened for ever . . . of the subject of irregular relations’ (quoted in Caine 1992: 26). Nonetheless, Wollstonecraft remained a seminal influence on feminist thinking throughout the nineteenth century. Her private life may have scandalized the orthodox, but for many of the feminists who came after her it represented an active assertion of women’s rights against the suffocating claims of domesticity.

With her reformist ardour and fierce intellectual curiosity, Meredith’s Diana Warwick has a faint kinship with her historical predecessor. We must not, however, press the resemblance too closely. Mary Wollstonecraft was a professional polemicist, engaging passionately, from a feminist standpoint, with the issues of her day, and inspired by the revolutions in America and France. She was the natural leader of the little feminist group in London who were attempting to live by their pen, which included Mrs Inchbald, Mrs Fenwick, and Mary Hays. ‘In her life of Mary Wollstonecraft . . . Claire Tomalin has recently illuminated the absurdities and heroics of a pioneer; her courage, her capacity for self-dramatisation, her determination to “impose her will on fate”’ (Bradbrook 1982a: 50). Diana, in the early years of Victoria’s reign, is fully aware of political and gender issues, and she, too, attempts to live by her pen; but except in her temporary and informal role as secretary, amanuensis, confidante, and (as far as he, at least, was concerned) prospective sexual partner of the rising young MP, Percy Dacier, she is not an activist, but an observer and commentator. There is no direct intervention on her part, for example, in educational issues. But Wollstonecraft had been a teacher and governess, and

blazoned her colours on the very first page of her 'Introduction' to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792):

In a treatise . . . on female rights and manners, the works which have been particularly written for their improvement must not be overlooked; especially when it is asserted, in direct terms, that the minds of women are enfeebled by false refinement; that the books of instruction, written by men of genius, have had the same tendency as more frivolous productions; and that, in the true style of Mahometanism, they are treated as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species, when improveable reason is allowed to be the dignified distinction which raises men above the brute creation, and puts a natural sceptre in a feeble hand. (1994: 71-72)

Her marriage to a fellow radical, William Godwin, and her posthumous acquisition of the poet Shelley as her son-in-law, reminds us that as the nineteenth century moved into its first quarter and beyond, feminist sympathies were far from being a female monopoly. A few weeks after Mary's tragic death on 10 September 1797 from complications following the birth of her daughter, Godwin began writing his *Memoirs*, completed a draft in ten weeks, and published it in January 1798. In Chapter 6 he wrote:

The *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is undoubtedly a very unequal performance, and eminently deficient in method and arrangement. When tried by the hoary and long-established laws of literary composition, it can scarcely maintain its claim to be placed in the first class of human productions. But when we consider the importance of its doctrines, and the eminence of genius it displays, it seems not very improbable that it will be read as long as the English language endures. The publication of this book forms an epocha in the subject to which it belongs; and Mary Wollstonecraft will perhaps here-after be found to have performed more substantial service for the cause of her sex, than all the other writers, male or female, that ever felt themselves animated in the behalf of oppressed and injured beauty. (1987: 232)

Reaction, for and against

The *Memoirs* were unusually revealing, for their time, of intimate personal detail: Godwin wrote with great candour, for example, about his wife's love affairs and her two attempts at suicide—and this proved most unwelcome to many who might otherwise have supported her work and philosophy. The *Vindication* was not republished until 1844, an interval that was symptomatic of the reaction that set in in English society and politics after the alarms of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. Feminist activism went into a relative decline for some twenty years, and centre-stage was yielded, with a few exceptions, to political reactionaries and moral conservatives. The Evangelical revival amongst the middle class, which had deplored the excesses of the Regency, and the general moral laxity, extravagance and idleness of the upper class, reinforced this tendency. Even James Mill, though a prominent Utilitarian, and as such supposedly committed to radical solutions for social ills, was not a supporter of female emancipation. In his 'Article on Government' (reprinted as a pamphlet in 1825, after its initial publication in the fifth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* [1820]), he wrote:

One thing is pretty clear, that all those individuals whose interests are indisputably included in those of other individuals may be struck off from political rights without inconvenience. In this light may be viewed all children up to a certain age, whose interests are involved in those of their parents. In this light also women may be regarded, the interest of almost all of whom is involved either in that of their fathers, or in that of their husbands. (Lively and Rees 1978: 79)

In the same year, 1825, William Thompson, ‘the forgotten man of the woman’s movement’, responded to Mill with his *Appeal of One Half the Human Race*, ‘the most important feminist work between Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* . . . and the High Victorian masterpieces of George Drysdale and J. S. Mill’ (Heldsinger et al. 1983: 21). The younger Mill was so impressed by Thompson’s cogency that he referred to the *Appeal* nearly fifty years later in his *Autobiography* (1873), and his *Subjection of Women* (1869) shows similarities to Thompson’s work.

Both men examine the notion and nature of the ‘contract’ in marriage; both emphasize the despotic power of husbands; both place special emphasis upon the intellectual and spiritual equality of the sexes, and argue that only such equality can free wife and husband from the slavery of her servitude. (Heldsinger et al. 1983: 25)

Nearly a century before it was implemented, Thompson called for the enfranchisement of women,⁵ and decisively rejected the idea that the interests of the wife were to be subsumed into those of her husband. A blatant instrument of male oppression, the argument from common conjugal interest was to persist through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.

A liberal voice such as Thompson’s, however, was a rarity in this reactionary period. A more typical sign of the prevailing temper was Hannah More’s strong disapproval, in her *Moral Sketches* (1819), of the sensual provocations in French novels: ‘Such fascinating qualities are lavished on the seducer, and such attractive graces on the seduced, that the images indulged with delight by the fancy, carry on the reader imperceptibly to a point which is not so far from their indulgence in the act as they imagine’ (quoted in Houghton 1957: 359-60). What Houghton calls ‘the French ideal of *l’homme sensuel moyen* and the French worship of the goddess of Lubricity’ (360) were not congenial to English moral conservatives who, from the late eighteenth century onwards, were concerned to construct an image of ideal middle-class womanhood. In her *Strictures on Female Education* (1799), More had expounded a method of control over young daughters, amounting to severe repression, that was to be adopted in all too many middle-class nineteenth-century households:

An early habitual restraint is particularly important to the future character and happiness of women. A judicious relaxing, but steady and gentle curb on their tempers and passions can alone ensure their place and establish their principles. . . . They should, when very young, be inured to contradiction. . .

. Girls should be led to distrust their own judgement; they should learn not to murmur at expostulation; they should be accustomed to expect and endure opposition. (Quoted in Rendall 1985: 112)

Constructing the ‘Angel’

The reactionary socio-political spirit of the time, the powerful influence of the Evangelical guardians of the Puritan conscience, and the fundamental economic changes set in train by the Industrial Revolution, all contributed to the development of the idea that women were constituted differently from men, and required separate, and unequal, treatment. With the rapid growth of commerce and industry, and the towns and cities to service them, came a great expansion of the middle class, and the subsequent division of labour according to gender. An ideology of ‘separate spheres’ developed, according to which the men went out to work and earn sufficient money to support a wife and family

in comfort, while the (middle-class) women withdrew from the marketplace to look after their menfolk, their homes and their children. Although ‘the ideal division between domestic woman and public man was never realized in many homes, and never became the dominant reality’ (Levine 1987: 12) (and decidedly not in working-class homes), for men who accepted it as the natural order it was a matter of pride, a sign of aspiration to gentility, that they should be able to keep their women uncontaminated by the grime of business, politics and the professions. Sequestered, however, in their ‘proper’ sphere, women found themselves caught in an existential paradox. On the one hand, they acquired, if they married, the manifold responsibilities of running a home—ministering to a husband, bringing up children, managing the servants, and spreading their feminine beneficence into the community by philanthropic means. Except for children, these would also have been the concerns of single women, dutiful daughters, stranded without husbands in the family home. Married or single, the paradox lay in the moral influence the ‘weaker sex’ were encouraged to exert in their limited terrain. In the brutal world beyond the park or garden, their menfolk were subject to varieties of illicit temptation. In the home, presided over by a moral paragon, the men could be cleansed of their spiritual disease. Every home-bound woman, in this ideal sense, was a kind of surrogate for the local clergy, a morally unimpeachable heroine of the hearth, inexhaustible in the cause of right thinking and conduct. It was assumed by those, men and women, who adhered to the prevailing domestic ideology that the ‘angel’ would have an aversion to sexual activity corresponding to her aversion to the contamination of work outside the home. In his article ‘Prostitution’, for example (published in the *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* in July 1850, and reprinted in 1853 by John Chapman as a pamphlet entitled ‘The Great Sin of Great Cities’), W. R. Greg wrote that ‘[i]n men the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if non-existent . . .’ (quoted in Basch 1974: 8). It was as if these women had become domestic missionaries, tasked with subduing the passions and lightening the darkness of a race of male savages, rather than what they had conventionally been considered from antiquity, fallen creatures, much in need of the protection, from themselves and others, that religion could provide.

This Pauline suspicion of Eve was weakening but still influential in the first half of the nineteenth century, when a number of writers took it upon themselves to produce books of advice and instruction for the conduct of women. One of them, published in 1839, and attributed to Sarah Lewis, was called, appropriately enough, *Women’s Mission*. It laid out a notably ambitious programme for the custodians of purity:

Christian virtues . . . are more easy of practice to women than to men, because women have fewer worldly interests, and are by nature and education less selfish. . . . Let women begin this good work; they are eminently qualified for the acceptance of the two great truths of the gospel, love and self-renunciation, which qualities are more or less placed in the hearts of all women; they are naturally disposed to reverence, to worship, to self-sacrifice, for the sake of a beloved object.

Women without children will not be at a loss for something to do:

Their mission is the establishment of peace, and love, and unselfishness, to be achieved by any means, and at any cost to themselves; in the cultivation first in themselves, then in all over

whom they have any influence, of an unselfish and unworldly spirit; the promotion even in the most minute particular of elegance, of happiness, of moral good. The poor, the ignorant, the domestic servant, are their children; and on them let them lavish the love which God has denied to flow in its natural channel. . . . (1984: 24)

It was Sarah Stickney Ellis's view, in *The Women of England* (1839), that women were inherently inferior to men: "[T]hey are . . . from their own constitution, and from the station they occupy in the world . . . relative creatures" (quoted in Basch 1974: 5), whose only reason for existence was meekly to do their duty towards men, that of self-abnegating service.

Thus was evangelical piety harnessed to instinctive, indeed self-protective, rejection, by conservatives of both genders, of feminist notions of overall equality with men—especially in sexual appetite. The result was a powerful middle-class ideology of female subjection in the guise of exaltation in the interests of domestic order, an order advantageous to males. As the century proceeded, it did not lack for advocates. One of them was John Ruskin (1819-1900), who in his lecture 'Of Queen's Gardens', delivered in Manchester in 1864, and published the following year in his volume *Sesame and Lilies*,⁶ spoke in terms reminiscent of medieval chivalry and courtly love of his ideal of the perfect woman in the perfect setting:

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest, wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise: she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial:—to him, therefore, the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued, often misled, and *always* hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love—so far as it is this, and roof and fire are types only of a nobler shade and light,—shade as of the rock in a weary land, and light as of the Pharos in the stormy sea;—so far it vindicates the name, and fulfils the praise, of Home.

And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermilion, shedding its quiet light far, for those who else were homeless. (1907: 59-60)

There is obviously no limit to the lengths that Ruskin will go to envision a woman so gloriously unproblematic to the opposite sex. He continues:

So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an

infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service—the true changefulness of woman. (1907: 60)

In Kate Millett's judgement, Ruskin's lecture is 'one of the most complete insights obtainable into that compulsive masculine fantasy one might call the official Victorian attitude' (1980: 122).

In his famous poem *The Angel in the House*, published in five parts from 1854 to 1877, Coventry Patmore (1823-96) composed another paean to 'the object that was scarcely mortal . . . [a] conception [that] looks like a curious blending of Protestant earnestness and Romantic enthusiasm, with a strong assist from chivalric literature (as ready a source for woman worship as for hero worship)' (Houghton 1957: 341). It is easy to dismiss Patmore as a sentimentalist about domestic love, in a stanza such as the following:

Be man's hard virtues highly wrought,
 But let my gentle mistress be,
 In every look, word, deed, and thought,
 Nothing but sweet and womanly!
 Her virtues please my virtuous mood,
 But what at all times I admire
 Is, not that she is wise or good,
 But just the thing that I desire. (n.d. 219)

And as Bernard Richards notes, 'Bathos lurks constantly in ambush for Patmore' (1988: 131) as he contrives what is actually a deceptively skilful amalgam of transcendentalism and erotic passion in the cause of woman worship. Walter Houghton sees such worship as one way the Victorians 'were able to quiet their anxious doubts' (1957: 393) about religion. It also assisted in freeing the sexual relation from the taint of sinfulness the church had traditionally laid on it.

The idealization of femininity was a remarkably tenacious concept, originating before the end of the eighteenth century, but developing from then on into a theory about psychological differences between the genders that assumed that 'feminine qualities are "natural"'. The theory 'has been the major psychological agent in enforcing the subjection of women' (Gorham 1982: 5). Nor did it entail only the position of wives and mothers. Daughters, too, were a potent element in the ideology, and the comparison in significance between them and sons in Sarah Tytler's article 'Girls', written as late as 1887 for *The Mother's Companion*, echoes Ruskin's, in the passage quoted above, between the man and the woman:

Surely there is no thought sweeter or more tender than that which comes with a baby-girl. . . . The thought of a man-child has more possibilities of strength and power. It gratifies pride and ambition more. . . . But the mother of the little woman-child sees in her the born queen, and, at the same time, the servant of home; the daughter who is to lift the burden of domestic cares and make them unspeakably lighter by taking her share of them; the sister who is to be a little mother to her brothers and sisters; the future wife and mother in her turn, she is the owner of a destiny which may call on her to endure much and to suffer much, but which, as it also bids her love much . . . is well worthy of an immortal creature. . . . A family without a girl . . . lacks a crowning grace, quite as much as a family without a boy misses a tower of strength. (Quoted in Gorham 1982: 5-6)

Add to this Ruskin's stipulation for a woman's 'majestic childishness' (1907: 62), and we cannot but shake our heads at these signs of the Victorian fear of outright, adult, female sexuality. It is a relief to

escape from the hothouse atmosphere of Victorian angel-worship to the out-of-doors Shakespearean freshness and ardour of Meredith's 1851 version of *Love in the Valley*:

When at dawn she wakens and her fair face gazes
 Out on the weather thro' the window-panes,
 Beauteous she looks! like a white water-lily
 Bursting out of bud on the rippled river plains.
 When from bed she rises clothed from neck to ankle
 In her long nightgown, sweet as boughs of May,
 Beauteous she looks! like a tall garden lily
 Pure from the night and perfect for the day! (Bartlett 1978: 1. 65, ll. 57-64)

The 'Angel' as Paradox

Barbara Caine draws attention to a 'central contradiction' (1997: 84) in the idea of sacramental marriage, of female self-renunciation for the sake of an ideal of domesticity and marital bliss. The contradiction lay in the calculated assertion of female practicality over the helpless domestic male. Sarah Ellis (who published, amongst her other books, *The Wives of England* [1844] and *The Daughters of England* [1845]), goes so far as to suggest that men are inherently incapable of remaining affectionate without tactical intervention by the woman:

Affection does not come by relationship alone; and never yet was the affection of man fully and lastingly engaged by woman, without some means being adopted on her part to increase or preserve his happiness . . . but let his home be made more comfortable, let his peculiarities of habit and temper be studiously consulted, and social and familiar gratifications provided for his daily use; and unless he is ungrateful beyond the common average of mankind, he will be sure to regard the source from whence his comforts flow with extreme complacency, and not unfrequently with affection. (Ellis 1984: 101)

There is a kind of condescension here, a sly indulgence of the wilful, selfish, morally and emotionally adolescent male for the sake of the female desire to maintain domestic peace and stability. There is also the beginning of a subtle reversal of gender roles. The moral superiority of the female in inducing contentment in her husband through judicious self-sacrifice, which in turn ensures order in the home, is indicative of a power to do good, and a power to control, that from the middle of the century onwards will be increasingly harnessed by feminists for social purposes. The domestic resourcefulness of women is well illustrated by Jane Welsh Carlyle, who, in a letter of October 1843 to her friend Mrs Jane Aiken, describes the extraordinary pains she went to to provide her husband with home comforts, and particularly to shield him from extraneous noise. He was satisfied for only three days (after returning from his travels) with her 'immensity of needlework . . . and all the other manifest improvements into which I had put my whole genius and industry' (and at very little cost). He had to be protected from the neighbour's piano practice, so a carpenter was engaged to do what he could in the way of sound-proofing. Alterations were made, after which Jane had to clear up the 'regular mess' of three months' work. But alas, for the

dreaming, reading, dawdling existence which best suits me, and alone suits me in cold weather, to find myself in the thick of a new 'mess': the carpets, which I had nailed down so well with my own hands, tumbled up again, dirt, lime, whitewash, oil, paint, hard at work as before, and a

prospect of new cleanings, new sewings, new arrangements stretching away into eternity for anything I see! (Murray 1984: 132, 133)

It was energy and enterprise—and impatience—of this order that would in time be transposed into political terms as women staked their claim for equal rights with men. As Millicent Garrett Fawcett wrote in *Home and Politics* (not dated, but Levine suggests 1894),

[t]his difference between men and women, instead of being a reason against their enfranchisement, seems to me the strongest possible reason in favour of it; we want the home and domestic side of things to count for more in politics and in the administration of public affairs than they do at present. (Quoted in Levine 1987: 13-14)

The Beginnings of Organized Activism

The British government of the early nineteenth century was hostile to any agitation it could associate with radical calls for human rights; and yet there were women, both working and middle class, who were willing to agitate on behalf of those with whom they felt a kinship in misfortune. Work outside the home did not preclude all working-class women from energetic activism. Before war broke out on the Continent they had joined in

bread riots, enclosure protests and Luddism, and in the years immediately following the Napoleonic Wars they began to be drawn into more organised political action for the reform of the Parliamentary system, as they had not been in the 1790s. In June 1819 the Blackburn Female Reform Society was founded, its aim ‘to assist the male populations of this country to obtain their rights and liberties’, and its members ‘to use their utmost endeavours to instil into the minds of their children a deep and rooted hatred to their tyrannical rulers’. (Rendall 1985: 235)

Members of Reform Societies convened to express their support for leaders such as Henry Hunt and William Cobbett, confronted at Peterloo the very real dangers of opposing state policy, and agitated for a free press in the 1820s and 1830s. New societies formed to support the parliamentary reform that came warily into being in 1832, and still later there was national working-class support for the Chartist movement, with its demand to widen the male franchise, though some leading Chartists wanted it for females as well.

In 1825 the Ladies’ Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves had been founded. It was a significant development in the history of feminism, because together with similar women-only societies formed elsewhere in the country, the experience of organizing to abolish slavery provided the essential basis for the bonding necessary to broaden the fight, and work for the liberation of women from the legal slavery enshrined in age-old custom, and inscribed in the laws of Westminster. Two men of the Unitarian persuasion, W. J. Fox and his friend R. B. Adams, published stirring indictments of the behaviour of their sex towards women. Writing in No. 7 of *The Monthly Repository* in 1833, Fox described the appalling situation of Mehitabel, a younger sister of John Wesley, whose ‘primeval situation was that of being born into what is called a well-regulated family’, a family in which the mother followed ‘the law, order and duty system, the fear, honour, reverence and obey plan in its most complete development. Everything is summed up in submission’ (quoted in Caine 1997: 63). We are

reminded immediately of the domestic plight of Wollstonecraft's Maria, whose separation from her infant daughter before the novel begins, and incarceration in an asylum, are symptomatic of the atrocities committed against women. in a system that offers no means of redress. Mehitabel was forced to abandon the man she loved and marry

a violent and unaffectionate plumber with whom she had nothing in common. She lived with him for twenty-six miserable years during which time all her children died (she thought their deaths were a result of the white-lead involved in his trade). Although she wrote to her father about her unhappiness, there was no thought that anything might be done. . . . Fox insisted that her 'marriage was an immorality.' (Caine 1997: 63)

The Feminist Struggle for Reform

For corroboration of Mehitabel's emotional suffering, we can turn to the remarkably courageous and resourceful Caroline Norton (1808-1877), a granddaughter of the playwright, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, whose appalling treatment at the hands of her husband gave Meredith the basis for Diana Warwick's character and her story. One of three beautiful and high-spirited sisters, thought by some—Lord Melbourne's sister, Lady Cowper, for example—to be too high-spirited (“The Sheridans are much admired,” said Lady Cowper, “but are strange girls, swear and say all sorts of things that make men laugh” [Forster 1986: 18]), Caroline was sent away, aged fifteen, from the Sheridans' grace-and-favour home at Hampton Court⁷ to school in Surrey, near the estate, Wonersh, of the third Lord Grantley. Unfortunately for Caroline's future happiness, her governess was the sister of Lord Grantley's agent; and when she took Caroline and her fellow pupils on a visit to Wonersh, Caroline was noticed by Lord Grantley's heir, his younger brother, George Norton, who fell instantly in love with her. In fact he applied to Mrs Sheridan for permission to marry her, but was advised to ‘wait three years until Caroline had “come out”’ (Forster 1986: 19). Three years later, when George repeated his offer, Caroline accepted him. She had seen how a ‘good marriage’ gave women status and security, and in what contempt society held languishing spinsters. As far as her eighteen-year-old judgement could tell, this marriage to the heir presumptive to a barony, who was a barrister and the MP for Guildford to boot, would be a good one. It took place on 30 July 1827; but it was not very long after the honeymoon that Caroline realized, as she wrote in a pamphlet, *The Separation of Mother and Child by the Law of Custody of Infants Considered* (1837), that she had visited upon herself a ‘frightful catastrophe’, in the course of which ‘her children were dragged screaming from her’ (Forster 1986: 16, 17) at the behest of an often drunken, violent husband. Relations worsened, with George Norton publicly, and falsely, accusing the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, of adultery with Caroline, and then suing her for divorce. (Meredith was to base Diana's marital drama on this episode.) Norton may also have intended to blackmail Melbourne: he was chronically short of money. The case was thrown out of court (as Diana's would be), but in the meantime Caroline had arrived home from a short visit to her sister to find that her three children, aged six, four and two, had been given into the untender care of her husband's mistress, a Miss Vaughn, and there was no legal redress as to their custody.

What I suffered on my children's account [wrote Caroline], none will ever know or measure. 'The heart knoweth its own bitterness,' and God knew mine! The days and nights of tears and anguish, that grew into the struggle of years—it is even now [eighteen years later] a pain to me to look back upon: even now, the hot agony of resentment and grief rises in my mind when I think of the needless tyranny I endured in this respect. Mr Norton held my children as hostages; he felt that while he had them, he still had a power over me that nothing could control. Baffled in the matter of the trial and damages, he had still the power to do more than punish—to torture—the wife who had been so anxious to part from him. I never saw them; I seldom knew where they were. Once, when I wrote to ask after them in illness, my letter to the nurse (which contained no syllable of offence, or beyond the subject of my enquiry) was turned inside out, and franked back to me. (Quoted in Murray 1984: 136-37)

Worse was to come, both for herself, in terms of helpless anguish, and for the children, in terms of their living conditions. Norton sent them away to his cruel sister, Grace, Lady Menzies, in Scotland, though not before Caroline had managed to meet them secretly, and distressingly, in St James's Park, where her eldest child 'gave me a little crumpled letter he had had in his pocket a fortnight directed to me. . . . He was so dear and intelligent' (Perkins 1910: 149; quoted in Forster 1986: 33).

This shocking abuse of herself and her children, and her helplessness in law, aroused in Caroline 'such a passionate disgust and rage that she was able to begin a process of change that went on for a century and has still not ended' (Forster 1986: 15). She was implacably determined, notwithstanding the advice of friends and family to leave well alone, to bring about a change in the law relating to infant custody. She published her 1837 pamphlet on it, and with the sympathetic assistance of Serjeant-at-Law (Thomas) Talfourd, a young Whig barrister and MP, an Infant Custody Bill was passed, after initially being rejected by the Lords, by both Houses, and became law in 1839. It was 'the first successful challenge to England's patriarchal legal system' (Heldsinger et al. 1989: 5). 'Children under seven were now allowed to reside with their mother if the Lord Chancellor agreed to it and if the mother was of good character' (Forster 1986: 40). Furthermore, the Court of Chancery could grant a mother access to her children under sixteen. Even so, Caroline found her access denied until in July 1842, William, her youngest child, now aged eight, suffered an accident while riding alone on his father's Yorkshire estate, and died of blood poisoning. Always desperately anxious about the neglect of her children (they ran wild in Yorkshire), Caroline arrived at the station to be told that William was already in his coffin. A momentarily penitent Norton allowed the two remaining boys to return to London with their mother, where she had their company for six months of the year during their holidays from Eton.

In spite of her mistreatment, and the law's failure to give her adequate protection, Caroline emphatically disclaimed any solidarity with feminists. 'What I write,' she declared in *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854), 'is written in no spirit of rebellion; it puts forward no absurd claim for equality. . . . I, for one (I, with millions more), believe in the natural superiority of men, as I do in the existence of God. . . . Masculine superiority is incontestable; and with superiority should come protection' (quoted in Shanley 1989: 27). The British parliament of males could not easily be persuaded to give that protection, but so cogent was her overall critique of women's legal disabilities that it served to advance the feminist cause. Amongst other things, it encompassed the laws of

property, which prevented a married woman, whether or not she had left her husband, from keeping her own earnings or inheriting property. As Sir William Blackstone had written in his *Commentary on the Laws of England* (1765-69), a married woman, legally speaking, was a nonentity, with her 'very being or legal existence . . . suspended, or at least . . . incorporated or consolidated into that of the husband, under whose wing, protection, and cover she performs everything' (quoted in Gamble 2001: 20). This was the famous, or notorious, doctrine of 'coverture'. In *A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth's Marriage and Divorce Bill* (1855) Caroline strongly criticized those provisions in law that would enshrine the double standard of sexual morality, which licensed a man to behave as he wished, but punished a woman with social ostracism. The bill proposed that a man could divorce an adulterous wife, but a wife could do no more than separate from an adulterous husband. It was a 'bad, wicked law,' wrote Caroline. 'Either let men renounce the privilege of divorce, and the assertion that marriage is a dissoluble contract, or allow the weaker party that refuge from intolerable wrong, which they claim as a matter of necessity for themselves' (quoted in Shanley 1989: 28).

No wonder Meredith's intelligent and eligible young heroines, such as Clara Middleton and even more Diana Warwick, whose fictional story unfolds before the reforms began, were so wary of marital entanglements (not before, in Diana's case, she had rashly experienced them). Conversely, no wonder the pretty innocents, such as Lucy Desborough in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, and Dahlia Fleming in *Rhoda Fleming*, who believed that the men they loved would be the protectors they desired and deserved, suffered so much for their good faith. Apart from her social, economic, political and psychological disadvantages (varying, of course, from society to society), the woman's struggle, at its most basic, is against the abuse of power over her perceived condition of physical weakness. She is taken advantage of because it is in man's nature to assert his masculinity, just as in the animal world a weakened creature is turned upon or cast out by the strong. The overall phenomenon, in terms of gender relations, was well understood by Harriet Taylor Mill (1807-58), who asked, inter alia, in her *Enfranchisement of Women* (1851), 'why the existence of one-half the species should be merely ancillary to that of the other—why each woman should be a mere appendage to a man, allowed to have no interests of her own, that there may be nothing to compete in her mind with his interests and his pleasure' (1983: 24). Before 1857, divorce required a separate Act of Parliament, precluded, because it was so costly, for all but the comfortably off. In Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) Mr Bounderby tells Stephen Blackpool, whom he unsympathetically employs, that a divorce from his (Stephen's) alcoholic wife would be impossible:

'Why, you'd have to go to Doctors' Commons with a suit, and you'd have to go to a court of Common Law with a suit, and you'd have to go to the House of Lords with a suit, and you'd have to get an Act of Parliament to enable you to marry again, and it would cost you (if it was a case of very plain-sailing), I suppose from a thousand to fifteen hundred pound' (2001: xi, 60)

The Act condoned the double standard, in that a husband could divorce his wife for adultery, but a wife had to prove a case of 'aggravated enormity' (as the Divorce Commissioners phrased it) against her husband. His adultery alone, in other words, was insufficient, but had to be committed

incestuously, or bigamously, or as an act of rape, sodomy, bestiality, cruelty, or ‘Desertion, without reasonable Excuse, for Two Years or upwards’ (quoted in Levine 1987: 136). Unsatisfactory as this was, it was only in the 1890s, when a ‘social purity’ movement was gathering strength in a bid to encourage temperance, that divorce law reform again became part of the feminist agenda.

Lord Lyndhurst, however, was able to amend the law to provide that

any woman who obtained a decree of judicial separation . . . should thenceforth be treated as a feme [*sic*] sole with respect to her property and contracts. Lord St Leonard’s was similarly successful in convincing his colleagues to accept an amendment stipulating that a woman who was deserted by her husband could go before a local magistrate and receive an order allowing her thenceforth to control her earnings as a feme sole. (Shanley 1989: 44-45)

This was as far as the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 was prepared to go in respect of women’s property. The notion of giving propertied wives complete equality with their husbands as to ownership was altogether too threatening to the patriarchal convictions of most legislators. Not only would the very foundations of marriage be undermined, these alarmingly empowered women would be looking to acquire significant roles for themselves in occupations outside the home. Perhaps they would want to leave their husbands. Such a consideration, Diana Worzala has suggested, was responsible for amendments to the Married Women’s Property Act of 1870. These weakened the Act so much that the Fourth Annual Report of the Married Women’s Property Committee, of 22 September 1871, condemned it as ‘vexatious, complicated, obscure in detail . . . foolish and anomalous’ (Levine 1987: 139). It was only in 1882, after persistent publication, speeches, and parliamentary lobbying, that a comprehensive Bill was passed that satisfied the Committee. Even so, male reluctance to concede equality of rights and status to married women was disgracefully prolonged. It was 1886 before women could sue their husbands for maintenance, and 1891 before their consent was necessary for ‘conjugal rights’ of intimacy. It was ‘not until 1923 that the grounds for divorce were made the same for women as for men; and not until 1925 that mothers were given equal rights and powers with fathers over their children’ (Murray 1984: 118-19).

From the patriarchal point of view, there was no knowing what mischief ‘the sex’ might be capable of if they were given too much freedom and independence. They might even insist on being given the vote! It was a notion that had been entering debate by the 1850s through such writings as Harriet Taylor Mill’s, and was to gather strength in succeeding decades, on the grounds (in respect of wives) that inferiority in marriage was incompatible with both active citizenship and real marital partnership. As Frances Power Cobbe wrote in 1862, ‘[w]hen the theory of the “Divine Right of Husbands” has followed to limbo that of the “Divine Right of Kings” . . . then will become possible a conjugal love and union nobler and more tender by far than can ever exist while such claims are even tacitly supposed’ (quoted in Shanley 1989: 49).

Apart from Caroline Norton, Harriet Taylor Mill and Frances Power Cobbe, other remarkable women, such as Emily Davies, Josephine Butler, and Millicent Garrett Fawcett had emerged onto the early to mid-Victorian political stage. It was Josephine Butler who led the long campaign (1864-86) for the repeal of the infamous Contagious Diseases Acts, which allowed police and other officials in

port and garrison towns to examine suspected prostitutes for venereal disease. What outraged feminists was the degradation to women—not all of whom turned out to be prostitutes—in being subjected by males to such a humiliating test, and the unfairness of making them suffer for a male vice. As the sixth entry in the ‘Woman’s Protest’ (published on 1 January 1870) put it: ‘[T]hese measures are cruel to the women who come under their action—violating the feelings of those whose sense of shame is not wholly lost, and further brutalising even the most abandoned’ (Hollis 1979: 208). ‘In an age when many women preferred death to pelvic examination, the Lock Hospital in which prostitutes were confined for examination and treatment, with its horrific stories of violation, touched the darkest female fantasies’ (Showalter 1999: 187). The experience of agitation against this ‘enslavement of women’, as Butler called it in her *Memoir* (quoted in Caine 1992: 161), however, assisted feminists in mastering the male vocabulary (hitherto shrunk from) for discussing it. ‘How could a lady refuse to call a spade a spade,’ comments Showalter, ‘when that utensil was digging the grave of her sisters?’ (1999: 193).

In spite of temperamental and tactical differences, feminists proceeded forthrightly to conduct their various campaigns for just laws and equal rights. They were concerned, as we have seen, with the laws of marriage, divorce and property, but also with greater opportunities for women—married or not—to be employed outside the home. And the need for female employment grew more critical as the century wore on. By 1871, as a result of higher male infant mortality, and loss of men through wars and emigration, ‘two-thirds of all women between 20 and 24 were single . . . and 30 per cent of those aged between 24 and 35. Taking widows into account, for every three women over 20 who were wives, there were two who were widows or spinsters’ (Hollis 1979: 33).

Better schooling for women was obviously of crucial importance, not least (as had long been recognized) for those destined to become governesses, those poor, anomalous creatures suspended midway, in social status, between their employers and the servants. Without proper training, they had no basis for improving their position, nor could they be as serviceable to their pupils as their duties demanded. In any case, those reformers who were active in support of a high standard of female education wanted it to have more than a utilitarian character and purpose. Women were entitled to cultivation for its own sake. The Governesses’ Benevolent Institution, founded in 1843, was a strong ally in this cause, and so were the Christian Socialists, F. D. Maurice (a Professor at King’s College, London), and the novelist and clergyman, Charles Kingsley. With the help of nine King’s lecturers, Maurice began a series of courses in 1847—designed not only for governesses, but for any ‘ladies’ who cared to attend—and examinations were set on them, though not of university standard. In 1848 Queen’s College was founded in Harley Street, and six months later, Bedford College, which had also grown out of lectures, in this instance at the home of the Unitarian, Mrs Elizabeth Reid. These two colleges would become secondary and tertiary institutions, respectively. Their beneficent influence was immediate: for example, a member of the evening classes at Queen’s College, Frances Mary Buss, founded in 1850 what has since become one of London’s most distinguished schools, the North London Collegiate School for Girls (it had actually begun five years earlier as a small private school,

but Buss reconstituted it); and the great legal reformer, Barbara Leigh Smith,⁸ was an early student at Bedford College. Another famous private foundation, Cheltenham Ladies' College, admitted its first pupils in February 1854. It shared the academic rigour of North London Collegiate, but was socially more exclusive, on the lines of Cheltenham College, its male equivalent. High schools of the Girls' Public Day School Trust were set up in 1872, and other private (that is, 'public') schools for girls followed in succeeding decades.

As far as state schooling was concerned, the Education Act of 1870 established, but patchily, a system of compulsory elementary education for all, and the Royal Commission on Secondary Education (the Taunton Commission), which sat for four years from 1864, enquired into the provision of secondary education at the existing very small fee-paying schools, at which girls were trained in mostly domestic rather than academic skills in conditions of dreary incompetence. Feminist pressure (against the opposition of, amongst others, Matthew Arnold) ensured that the Commission would include education for girls in its purview. However, state secondary education continued to train working-class girls in home-management, needlework and so on, whereas the private schools, where feminist influence prevailed, placed the emphasis on academic achievement.

Mary Leman Grimstone, who wrote for the *Monthly Repository* and *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, was even more ambitious:

For those women whom early widowhood, or other causes, consign to celibacy, I see not why civil offices should not be open, especially chairs of science in colleges endowed for their education of their own sex. Why should moral philosophy come with less power from the lips of woman than of man? Why may not she fill a professorship of poetry as well as he? (Quoted in Rendall 1985: 129-30)

Women were excluded from universities, however, until Emily Davies founded Girton College in Cambridge in 1873. Her strong conviction that women had the right to advanced education ran counter to her otherwise settled conservatism, but she made the most of it, becoming secretary of a group, which included Barbara Bodichon, dedicated to establishing the first College for Women. It opened its doors at Benslow House, Hitchin, to five students in 1869, and four years later moved to within two miles of Cambridge, where it was renamed Girton. George Eliot, whose sequestered life as George Lewes' mistress made her a very discreet feminist, 'wrote to her "dearest B." on 16(?) November 1867 that although she was much occupied, "the better Education of Women is one of the objects of which I have *no doubt*, and I shall rejoice if this idea of a college can be carried out."' A subscription of fifty pounds arrived from 'the author of *Romola*', and a note from her to say "'that we strongly object to the proposal that there should be a beginning made 'on a small scale'. . . . Every one concerned should be roused to understand that a great campaign has to be victualled for'" (Haight 1956: iv. 399, 401; quoted in Bradbrook 1982a: 62). Other foundations for women followed soon afterwards at both the ancient universities: Newnham in Cambridge (1875), and in Oxford, Lady Margaret Hall (1878) and Somerville College (1879). It was to be many years, however, before women were awarded certificates in the proper form. At Girton, for example, the certificates issued in 1930, when Muriel Bradbrook was given hers, were the same as those of 1869:

I received one stating that I had done all that would have entitled me, if a man, to graduate as a BA. The university also supplied a degree certificate in which the word 'titular' had been inserted by hand; this came through the post. No procession to the Senate House, no family parties in the Yard. Today, undergraduates kneel to receive their degree from the first woman Vice-Chancellor, Rosemary Murray, President of New Hall. (1982b: 113)

Oxford University awarded its first degrees to women in 1920, but at Cambridge women were not admitted to membership until 1948.

Above all other reforms they saw as necessary, it was understood by the mid-Victorian feminists, and their successors, that without the vote, full equality with men, domestic, social, economic and political, was impossible. The support of working-class women for the principal goal of Chartism—the vote for men—had been evident since Peterloo, and in the form of local associations it gradually spread countrywide, especially from the late 1830s. An occasional voice, male as well as female, was even raised for the women's vote.⁹

Involvement in politics, however, was becoming increasingly a middle-class female concern, after a quiescent period that followed the enfranchisement of middle-class males in 1832. In the 1840s middle-class women were going beyond their philanthropic and anti-slavery activities (the latter also involved working-class nonconformists) by supporting the campaign to repeal the Corn Laws, which, it was thought, protected agriculture at the expense of manufacturers and consumers. During the 1850s an association of activist women began forming in London, led by Barbara Leigh Smith and Bessie Rayner Parkes, both of whom published pamphlets in 1854,¹⁰ then extended their activity to the production of a feminist monthly, *The English Woman's Journal*, financed by Smith and edited by Parkes. Its life was short (1858-64), but it served to attract other women, of various much-needed capabilities, to the cause. Among them were Jessie Proctor and Adelaide Boucheret, who set up a female employment society; Maria Rye, who opened an office for copying legal documents; and Emily Faithful, who established the Victoria Press. Their numbers grew, and in 1859 they moved from a room in Cavendish Square to 19 Langham Place, the office of their monthly journal. Thus was born the Langham Place Circle, the epicentre of British feminism for its time, from which was generated the reformist energy to expand the movement. It was to its great advantage, in publicizing its activities, to work with the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science (founded in 1857), giving conference papers and publishing them in the 'Proceedings'. Amongst the Circle's campaigns was that of assisting, through the powerful agency of her close friend, Emily Davies, to propel Elizabeth Garrett into the medical profession. The campaign failed inasmuch as London University refused her matriculation, but 'she qualified for licensing as a doctor through the Society of Apothecaries—a back door into medical practice that was hastily shut behind her' (Murray 1984: 223). She eventually received her medical degree in 1870 from the University of Paris. As Philippa Levine observes, 'In many ways the feminism of these women was more of a life-style than merely a form of organized political activism' (1987: 15). Langham Place provided space for recreation as well as reform, including a library, a reading room, a coffee shop, female debating societies and social

clubs—in all, a necessary refuge from the demands of males with whom, in one way or another, most of them shared their lives.

By 1867 committees were forming to campaign for women's suffrage, first in Manchester and London, and then in Edinburgh, Bristol, Dublin and other cities. Amongst the abuses that female enfranchisement was intended to undermine, if not abolish, was that of 'Wife Torture in England', which was the title of an article by Francis Power Cobbe, published in 1878 in the *Contemporary Review* as a contribution to the campaign for another Matrimonial Causes Act which was passed later that year. It was a direct attack on the outrageous provisions in common law that entitled a man 'to give his wife moderate correction . . . by domestic chastisement', just as he could restrain his children or apprentices. Common law also recognized his right to restrain his wife physically 'to prevent her going into society of which he disapproves, or otherwise disobeying his rightful authority' (Murray 1984: 121).

The perennial infantilization and objectification of women, which made them victims of men rather than their partners, was what Cobbe and her fellow-feminists were determined to resist, many decades (such had been the stubborn resistance of the patriarchy) after Wollstonecraft's incisive intervention. Another article by the indefatigable Cobbe appeared in the *Women's Suffrage Journal* of October 1878 in aid of women who were assaulted by their husbands. Such women, Cobbe maintained, were entitled to judicial separation. She cited the case of one Isobel Grant, who had been 'sentenced to death for killing her husband during a drunken fight. In the very same week, a habitual wife-abuser who killed his wife was sentenced to one week in prison' (Caine 1997: 119). The abominable unfairness of such a system is most graphically drawn attention to, not in Meredith's fiction, as it happens, but in Hardy's, when poor Tess is hanged for stabbing her seducer, Alec Stoke d'Urbeville, to death. Unfortunately, the Act of 1878 did not go far enough in the relief of abused women. It was biased in favour of the rich, who could afford a full divorce, while the poor had to be satisfied with separation via a magistrate's court, which, of course, precluded remarriage. It was only in the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1895 that any abused wife, irrespective of class, and not guilty of adultery, could apply for separation from her husband. Divorce was made no easier than before, but a separated wife was given custody of her children under sixteen, and was entitled to a weekly allowance of not more than two pounds.

Meredith and John Stuart Mill

There were all too many atrocities of the kind against which Cobbe and her associates campaigned. It could not be otherwise, when the subjection of women to men was enshrined in law. *The Subjection of Women* was the title of the famous tract by John Stuart Mill (1806-73), written with his stepdaughter, Helen Taylor (1831-1907), completed in 1861 (three years after his wife Harriet's death), but published in 1869,¹¹ when it was placed in Meredith's hands by his friend John Morley (1838-1923). It was a seminal conjunction of great progressive minds: first, the feminist's parliamentary and

philosophical champion, a member of the House of Commons from 1865 to 1868, and presenter, on 7 June 1866, of 1499 signatures on a petition for women's suffrage organized by Barbara Bodichon and others; second, the editor of the *Fortnightly Review* (and later of the *Pall Mall Gazette*), a politician-to-be (he was elected as Liberal MP for Newcastle in 1883), 'one of the most distinguished representatives of the influential mid-Victorian tradition of rational, optimistic, philosophical radicalism' (Roberts 1997: 117), and an acolyte of Mill's; and third, the novelist, politically detached but philosophically radical (he had imbibed, amongst other influences, the French Encyclopedists in his youth), deeply bruised by his failed marriage to Mary Ellen Nicolls, but happily remarried to Marie Vulliamy, and more than twenty years into his writing career. If we discount the early 'romances', he had an early book of poems, five novels, and the impressive sonnet sequence, *Modern Love*, behind him. Already he had shown relationships between men and women in a patriarchal culture to be a primary concern in his fiction, with particular reference to the way women were treated, and how they responded to male inadequacies or downright abuse. That may well be why, as Morley recorded in his *Recollections*, Meredith

eagerly seized the book, fell to devouring it in settled silence, and could not be torn from it all day. He had more experience than Mill of some types of women and the particular arts, 'feline chiefly',¹² to which some have recourse to make their way in the world. It was a memorable day when he found the case set out, with a breadth, strength, and grasp, that raised the question brought up in France by Condorcet at the end of the eighteenth century to a new and active position in English-speaking countries in the nineteenth.¹³ (1917: 1. 47).

The Subjection of Women, observes Kate Millett,

is a reasoned and eloquent statement of the actual position of women through history as well as an attack on the conditions of legal bondage, debilitating education, and the stifling ethic of 'wifely subjection' within the Victorian period. It is argued as powerfully as the essay *On Liberty* and is as full of Mill's splendidly controlled humanist outrage as any of his statements on slavery or serfdom, to which he draws frequent parallels.

'It was a drastic statement to make then, just as it is now', Millett continues, referring to Mill's declaration that

the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (Millett 1980: 123-24)

We can imagine how stirring sentiments such as these must have been to a progressive like Meredith (and how alarming to chauvinist bigots, for decades to come). It was not in his nature, however, to become an unquestioning acolyte of the nineteenth century's renowned liberal philosopher. He was temperamentally averse to the patriarchal assumptions that, as Barbara Caine points out in her discussion of feminism and the 'Woman Question' in early Victorian England (1992: 18-53), underlay the liberal ideology of the time, and influenced Mill in the writing of *The Subjection of Women*. To be sure, when Mill contends that women's absolute dependence on the power and goodwill (all too often contradictory attributes) of men is 'the primitive state of slavery lasting on', and that '[i]t has not lost the taint of its brutal origin' (1998: 476), it was no wonder that a committed liberal like Millicent

Garrett Fawcett, who was only twenty-two when Mill published his book, fervently believed in his importance for the women's movement. It was wonderfully heartening to be told by so eminent a man that 'a great number of women do not accept' the rule of men over women, and to have their claim for education acknowledged, together with their 'demand for their admission into professions and occupations hitherto closed against them' (484, 485). And the future editor of the *Vindication* would surely have recognized a strong connection with her author's sentiments in such passages as the following:

When we put together three things—first, the natural attraction between opposite sexes; secondly, the wife's entire dependence on the husband, every privilege or pleasure she has being either his gift, or depending entirely on his will; and lastly, that the principal object of human pursuit, consideration, and all objects of social ambition, can in general be sought or obtained by her only through him—it would be a miracle if the object of being attractive to men had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character. And, this great means of influence over the minds of women having been acquired, an instinct of selfishness made man avail themselves of it to the utmost as a means of holding women in subjection, by representing to them meekness, submissiveness, and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man, as an essential part of sexual attractiveness. (486-87)

Mill rejected Comte's views on the biological inferiority of women, and held that women should be free to choose their own way of life. On the occasion of his marriage to Harriet Taylor, whose husband had died two years before, he wrote a document (6 March 1851) in which he completely renounced a husband's 'legal power & control over the person, property & freedom of action of the other party, independent of her own wishes and will'. He was unable to legally divest himself of 'these odious powers', but he felt it his duty 'to put on record a formal protest against the existing law of marriage' that confer them, and to make 'a solemn promise never in any case or under any circumstances to use them.' Furthermore, his wife would retain

in all respects whatever the same absolute freedom of action, and freedom of disposal of herself and of all that does or may at any time belong to her, as if no such marriage had taken place; and I absolutely disclaim & repudiate all pretension to have acquired any rights whatever by virtue of such marriage. (Quoted in Capaldi 2004: 228-29)

This declaration was, of course, consistent with Mill's liberal convictions; but he also wrote it to protect himself and Harriet 'against . . . any possible rumour that he was marrying [her] in order to get control of John Taylor's money' (Packe 1954: 348).

The quotations above reveal a modern consciousness of social justice and morality, but it had its limitations. Mill is not explicit, for example, as to how women, especially in the working class, whose contribution to domestic finances was essential, were to gain entry into occupations other than needlework, governessing, and domestic service. He believed (to the disappointment of more radical feminists such as Josephine Butler, but not the majority) that in general it was as well that men should earn the income and women should manage it within the home, especially if they had young children to care for. On the other hand, women should certainly have the vote, and be free to enter public office, or professions which required a high degree of involvement in public affairs. If, however, they were to be effective in public life, they needed an education that would assist them in realizing their

potential as a force for good, in the broadest sense. Hitherto their horizons had been artificially limited by trivial considerations of religion, morality and domestic piety.

There was, then, a contradiction in the liberal feminism to which Mill, and his many feminist supporters, adhered. In John Goode's Marxist formulation, he (Mill), and they, 'question[ed] the traditional status and role of women', but they did so 'from within the [bourgeois] theory that insists on it. . . . There is no contradiction of bourgeois theory' (1976: 238). As far as the franchise was concerned, there was still, in the 1880s, little questioning of

either the naturalness of class distinctions or the middle class's right to monopolize the responsibilities of citizenship. . . . They demanded the right to vote, but only for themselves, not for all women. Typically, in fact, they were quite outspoken in arguing *against* extending suffrage beyond the ranks of the middle class. (Ardis 1990: 15)

Meredith and Women

Unlike Mill, Meredith never produced a sustained discursive account of his views on sexual politics, but he has given us ample evidence in his novels of his thinking on the place of women in the home and in society. No doubt he settles, in the end (and this is objectionable to modern feminists like Kate Millett), for disposing of his young heroines in marriage, but he gives them free rein in, for example, *The Egoist*, *Diana of the Crossways*, *One of Our Conquerors*, *Lord Ormont and His Aminta*, and *The Amazing Marriage* to make their own choices for what appears to be a happy future, however male-ridden the path towards it may have been.

The years after Meredith's reading of Mill's *The Subjection of Women* were those in which he deepened his knowledge of the feminist cause, the men and women who were pursuing it, and their difficulties, plans, visions and achievements. As a reader of both the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Westminster Review* (to both of which he contributed), he saw articles by leading feminists such as Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Edith Simcox, Emily Shirreff, Sophia Jex-Blake, and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson.

In July 1874 the *Westminster Review* published a review article on 'The Emancipation of Women' written by Louisa Shore, who, with her sister Arabella, would help to catalyze Meredith's feminism in the late 1870s. And throughout his career Meredith undoubtedly knew of literary works in which the woman question figured, especially since his private reading was supplemented by his work as publisher's reader for Chapman and Hall beginning in 1860. (Ives 1998: 15)

On 11 August 1876 Meredith replied to a letter from his friend Louisa Shore, commenting briefly on his poem 'A Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt', about which she had enquired (it had been published by John Morley in the *Fortnightly* ten days earlier), and taking the opportunity to express a view on the feminist campaign. The 'Ballad' had been structured as a vigorous dispute between a man representing the prevailing patriarchy, and a woman representing the feminist revolt against it, with a friend of the man standing by, silently weighing up the arguments, until in the end he (the friend) sides with the

woman. In stanza 33, for example, the man urges what seems to him a rational middle path, one that avoids the temptations that lead to self-destruction:

—A plain safe intermediate way is cleft
 By reason foiling passion: you that rave
 Of mad alternatives to right and left
 Echo the tempter, madam: and 'tis due
 Unto your sex to shun it as the grave,
 This later apple offered you.

But in the following stanza, the woman, while acknowledging the perils of the course on which she and her sisters are set, sees through—as she does throughout the poem—the apparent reasonableness to the male self-interest it disguises:

—This apple is not ripe, it is not sweet;
 Nor rosy, sir, nor golden: eye and mouth
 Are little wooed by it; yet we would eat.
 We are somewhat tired of Eden, is our plea.
 We have thirsted long; this apple suits our drouth:
 'Tis good for men to halve, think we.

As the poem draws to its conclusion, the speaker concedes to women the power of their beauty over 'frail man', but reminds them that man, in allowing himself to be seduced by it, becomes a far more formidable creature—not merely their worshipper, but their possessor. Perhaps, though, if women will only use their weapon wisely, the ideal of partnership will triumph over the temptations of domination:

Have women nursed some dream since Helen sailed
 Over the sea of blood the blushing star,
 That beauty, whom frail man as Goddess hailed,
 When not possessing her (for such is he!),
 Might in a wandering season seen afar,
 Be tamed to say not 'I,' but 'we'? (Bartlett 1978: 1. 281-82, 284)

In the same letter of 11 August, Meredith explained to Miss Shore how his poem related to his position on the feminist movement:

Will you say, that I have not assumed the present situation in 'Fair Ladies', but one in which it is to be understood that the beautiful, i.e. the most thoughtless of the sex hitherto, turn the chief weapon of the sex to the benefit of their sisters—having learnt to say 'we' for 'I': and thus, partly by beauty, partly by earnest argument, win one champion, and make their antagonist melancholy. . . . But it is not yet time for active measures. By spreading instruction among women, as you do, far more is accomplished than by besieging Parliament. This is a movement that, when general enough to command respect, will knock away obstruction as the lid of a pot. I have neither space nor the hour to pursue: but as I hope for the advancement of the race, and conceive that there can be none till women walk freely with men, you will not take me for a particularly deadly enemy, and should not for chilly friend. (Cline 1970: 1. 520-21)

Just over thirty years later, on 14 November 1907, Meredith wrote to Mrs Florence J. Greenwood about his 'Ballad', again urging that women should use their intelligence in their struggle, in preference to aggressive activism:

There were no public circumstances to call it forth. It came of my study of the position and the aims of women, not much mentioned by them then, though strong in their hearts—the feeling and thinking portion of them; and I read them from sympathy. The poem was not noticed at the time. I wish you success, but fear that the combatant Suffragists are doing injury to a good

cause. I would gladly see all the avenues of the Professions open to women. That would be a larger education for them. (Cline 1970: 3. 1615)

That women should have had ‘instruction’ was, for Meredith, of vital importance if they were to realize their goals, and it was intelligence that appealed to him strongly in the women who meant most to him. His first wife, Mary Ellen Nicolls, the widowed daughter of the novelist, Thomas Love Peacock (1785-1866), certainly had it, and although his second, Marie Vulliamy, was not similarly clever, she amply made up for that deficiency (if such it was) with (as Meredith, before his marriage, wrote to his friend Augustus Jessopp, who had met her) ‘so very much sweetness’ (Cline 1970: 1. 255). He was careful to endow his most admirable heroines with both intelligence and sweetness of temper, notably Clara Middleton, Laetitia Dale (Clara’s main co-heroine in *The Egoist*), and even Diana Warwick, notwithstanding her combativeness. It was particularly significant that Diana should be favoured with ‘brains’ (as Meredith wrote to both Robert Louis Stevenson and Mrs Leslie Stephen on 24 March 1884) because he had concluded, after meeting Caroline Norton at the home of his friends, the Duff Gordons, that she was somewhat lacking in them. For her part, Caroline ‘had not liked him. He had refused to be charmed by her, and showed no respect for her literary achievements’ (Chedzoy 1992: 280). Nonetheless, he had obviously seen enough in her and her history to supply him with certain elements of character and narrative for the novel which became *Diana of the Crossways*. The powerful strain of self-reliance in both Diana and her real-life inspiration, the vital importance for both women, in struggling for financial independence, of their quality of mind, are characteristics alluded to in a letter Meredith wrote to a Miss Price on 2 November 1888:

Women who read my books have much to surmount in the style, and when they have mastered it and come to the taste, I am well assured of their having discovered in me one who is much at heart with them. I have this feeling for women, because, what with nature and the world, they are the most heavily burdened. I can foresee great and blessed changes for the race when they have achieved independence; for that must come of the exercise of their minds—the necessity for which is induced by their reliance on themselves for subsistence. Thus they will work out their problem. (Cline 1970: 2. 936)

Meredith was concerned not only to secure women from sexual oppression, but to liberate them into a world in which they would be equipped to take their place as men’s equals. To Mrs A. E. Fletcher, for example, of the Dorking Women’s Liberal Association, he wrote in 1904 (possibly on 19 May, but Cline queries the date):

At this present time women need encouragement to look out upon affairs of national interest, and men should do their part in helping them to state publicly what has long been confined to the domestic circle—consequently a wasted force. That it can be a force men are beginning to feel. That the exercise of it is an education we see already in the enlargement of their view of life and of the country’s needs. So there is hope that the coming generation will have more intelligent mothers. This holds true whatever side in politics they may take, and it is the main point. . . .

By studying public matters diligently you will soon learn to perceive that there is no natural hostility between the sexes. Their interests are one when they have learnt to step forward together. It is amongst the lessons devolving upon them to teach the male kind who are not yet enough enlightened in that direction. (Cline 1970: 3. 1497-98)

His letter to Hugh W. Strong in the following January, on ‘the injustice done to women’, has been quoted above. As he commented to *The Times*, c. 28 October 1906, Meredith did consider women to be ‘excitable’, and strongly disapproved of suffragette militancy as being ‘a breach in good manners, an error of judgement, proof that [women] have not yet learnt how to deal with men.’ On the other hand, men need to be ‘well shaken at home, and taught that woman is a force to be reckoned with.’ Until then, men will be even more determined to ‘bar the fortress they hold against feminine assailants, [and to] punish offenders sharply’ (Cline 1970: 3. 1576).

It was where Meredith saw youth combined with physical appeal, intellectual promise, and a depth of spiritual resource for which more obvious attributes seemed to be an index, that his ‘feeling for women’ was at its most susceptible. A diary entry of Alice Brandreth (later Lady Butcher), who met Meredith when she was thirteen, and remained his friend for the next forty-one years, gives us a flash of illumination into the source of Meredith’s remarkable empathy:

I notice that Mr Meredith likes to hear about the people I meet, the books I read, and the classes and lectures I attend, but he never wants to hear my *opinion* about anything or anybody. I asked him why? and he replied, ‘Because I know *that* already.’ I asked him how it was that he knew so much about girls and women, and he replied ‘It is my mother that is in me.’ (Butcher 1919: 33)

We are reminded of Meredith’s comment in a letter to Dr H. Anders, of 9 November 1907: ‘In Diana of the Crossways my critics own that a breathing woman is produced, and I felt that she was in me as I wrote’ (Shaheen 1997: 197).

We have already noticed Meredith’s qualified support for the suffrage campaign. He was always interested in the suffrage, writes Lady Butcher, ‘and his “Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt” is the best expression of his sympathies and opinions, hopes and fears, on that subject. His improvised rhymes on Women’s Suffrage it is perhaps more discreet to suppress, though they were extremely funny, and amused us all’ (1919: 80). ‘[H]e was from first to last,’ she added later, ‘the apostle of liberty for women, but it must be a sane and wholesome liberty’ (1919: 103).

Meredith took his friendships seriously, whether they were with men or women. But where the women were young, unattached, and apparently willing to entertain his passionate nature without undue alarm, he was either playful (as he was to Janet Duff Gordon), or didactically expansive in a way that might seem to the young woman concerned to be a form of lovemaking. Three of them—Janet Duff Gordon, Hilda de Longueuil, and Lady Ulrica Duncombe—crossed his path at what were for Meredith critical times. Janet, aged seventeen when he was just over thirty, used to ride her horse in his Surrey neighbourhood while he accompanied her on foot, exhilarated by her endearing young charms, and she by his dazzling conversation. He had been deserted by Mary Ellen, and had not yet met Marie Vulliamy; but alas, the brilliant and handsome young poet (‘my Poet,’ Janet called him) was also a poor man, and the upper-middle-class young woman evidently had better prospects in view. ‘On 5 Dec. 1869 [she] was married to H. J. Ross, a man twenty years her senior who had been with Layard at Nineveh and who was a partner in the banking firm of Briggs and Co. at Alexandria.’ Ironically, ‘Ross lost most of his money in the commercial crisis of 1866, and thereafter he and Janet

lived mostly in Italy, in good part upon her literary earnings' (Cline 1970: 3. 1723). At long intervals she would visit her poet at Flint Cottage, the last occasion being in July 1904. Lionel Stevenson records that

[d]uring her long residence in the Val d'Arno she had developed into a fabulous specimen of the expatriated Englishwoman, writing cookery books, selling expensive vermouth to her friends, and waging war on the peasants who shot songbirds. When she wrote a book of memoirs in 1890, Meredith arranged for its publication by Chapman and Hall. . . . (1954: 343)

The ellipsis is where Stevenson adds that Meredith 'forced her to omit all excerpts from his letters'; but Janet included several letters in *The Fourth Generation* (1912), the last dated 8 July 1904, when Meredith invited her to take the train from Victoria to Box Hill the following Thursday. He had said it would be 'a revival of old pleasures to see you, with some clouds of memory overhead, but no longer obscuring', and so she found it, after the 'so many years that [she] had been unable to go to England.'

He had aged and his deafness had increased, but the old fire and brilliancy were there, and we talked for two or three hours about old times and old friends, most of them, alas, dead. 'You have something of Rose in you still, my dear,' he said, smiling rather sadly as I got up to go; 'those were pleasant days.' (1912: 381)¹⁴

Janet writes in her memoir of her sadness when the news arrived in May 1909 of the death of

my dear Poet . . . the old friend of my childhood, the last of that joyous circle which frequented 'The Gordon Arms', the last person to whom I could say 'you remember.' What an uphill fight he had, and how splendidly he won it. I never think of him as the old man I saw at Box Hill. He lives in my memory as the lithe, active companion who so often strode along by the side of my cob over Copsham common, brandishing his stick and talking so brilliantly. (1912: 392)

Meredith met Hilda de Longueuil not long after Marie died, in great suffering, from cancer in September 1885. Towards the end of 1886 Hilda was in transit from Canada to a new home in France, and staying with Meredith's neighbours, the Grant Allens. Meredith was in his late fifties, she was twenty-four, and endeavouring to recover from disappointment in love. She stayed long enough for the development of a mutual attraction, but that did not prevent her from leaving for France. Meredith offered to escort her, but she preferred to journey alone. He wrote long letters that mingled rather importunate affection with earnest advice on Hilda's character and conduct that may not have been entirely welcome. On 2 March 1887 he proposed that he should write to her a series of letters to be published under the title *Letters to a Lady, on the Art of Fiction*.

[I]t will give me a hand over all the human chords, it will not block my work, it will help to divert you, it will be due to your sweet influence on me, inspired by you. Your work in me: therefore ours in union; and you shall give me your opinions, when you form any, and I will answer them. Then we will publish the book, going into the market together. To this you must consent before we begin. Give me that proof of your liking for me, and our brotherhood. You will!—I do think the work would interest you, and it may keep you from brooding—an evil habit of yours. Shall I tell you of a defect in your physical construction, explaining much to the observer? Well, you have not lively nostrils, they are not nervous and dilating to air; they show the want of fiery animation. Consider that physical cause of a tendency to revolve your meditations gloomily and shut your sensations from fellowship with the outer world—that of nature and human kind. (Cline 1970: 2. 855-56)

Evidently she had been less responsive to Meredith, in her unhappiness, than he could have wished. At any rate, she did not take up his offer of immortality, and the correspondence fell away.

Lady Ulrica Duncombe, a daughter of the first Earl of Feversham, may have come to know Meredith through her sister, who lived at Esher Place, in Surrey. Ulrica, too, was only twenty-four, but by early November 1899 Meredith was writing to thank the Marchioness of Granby 'for a reproduction of a portrait of Lady Ulrica' (Cline 1970: 3. 1729); and on the day of his old friend Frederick Maxse's funeral (25 June 1900) Ulrica was at his side to console him. He was devoted to her from that moment, and assumed the role of distinguished mentor to a young student, plying her with his literary enthusiasms, such as Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*, and his own *Essay on Comedy*, 'wherein you will see,' he wrote on 12 July 1900, 'that an accurate perception of foibles in those whom we love does not lessen the love, or perhaps even the reverence' (Cline 1970: 3. 1351). The old man's passion, in its philosophical guise, flows on through the following months; but there are signs of discontent on the lady's part. Meredith apprehends that she has little interest in a complete set of his novels in the 'Edition de Luxe' he wants her to have ('she preferred to read philosophy or history' [Jones 1997: 229]). 'Writing to you,' he tells her on 11 October, 'is my refreshment, as it is my privilege, for I speak to the pearliest of ears, where, as I am certain, all rings clear; and if in such cases, the heart is a galloper, it is not to be distrusted when a veteran is at the reins' (Cline 1970: 3. 1366). But Ulrica's visits to Flint Cottage became fewer, and shorter, and her letters more infrequent. Eventually, in September 1902, she left for India, returning in the spring of the following year, and in 1904 she married Evelyn Baring, of the banking family, who was Military Secretary to the Viceroy of India. The 'immense wealth' of the family 'may have compensated her for the afternoons she had devoted to discussing Goethe at Flint Cottage' (Jones 1997: 230).

How are these attachments to the three young women to be accounted for? Partly it was that Meredith had a philosophical conviction that, as Elizabeth Adams Daniels notes, women are 'in touch with nature' more than men, more in harmony with the 'earth spirit' (1990: 1). In novel after novel, he places his heroines in natural settings where they seem to be not only inhabiting them, but also an inherent part of them, no less a presence (whether in repose, like Diana Warwick, or in movement, like Clara Middleton) than wind, sunlight and water. Examples of this phenomenon will be provided in the chapters that follow. Of his women friends, Janet Ross, especially, was forever associated in Meredith's mind with the enchanting Surrey countryside through which he wandered with her. Philosophy apart, she and the others appealed to his romantic idealism, an attribute he was unable to suppress for all his scorn for those who preferred sentimentalism to reality. ('Under the hearty and effervescing Romantic,' observes V. S. Pritchett, 'there is a mordant and self-punishing man' [1970: 57]). But as he grew older, the attraction that youthful beauty had for him did not abate, any more than his need for enthusiastic, intelligent response to his ideas. The fact was that '[p]aying court to attractive women was one of the few pastimes that he could still engage in, and he made the most of it' (Stevenson 1954: 336). Stevenson quotes a friend of Meredith's (Morley Roberts, writing in 1932):

He spoke to them all as if he loved them at first sight and would willingly kneel at their feet. I had seen this first when I had occasion to take down to Box Hill a lady whom he had desired to meet. In his most charming way—and he could be inexpressibly charming—he made delightful love to her with words so appropriate to an old man adoring beauty for the last time that I was filled with admiration for his delicate intimation of a sudden sorrowful and hopeless passion. . .

. When I saw him later I asked him if he had been able to recognize the beauty of this particular lady's voice. . . . 'Her voice? Her voice?' said Meredith. 'Ah, no, I could not really hear her. But oh, her eyes, her eyes!' (1954: 336-37)

Late Victorian though he was, Meredith's feminist convictions had no chronological or geographical boundaries. An undated letter written for him by his daughter, Marie Sturgis (which might explain the curious syntax), to an unidentified correspondent expressed the simple, commonsense inclusiveness of his position:

It heartens him to see women banded in union. What nature originally decreed, and men are but beginning to see. That they are fitted for most of the avenues open to energy—and by entering upon active life they will no longer be open to the accusation men so frequently bring against them, of their being narrow, weak and craven. (Shaheen 1997: 257-58)

In his half-century of writing that preceded this letter Meredith had been preoccupied above all with the situation of women in the home and in society, particularly, of course, with the nature of marriage, the impact of the prospect of marriage on the lives of men and women, and the aftermath of failed marriages, or other liaisons, with its effect on the couples involved. His major work of poetry, the sonnet sequence *Modern Love*, throws light on his own experience of marital unhappiness with Mary Ellen. As a reading of his letters indicates, Meredith was often playfully flirtatious in his communications with the older, married women he admired, such as Mrs Walter Palmer and Alice Meynell—and with the young, newly married Janet Ross; and when he fell in love again, after he lost Marie Vulliamy, he endeavoured, without much success, to restrain his ardour for fear of frightening the young women away. Balance, dignity, self-control; manliness, rationality, truth to oneself—all these were important aspects of his self-image, by no means incompatible with an intensely humorous nature (both mischievous and whimsical), great warmth of heart, and a romantic idealism that was balanced by a rigorous and remarkably well-furnished intellect. If we compare him with some of his great literary contemporaries, we might say that he is as romantic as Thomas Hardy, as psychologically perceptive as Henry James, and for sheer intelligence, philosophical reach, and literary breadth encompassing both classical and modern languages, matched only by George Eliot. Above all, for our purposes, Meredith, more than any of his male contemporaries (or indeed his English predecessors, with the exception of Chaucer and Shakespeare), 'not only knows how things are ordered in sexual politics, he knows why.' Simply put, he understands women better than they do, as he shows, for example, in *The Egoist*, where his portrayal of women is 'a feat of astounding empathy.' The quotations are from Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1977: 135), and are equally applicable to the other major novel we are to consider, *Diana of the Crossways*.

CHAPTER TWO

Experiments in Egoism¹

Introduction

On 15 November 1879, the anonymous critic of *The Egoist* in the *Saturday Review* commented that Willoughby ‘is, in truth, thoroughly selfish, an “egoist”, as Mr Meredith, adopting current slang, writes the word which used to be “egotist”’ (Williams 1971: 220). According to the *OED*, the ‘slang’ usage was not noticeably ‘current’. ‘Egotist’ had usually meant, amongst other things, ‘a selfish person’, at least since 1714, when Joseph Addison used it in that sense in *The Spectator*. ‘Egoism’ was in use by the late eighteenth century, and by 1800 was understood, in its practical ethical sense, as ‘[having] [r]egard to one’s own interest, as the supreme guiding principle of action’, and also as ‘systematic selfishness’. By 1840 (and here we come still closer to Meredith’s usage in *The Egoist*), ‘egoism’ had come to mean ‘[t]he habit of looking upon all questions chiefly in their relations to oneself’, or ‘the excessive exaltation of one’s own opinion’; and an ‘egoist’ was ‘[o]ne who makes regard to his own interest the guiding principle of his conduct’ (*OED* 1989: 95). Whether of ‘egotist’ or ‘egoist’, these meanings are all applicable to Sir Willoughby Patterne, as well as, in various ways, to other figures, male and female, in Meredith’s fiction. What the meanings themselves do not do is take into account the social consequences of behaving as such a character, particularly where male egoists are involved in relation to women, the special concern of this dissertation. Sir Willoughby being the apotheosis of the patriarchal egoist, the comments he evokes from some recent critics are illuminating in this respect. Lionel Stevenson, for example, in his ‘Riverside Edition’ of *The Egoist*, notes that ‘egoism’ was an ‘insidious evil that Meredith found in the contemporary world’ (1958: viii)—an evil even worse, in fact, than ‘sentimentalism’. The latter, for Meredith, was the other great evil of contemporary society inasmuch as, like egoism, it encouraged views of life as it was wished to be, rather than as it is. As he wrote in the (typically convoluted) first chapter of *Diana of the Crossways*, ‘We have to guard against “half-conceptions of wisdom, hysterical goodness, and impatient charity”—against the elementary state of the altruistic virtues, distinguishable as the sickness and writhings of our egoism to cast its first slough’ (12). In Stevenson’s words,

[‘Egoism’] was his term for what the modern psychologists call ‘aggression.’ In his view, an egoist always brings unhappiness upon himself and misfortune upon everyone around him by his insistence upon having his own way, and by his compulsive need to nurture his self-esteem upon the submission of other people. (1958: viii)

The term ‘aggression’ seems reductive at first sight, but it usefully characterizes Sir Willoughby’s attitude to women. For Angus Wilson, in his ‘Afterword’ to the Signet Classic edition, Sir Willoughby’s egoism takes on a social dimension in being that of ‘the complacent English gentleman the bourgeoisie looked up to as their ideal. In Meredith’s view it was exactly such complacent, materialistic, sentimental egoism that was destroying England’ (1963: 504). Judith Wilt also sees

destructiveness in this outwardly civilized gentleman. He is both brutal and infantile, a satyr in gentlemanly disguise, determined to use all his inherited power to have his own way with women, but at the same time pathetically dependent on their uncritical devotion (Wilt 1975: 159-69).

As Sir Willoughby suffers the agony of realizing that he is losing Clara Middleton, it is his aggression that he aches to unleash on her, an impulse constituted of jealousy, spite, and, at the moment described below, anger akin to delirium:

In the solitude of his room he cried right out: 'I swear it, I will never yield her to Horace De Craye! She shall feel some of my torments, and try to get the better of them by knowing she deserves them.' He had spoken it, and it was an oath upon the record.

Desire to do her intolerable hurt became an ecstasy in his veins, and produced another stretching fit, that terminated in a violent shake of the body and limbs. . . . (xxxvii, 458)

Clara is not at this moment within reach, so the aggression has to be sublimated in a 'violent shake' of his own body; but we have here a physical enactment, in symbolic form, of the harm this egoist wishes to do to the woman he believes is intolerably humiliating him. In his very nature the egoist desires to exert power over other people: it is necessary for his self-esteem, as Stevenson says, that they submit to him—he subjects other people to an ordeal of submission as an irrepressible psychological imperative, and it may or may not have a happy outcome. It is happy in the fantasy *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1855), in which the main egoist is a woman, and her aggression is necessary for the hero's understanding of what is good for him. It is tragic in, for example, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), in which the ordeal of 'education' that Richard undergoes at the hands of his well-meaning father leads eventually to his being wounded in a duel, and the death of the two young women who love him. In *Evan Harrington* (1861) the Countess de Saldar, another female egoist, and a major comic figure, although a secondary character in the novel (Richard C. Stevenson calls her 'the true Molièrian figure of the comedy . . . one of [Meredith's] most original characterizations' [2004: 64]), incites much comic confusion in upper-class circles on her own and her brother Evan's behalf, but the outcome is what she desires—his union with the baronet's daughter he loves. The egoist's self-projection has both individual and social consequences. In *Beauchamp's Career* (1876), Meredith uses a diatribe by the Radical politician, Dr Shrapnel, to adumbrate the social consequences in their wider, politico-historical sense. Dr Shrapnel is thinking of the exclusion of ordinary people, especially the poor, from the drawing up of the compact known as the British constitution. He alludes to '[t]he stench of the trail of Ego in our History,' and continues:

'Trace the course of Ego for them ['the helpless poor']: first the king who conquers and can govern. In his egoism he dubs him holy; his family is of a selected blood; he makes the crown hereditary—Ego. Son by son the shame of egoism increases; valour abates; hereditary Crown, no hereditary qualities. The Barons rise. They in turn hold sway, and for their order—Ego. The traders overturn them: each class rides the classes under while it can. It is ego—ego, the fountain cry, origin, sole source of war! Then death to ego, I say! If those traders had ruled for other than ego, power might have rested with them on broad basis enough to carry us forward for centuries.' (xxix, 327-28)

Meredith distils the essence of egoism in his portrayal of Sir Willoughby Patterne, and observes for us the corrosive emotional and psychological impact it has in the social microcosm of Patterne Hall. But amongst the reasons for his preoccupation with the phenomenon is his conviction of the limitless

damage this profound human failing can do if it is given a more than domestic theatre in which to rampage.

The effect on human lives of the egoist's aggression and destructiveness, as portrayed in Meredith's fiction, is what we are concerned to examine in this chapter, with particular reference to the effect on women. If the egoist tends to be solipsistic, Sir Willoughby is an extreme example; and the lives which come within his force field, those on whom he especially wishes to impose himself—Constantia Durham, Clara Middleton and Laetitia Dale—are fated to suffer disruption, and attempted subjection. In Constantia's case, the disruption will be more foreshadowed than actual, but she can read the signs in Sir Willoughby's behaviour, and escapes to avoid lasting damage to herself. The ordeal of patriarchal egoism, in its full, utterly dismaying strength, is reserved for Clara and Laetitia.

The Imperfect Male Egoist

Before giving any further attention at this point, however, to what became Meredith's definitive presentation of the egoistic patriarch, let us examine some of his earlier experiments in portraying egoists, male and female. We shall give particular attention to those who figure in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, which is generally considered to be one of Meredith's best novels. Egoists, and the personal, intersexual and social disruptions to which egoism, in his view, always gives rise, appeared in his fiction from the beginning, when he published his first novel, *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1855). Inspired by his childhood reading (*The Arabian Nights Entertainments* had been his favourite book), it was an extraordinarily inventive fantasy that reflected the vogue for oriental studies amongst literary scholars of the mid-nineteenth century (Edward Fitzgerald's free translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám of Naishápúr* was to appear anonymously four years later). The young hero, Shibli Bagarag of Shiraz, a barber, and down on his luck, is gazing at the city before him when he is accosted by

a woman, old, wrinkled, a very crone, with but room for the drawing of a thread between her nose and her chin; she was, as is cited of them who betray the doings of Time,
Wrinkled at the rind, and overripe at the core,
and every part of her nodded and shook like a tree sapped at the waters, and her joints were sharp as the hind-legs of a grasshopper; she was indeed one close-wrecked upon the rocks of Time. ('The Thwackings', 3)

Deftly archaized diction, simulating an oriental storyteller's tropes, tone and rhythm, evokes the sorceress, Noorna bin Noorka, daughter of the Vizier at the royal court, a repulsively ugly crone when Shibli meets her, but in reality a beautiful young woman, who reveals herself after he agrees to marry her in spite of her appearance. With her occult knowledge of his nature and potential, she persuades Shibli that their own future prosperity, her father's, Shibli's uncle's (he is Baba Mustapha, chief barber to the court of Persia), and indeed that of the whole realm, depend on his shaving the clothier Shagpat. This man, 'the son of Shimpoor, the son of Shoolpi, the son of Shullum' ('The Thwackings', 1), revels in, and is revered for, his exceptional hairiness; for amongst this hair is one of limitless power, the Identical, whose possession is the source of all blessing.

‘[T]is certain [says Noorna] that when thou hast shaved Shagpat thou wilt have achieved the greatest of things, and be most noteworthy of thy race—thou, Shibli Bagarag, even thou! and thou wilt be Master of the Event, so named in anecdotes and histories and records, to all succeeding generations.’ (‘The Thwackings’, 6)

The quotations are given as a sample of the story’s quaint, piquant flavour, unique in Meredith. His work would always be richly metaphorical, but except to a lesser extent in his next work, the Germanic romance entitled *Farina, a Legend of Cologne* (1857), he never again, in his prose, allows himself so extravagantly exotic a mode of expression. It is almost as if he chose to compensate for his desperate marital difficulties (described below) by escaping into fantasy—though some critics have attempted to turn it into allegory (Ian Fletcher, for one, whose brilliantly allusive essay [1971: 34-68] sees much else in the novel besides). The story is a dazzling phantasmagoria, with proof ‘in every line’, as an anonymous critic wrote in the *New Quarterly Review* of April 1856, of ‘a gorgeous imagination, literary skill of a high order, and considerable dramatic power’, together with ‘quiet irony, humour, pathos, and an energy of imitation, unflagging from beginning to end’ (Williams 1971: 49). Reviewing the novel in *The Leader* of 5 January 1856, George Eliot called it ‘a work of genius, and of poetical genius. . . . It is no patchwork of borrowed incidents. Mr Meredith has not simply imitated Arabian fictions, he has been inspired by them, but only as an Oriental genius would have used them who had been “to the manner born”’ (Williams 1971: 41). George Eliot was well aware of the importance that Oriental inspiration had assumed for the English: ‘[A]lmost all our good things—our most precious vegetables, our noblest animals, our arts, our religious and philosophical ideas, our very nursery tales and romances, have travelled to us from the East. In an historical as well as in a physical sense, the East is the Land of the Morning’ (Williams 1971: 40).

Four months later, in the *Westminster Review*, she again praised Meredith’s remarkable ability to transmute his inspirational material into a seemingly original work, full of the ‘wild imaginativeness’ (Williams 1971: 47-48) of his models. The novel, in fact, had a deeper originality than its author’s handling of Oriental colour, character and incident. In the context of gender relations to which its readers were accustomed, it was fundamentally subversive in foregrounding the roles, to the disadvantage of the male protagonist, of its major female characters. (Besides Noorna there is Goorelka, ‘the witch Princess’, and Rubesqurat, ‘the drolly sensual but also sinister Mistress of Illusions’ [Fletcher 1971: 35]; but it is Noorna who predominates.) ‘It is a sort of work which not everyone has sympathy with,’ wrote Meredith presciently to Charles Kingsley on 11 February 1856 (Cline 1970: 1. 25). The ‘hero’ achieves his goals, but he is both vain and inept, and dependent on Noorna for rescue from a variety of potential catastrophes. She had told her father that ‘vanity will trip him’ (‘The Betrothal’, 105) and sure enough, when he hears what he has to do, he behaves as she expects:

He was a hawk in eagerness, a peacock in pride, an ostrich in fullness of chest. . . . Thereupon he exulted, and his mind strutted through the future of his days, and down the ladder of all time, exacting homage from men, his brethren; and ’twas beyond the art of Noorna to fix him to the present duties of the enterprise: he was as feathered seed before the breath of vanity. (‘The Betrothal’, 110, 111)

The language echoes King Lear in its portrayal of humanity in its decadence; and though Sir Willoughby Patterne is twenty-four years in the future, these lines foreshadow him. They are an early evocation of the power of the 'Comic Spirit' (about which Meredith was to write in his *Essay on Comedy* in 1877) to ironically deflate, at the very moment of their offering, the pretensions of unthinking male egoism. As George P. Landow writes, 'the conventions of heroism, fantasy, and romance' (2004: 1) are already in Meredith's sights, and Shibli Bagarag would share his low birth, high achievements and 'imperfect egoism' (Fletcher 1971: 59) with later heroes such as Evan Harrington. In *The Shaving of Shagpat* 'the limited male hero who so obviously depends on a woman's sense and heroism qualifies the male ideal' (Landow 2004: 1). It is an undermining of the male Victorian's notion of sexual hierarchy (J. M. S. Tomkins thinks the novel is 'without doubt, an allegory of social revolution' [1971: 121]), and the theme would keep recurring in the later fiction. Writing of the ordeals that Meredith's heroes endure, V. S. Pritchett notes that in spite of their severity, Meredith persists in finding comedy in what in this novel he calls 'thwackings'. Here, as in, say, *Beauchamp's Career*, when Romney has no compunction in horsewhipping Dr Shrapnel, the beatings are both physical and symbolic (as, no doubt, a Victorian father would intend). 'The important ordeal,' says Pritchett,

is spiritual. The soul has to pass through fire. And what has to be burned away? Pride above all and self-delusion. The business of comedy is ruthlessly to expose the false emotions and the false image of oneself and the purpose of comedy is to establish sanity. This is the theme that dominates all Meredith's novels; it is his only important theme. His hero [or heroine, we should add] should emerge at the end, fitted at last to face life. (1970: 59)

The Blindness of Paternal Egoism

The idea of the male egoist is central to Meredith's first realist novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, in which Sir Austin Feverel attempts to bring up his son according to a philosophic programme of education 'precisely calibrated,' writes Judith Wilt, 'to anticipate, control, and often foil each natural urge as it blossoms' (1975: 84). The precise calibration constitutes what Sir Austin believes to be his 'scientific' method, the general purpose of which is 'to prepare the boy to cope with a world full of sham, hypocrisy and vice' (Kelvin 1961: 6). Sir Austin, the self-proclaimed 'Scientific Humanist', is to judge—like Providence, as his nephew Adrian Harley remarks—of his son's eventual fitness to take his place as the heir to the Feverels. He is particularly concerned to ensure a favourable outcome—favourable to the House of Feverel, not just to Richard—to his son's future relationships with women. It is in fact the boy's primary ordeal (in a novel dominated by that metaphor) to be subjected to education by precept culled from Sir Austin's book of aphorisms on human conduct, 'The Pilgrim's Scrip'²—an education specifically designed to cultivate in the boy a Galahad-like purity and immunity to self-destructive sexual temptation. The reward of true knightliness (though not before he is twenty-five) will be a woman who, in Sir Austin's opinion, is worthy of him—who will not betray and desert him, thus replicating Sir Austin's own ordeal.

A choice expression of Sir Austin's misogynistic motive, a marker, so to speak, for the pedagogic course he intends following, appears on the first page of the novel: 'I expect that Woman will be the last thing civilized by Man' (i, 1).³ Sir Austin had loved his wife, even though Meredith plainly intends the reader to see her as a less than admirable character:

A languishing, inexperienced woman, whose husband in mental and in moral stature is more than the ordinary height above her, and who, now that her first romantic admiration of his lofty bearing has worn off, and her fretful little refinements of taste are not instinctively responded to, is thrown into no wholesome household collision with a fluent man, fluent in prose and rhyme. (i, 2-3)

The 'collision' is inadvertently contrived by her husband. For all her faults, Lady Feverel is beautiful, and the man in question, Denzil Somers, 'a sort of poet' (i, 2), a college friend of her husband's, and a wastrel, becomes a dependent of Sir Austin's as nominal bailiff for the Feverel estates. Sir Austin believes him to be a genius, and for that reason overlooks the unsavoury elements in his character. In his idealism, '[he] had opened his soul to these two.'

He had been noble Love to the one, and to the other perfect Friendship. He had bid them be brother and sister whom he loved, and live a Golden Age with him at Raynham. In fact, he had been prodigal of the excellences of his nature, which it is not good to be, and, like Timon, he became bankrupt, and fell upon bitterness. (i, 3)

As Gillian Beer has noted (1970: 24), the upper case personifications, and references to godlike or heroic life in the 'Golden Age' and Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*, are indicative of a particularly grandiose form of egoism in Sir Austen that his wife and her lover would understandably have found alienating. His self-regarding notions of prodigality and excellence of nature, the abuse of which he then dramatizes as the cause of his 'bankruptcy' and 'bitterness', are further signs of what will be an increasingly incapacitating failure to see himself as he is—a romantic in the guise of a 'Scientific Humanist', with an unrealistic pedagogic mission. His ultimate mistake is to believe that an intellectual blueprint enshrined in his book of aphorisms (from which a selection has been made called 'The Notebook', which is Richard's curriculum) can be imposed upon a creature of flesh and blood, whose instinct will be to resist, no matter how much he loves his father. Sir Austin anticipates Sir Willoughby Patterne in wanting time to stand still, and the little community over which he rules, and especially his son and heir, to be impervious to influences he, Sir Austin, cannot control. No more than Sir Willoughby, however, can Sir Austin confront the fatal discrepancy between his cherished notions and life's realities. In fact, Gillian Beer observes, "'The Pilgrim's Scrip' is Sir Austin's protection from the practical application of his wisdom' (1970: 19). The hard and simple truth he cannot face is that the System is incapable of recreating Camelot, or Eden, at Raynham Abbey. There is an education of the heart and spirit, as well as the mind, it cannot cater for. It cannot produce the poise of intellect and emotion, and the honourable conduct towards others, that Meredith's own philosophy commends in his pastoral allegory 'The Woods of Westermain', published in *Poems and Lyrics of the Joy of Earth* (1883). In this he writes of the human triad of 'Blood and brain and spirit' that must 'Join for true felicity.'

Are they parted, then expect
Someone sailing will be wrecked. . . . (Bartlett 1978: 1. 217)

The ordeals of life-experience that Richard negotiates as a boy out of love for his father are followed by those he generates for himself in his love for Lucy Desborough, which he pursues against his father's wishes, and they lead to tragic outcomes. The narratorial criticism of the character of Sir Austin that this implies (inasmuch as the System ceases to work as he has intended after Richard passes his malleable boyhood years)⁴ may also be read as an *ex post facto* criticism by the narrator of himself. As Gillian Beer remarks,

The material in the Maroon Notebook makes clear Meredith's mordant jest at his own expense—his secret recognition that in large measure he is Sir Austin. He is Sir Austin not only because he is Sir Austin's creator and in an emotional predicament close to his, but even more because their parallel methods of recording and ordering experience spring from similar impulses of personality. (1970: 19)

There is in fact a curious ironic candour in Meredith's presentation of Sir Austin (as there is in the young tailor, Evan Harrington, in Meredith's next novel), as if an oblique representation of himself, even in so flawed a figure, was some kind of release from the tensions of extreme reticence that were customary with him. Henkle draws attention to the fact that 'many of the positions taken in the *Scrip* are ones Meredith held with apparent conviction much of his life':

Sir Austin's entry, rhapsodizing 'the ultimate victory of good within us, without which nature has neither music nor meaning', accords perfectly with Meredith's meliorism and his sense of the inspiring powers of nature, visible in much of his poetry. Similarly, the vision by Sir Austin of an Intellectual Aristocracy does not too greatly misrepresent Meredith's thinking. . . . Even the ridiculous poetry of the Wallis figure, Diaper Sandoe, contains some of Meredith's own youthful lines. (1980: 244)

Various phrases from the two quotations above about Lady Feverel and her husband amount to confessions in fictional guise of aspects of his character and marriage that Meredith could apparently not reveal in letters, or his recorded conversation. His first wife, the widowed Mary Ellen Nicolls, the daughter of the novelist, Thomas Love Peacock, was decidedly attractive both in intellect and in person. But when she, too, had ceased to admire her husband's 'lofty bearing' (Meredith is reported to have been a handsome and spirited young man), she had herself been 'thrown into no wholesome household collision' with him. Meredith ironically contrasts the meanness of 'fretful little refinements of taste' with the implied generosity of spirit in 'a fluent man, fluent in prose and rhyme'. The discreet litotes serves to imply 'collisions' of far greater moment; and the prodigality of nature referred to in the second quotation did indeed cause, if not financial bankruptcy (Meredith was already poor when he married), then certainly bitterness, and a bankruptcy in morale. He had suffered greatly—indeed, was still suffering as he wrote this text—from his wife's betrayal. Lady Feverel leaves Sir Austin after five years of marriage, shortly after their son Richard is born. Meredith's marriage collapsed, after years of quarrelling, when Mary succumbed to the charms of the artist, Henry Wallis, during a visit (without Meredith) to North Wales in the summer of 1857. Wallis had used Mary as a model for a painting called 'Fireside Reverie' in 1855, for which Meredith had written the autograph, and Meredith was the model for 'The Death of Chatterton', which Wallis exhibited in the Academy in 1856. By the following summer, Wallis was taking advantage of his friendship by joining Mary in North Wales, and on 18 April 1858 a son, assumed to be Wallis's, was born to her in Clifton, where

she had gone to be looked after by her foster-sister. Meredith, who was now caring for their son Arthur, would not allow her to return home, and in the autumn she and Wallis left for Capri with their child.

As well as being beautiful and clever, Mary had been given an enlightened education by her father, and was not afraid to express her opinions. She was altogether a fine example of emancipated Victorian womanhood, and thus very appealing to the progressive-minded Meredith. Only twenty-one when he married her, he was evidently too eager to weigh the imprudence of being not only very young, but much too poor, for such a step. J. B. Priestley's account of the trouble between them is graphic:

This marriage was doomed from the outset. It was not so much the difference in age [Mary was nearly seven years his senior] as the likeness in temperament that made it disastrous. Both husband and wife were of the same kind, brilliant, ambitious, highly-strung, uncompromising, bitter-tongued, so that there was no point of rest between them, no possibility of give and take, no mutual adjustment of wills and purpose. The conditions of their married life were not likely to make things easier, being a dreary sequence of duns, lodgings, dead babies, and baffled literary ambition. There were frequent quarrels and scenes, separations and reconciliations. . . . (1926: 16)

Meredith's own words, in a sonnet from *Modern Love* (1862), his great lament for marital self-destruction, express the terrible agony of a marriage beyond repair, a prey to mutually inflicted suffering:

She stops before the glass. What sight in view?
A face that seems the latest to reveal!
For she turns from it hastily, and tossed
Irresolute, steals shadow-like to where
I stand; and wavering pale before me there,
Her tears fall still as oak-leaves after frost.
She will not speak. I will not ask. We are
League-sundered by the silent gulf between.⁵ (Bartlett 1978b: 1. 129)

Mary's elopement left Meredith to look after the five-year-old Arthur, and deal as best he could with his loneliness, his suspicions as to the paternity of her child, his intense jealousy of her lover (he had not ceased to love her himself), the social disgrace of her abandonment of him, and his guilt and remorse for derelictions of duty to her (difficult as they were, he found, to define) that might have contributed to the parting. The overall effect was to arouse an intense alienation, even though, on her return from Europe, she was no longer with Wallis, and desperately wanted to see Arthur. By now Meredith was encased in egoistic self-righteousness (as the two quotations indicate), and would not see her himself, although she was seriously ill with kidney trouble, and earnestly requested a visit from him when he returned from a visit to the Continent. Nor would he allow the boy to see or hear of her until the last month of her life, when he did so only '[a]fter some hesitation' (Cline 1970: 1. 104). When, in October 1859, she died in her Weybridge lodgings, Meredith did not go to her funeral. The quoted phrase is in a footnote to a letter from him to Janet Ross dated October 8 1861. His relenting about Arthur may have been prompted by a query from Janet as to the fairness of his attitude and behaviour, a possible inference to be drawn from his reply:

Your letter was based on false intelligence, my dear. It was perfectly right of you to take up the case as you did. I am glad you like me well enough to do so. Be sure I would not miss your friendship for much; and would stoop my pride for it, even if that stood in the way. As it is there is no feeling of the sort. (Cline 1970: 1. 103-04)

We have diverged, in this biographical detour, from our discussion of *Richard Feverel*, but its purpose is to locate the composition of this novel and the next (*Evan Harrington*) within the context of Meredith's very troubled marriage and its immediate aftermath. Meredith had behaved towards Mary, especially in her last, helpless months, as a victim of his own ego. Swathed in the haughty spirit of an injured party, he was apparently determined to punish her for emotional and physical neglect by neglecting her in return. Priestley's judgement is again illuminating: '[Meredith] does not come out of this disastrous affair too well, for he showed himself somewhat cold and implacable in the face of suffering and sorrow that reduced his own injuries to mere trifles: his pride would not allow him to speak the forgiving word and make the generous gesture' (1926: 17). His experience induced in him a disillusionment with women, and a distrust of marriage, that he gave to the character of Sir Austin Feverel on the very first page of the novel. In 'The Pilgrim's Scrip', he writes, Sir Austin had given a 'bruised heart to the world' (i, 1). But the 'monstrous . . . scorn' (i, 1) he had expressed in 'I expect that Woman will be the last thing civilized by Man' had the perverse effect of exciting rather than deterring women's interest in him—an early indication in the novel of his very human inability to foresee, or control, all the consequences of his actions. A letter from Meredith to his friend W. C. Bonaparte Wyse, conjectured by Cline to have been written in January 1862, is absurdly cynical in a young man (not to say confused), but arises from a similar 'bruised heart':

Women, my dear fellow, can occasionally be fine creatures, if they fall into good hands. Physically they neighbour the vegetable,⁶ and morally the animal creation; and they are, therefore, chemically good for man, and to be away from them is bad for that strange being, who, because they serve his uses, calls them angels. I respect many. I dislike none. I trust not to love one. For what if you do? Was there ever a gambler's stake as that we fling for a woman in giving ourselves for her whom we know not, and haply shall not know when twenty years have run? I do blame Nature for masking the bargain to us. The darlings ought all to be ticketed. Nevertheless, I envy your state of mind with regard to them immensely. I have seen infants fed with pap-spoons. They took all in faith, and they were nourished. If I thought myself superior, I who looked at them loftily, and drank more than was good for me that night, was I not an ass? (Cline 1970: 1. 124-25)

The biographical narrative, then, has certain obvious connections with the fiction. Sir Austin Feverel, too, had seen his wife as an ideal partner. In fact 'he had raised [her] to be his equal, and he judged her as his equal. [But] '[s]he had blackened the world's fair aspect for him' (i, 3-4). If the System to which he wishes his son Richard to conform is a kind of revenge against womanhood for wounding him so grievously, then he and Richard may be seen as surrogates in the fictional narrative for Meredith and his son Arthur. Like Richard, Arthur was only five when his mother left home. Meredith had no elaborate educational system of his own to force on him, but he did send him away, first to Norwich and then to Germany, where he himself had been, for his schooling. Arthur was a sensitive child, and his relationship with Meredith did not recover from these separations, any more than that of Meredith and his father Augustus did from theirs. Father and child in the novel are made to suffer emotional punishment as they undergo, so to speak, the narrator's expiation, his purgation, for past conduct. We

might even say that Meredith is not only Sir Austin, but also Richard, inasmuch as he, too, had lost his mother at the age of five, and had become estranged from the father he had loved after the latter's bankruptcy, and marriage to his servant. The difference, however, between the author and his character is that Richard does not lose his love for his father, whereas Meredith came to consider Augustus "a muddler and a fool", and developed 'a lifelong contempt' for him (Stevenson 1954: 10). On the other hand, 'Richard re-enacts the drama of male selfishness and irresolution' in which Meredith had become involved. 'He treats his young wife abominably and dallies with an older woman—a woman like Mary Ellen, perhaps?—who is worldly and cruel and who betrays his emotions' (Henkle 1980: 243). The not easily fathomed complexity of the links between the fiction and the biographical facts appears to reflect the author's difficulty in achieving a necessary artistic distance from the vicissitudes of experience. In V. S. Pritchett's view, it is 'the weakness of intensely personal novels' that the personal experience is 'not wholly transfigure[d]. . . . As shadows, [Meredith's] wife and her lover appear in the novel; so that we are blatantly invited to see that under the comedy there is an unresolved torture and that real life is grimacing unassimilated' (1970: 71).

Meredith had become aware, through his own experience of unhappy marriage, of the appalling destructiveness of contending egos, the distorted, ego-driven perception of the Other which both incites and results from that contention. Sir Austin recalls his own suffering, not his wife's, when he observes to Richard (after he has become aware of the latter's attachment to Lucy Desborough, the neighbouring farmer's niece), that 'women are not the end, but the means, of life. In youth we think them the former, and thousands, who have not even the excuse of youth, select a mate—or worse—with that sole view. I believe women punish us for so perverting their uses. They punish Society' (xxi, 184).

It is part of the malady of egoism, in Meredith's view, perhaps the very malady itself, that the obsessive inward gaze prevents the sufferer from seeing the world and its people as they really are, and thus from understanding his (or her) own folly. As Sir Austin's friend and confidante, Lady Blandish, reads in his Notebook, 'There is no more grievous sight, as there is no greater perversion, than a wise man at the mercy of his feelings' (xliv, 537). It could be argued that *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* was written to exemplify that statement, on account of its applicability to the author's own experience.

Sir Austin's ambitious, honourable, but misguided plan is to plant such fruitful seed in the child as 'to germinate in him the love of every form of nobleness.'

'I am only striving to make my son a Christian,' he said, answering them who persisted in expostulating with the System. And to these instructions he gave an aim: 'First be virtuous,' he told his son, 'and then serve your country with heart and soul.' The youth was instructed to cherish an ambition for statesmanship, and he and his father read history and the speeches of British orators to some purpose; for one day Sir Austin found him leaning cross-legged, and with his hand to his chin, against a pedestal supporting the bust of Chatham, contemplating the hero of our Parliament, his eyes streaming with tears. (xii, 91-92)

As Gillian Beer has noted (1970: 10-11), Meredith does not intend the reader to judge Sir Austin as ridiculous; in fact he removed passages that made him appear so from the 1878 edition of the novel.

But he did want the baronet to be seen as unwise, undermined by the fatal irony of imposing a philosophy of nurture that inevitably runs counter to the intended beneficiary's nature. Signs of this incompatibility appear early, when, on his fourteenth birthday, Richard and his friend Ripton Thompson are caught poaching by Farmer Blaize, are horse-whipped by him, and in revenge bribe 'a burly young countryman' (iii, 21), Tom Bakewell, to set fire to his rick. As Sir Austin begins discovering the truth of this escapade, he reflects sadly on the efficacy of his System: 'If a day had done so much, what would years do? Were prayers and all the watchfulness he had expended of no avail?' (iv, 35). But Meredith's narrative voice supplies the comment that defines the baronet's essential error:

If immeasurable love were perfect wisdom, one human being might almost impersonate Providence to another. Alas! love, divine as it is, can do no more than lighten the house it inhabits—must take its shape, sometimes intensify its narrowness—can spiritualize, but not expel, the old lifelong lodgers above-stairs and below. (iv, 35-36)

In plainer English, love cannot be relied on to transform us into more than earthly beings. Our physical inheritance includes the waywardness of our irrational minds, and the compulsions of our sexual instincts. Sir Austin is misled by love of his son to set too much store by his ideals. The primary purpose of Richard's education, as we have seen, is to protect him from the damage that a woman can inflict on him. But the programme is inherently and deeply flawed, inasmuch as Sir Austin casts himself in the role, not simply of moral tutor, but of an angel (the term is also used by Judith Wilt [1975: 85]) standing with flaming sword at the gate of the erotic paradise. In doing so he prescribes an impossible level of filial piety:

[T]here are fathers who are content to be simply obeyed. Now I require not only that my son should obey; I would have him guiltless of the impulse to gainsay my wishes—feeling me in him stronger than his undeveloped nature, up to a certain period, where my responsibility ends and his commences. (xvi, 133-34)

Sir Austin is an egoist, but very far from being an ogre; and to the extent that '[I]f life was made very pleasant to [Richard] at Raynham, as it was part of Sir Austin's principle of education that his boy should be thoroughly joyous and happy', the System, as Richard grows from boyhood to adolescence, seems to be working. As long as he attends to his studies he is allowed to have whatever he wants, and his watchful father's reward is to see him 'tall, strong, [and] bloomingly healthy' (xii, 95). But Meredith, who had experienced another kind of liberal education, as enlightened as it was pastoral, with the Moravian brethren at Neuwied, is intent on demonstrating the deleterious effects of an upbringing that cannot, of its very nature, keep control of every development in the child. The ironically named 'Scientific Humanist', locked in his own self-conceit, cannot, for example, dictate the nuances of Richard's relationship with his comrades. He is powerless to prevent the growth of pride, or ego. As the narrative voice explains,

Perhaps the boy with a Destiny was growing up a trifle too conscious of it. His generosity to his occasional companions was princely, but was exercised something too much in the manner of a prince; and, notwithstanding his contempt for baseness, he would overlook that more easily than an offence to his pride, which demanded an utter servility when it had once been rendered susceptible. (xii, 95)

Sir Austin sees himself as the inhabitant of a 'lofty watch-tower' (xii, 101), whence he oversees the conduct of his son, day by day, and in minute detail. Whenever he can, he likes to station himself in some hidden place from where he can observe his son's behaviour undetected. Thus, on the occasion of the swimming contest between Richard and his friend Ralph Morton, 'he was a spectator from the cover of a plantation by the river-side', and Lady Blandish, 'to the scandal of her sex', accompanies him. 'He had invited her attendance, and she, obeying her frank nature, and knowing what The Pilgrim's Scrip said about prudes, at once agreed to view the match, pleasing him mightily'. At this point, however, the satirical narrator's voice intervenes to throw light on Sir Austen's romantic idealism, or, in Meredith's term, his sentimentalism. 'For was not here a woman worthy the Golden Ages of the world? One who could look upon man as a creature divinely made, and look with a mind neither tempted, nor taunted, by the Serpent! Such a woman was rare.' A little further on in the paragraph a direct, and ironic, link is made between the father's sentimentalism and the son's, when Lady Blandish, wanting a better view of the boys, 'advanced her head above his shoulder delicately' (xii, 97). In doing so her bonnet catches Richard's eye, distracts him from his start, and he loses the race. But he will not 'plead a false start. . . . It was the Bonnet had beaten him, not Ralph. The Bonnet, typical of the mystery that caused his heart those violent palpitations, was his dear, detestable enemy' (xii, 98); a symbol, in other words, of femininity, and all he had yet to discover about it.

Elevated or covert, Sir Austin's steady view of his son's development is no guarantee of its perceptiveness. He believes his son to be morally pure, and that any tendency to 'wildness . . . any remoteness or richness of fancy in his expressions' were effects of the 'Blossoming Season' (xii, 100). The narrator's indictment is severe, and applies to this and all other freaks of the System as described in the text: 'There is nothing like a theory for blinding the wise.' (Indeed, as a criticism of ideology, it holds good for any time and place.) The comment continues: 'Sir Austin, despite his rigid watch and ward, knew less of his son than the servant of his household. And he was deaf, as well as blind' (xii, 100-01), inasmuch as he had been warned that Richard was 'scribbling', but had had no idea that it could be poetry, which for Sir Austin is a sign of degeneracy. It is now that he makes one of his egregious mistakes (he has a way of sabotaging, through crass misjudgement, his own System). He subjects his son to examination by a phrenologist, and induces him to throw his poetry into the flames. That Sir Austin should recount this episode to Lady Blandish (who sympathizes with Richard) with mingled pride and admiration, both of his son and himself, is a measure of his blindness. Again the authorial comment—of course, a poet's comment—is severe:

Killing one's darling child is a painful imposition. For a youth in his Blossoming Season, who fancies himself a poet, to be requested to destroy his first-born, without a reason (though to pretend a reason cogent enough to justify the request were a mockery), is a piece of abhorrent despotism, and Richard's blossoms withered under it. (xii, 101)

Richard's internal discourse takes up the narrative: 'A strange man had been introduced to him, who traversed and bisected his skull with sagacious stiff fingers, and crushed his soul while, in an infallible voice, declaring him the animal he was: making him feel such an animal!' (xii, 101-02). There follows another authorial intervention:

Not only his blossoms withered, his being seemed to draw in its shoots and twigs. And when, coupled thereunto (the strange man having departed, his work done), his father, in his tenderest manner, stated that it would give him pleasure to see those same precocious, utterly valueless, scribbles among the cinders, the last remaining mental blossoms spontaneously fell away. Richard's spirit stood bare. He protested not. (xii, 102)

Richard exclaims, silently: 'Enough that it could be wished! He would not delay a minute in doing it'; the narrator returns momentarily to describe the action thus announced: 'Desiring his father to follow him, he went to a drawer in his room, and from a clean-linen recess, never suspected by Sir Austin, the secretive youth drew out bundle after bundle: each neatly tied, named and numbered: and pitched them into flames'; Richard is given a final (silent) cry of despair: 'And so Farewell my young Ambition!'; and the sentence, paragraph and chapter conclude with the narrator's damning judgement on the meddling, muddling dogmas of the 'Scientific Humanist': '. . . and with it farewell all true confidence between Father and Son' (xii, 102). The dialogue (in the Bakhtinian sense) between two consciousnesses, the narrator's and his character's, serves to dramatize and enrich the reader's apprehension of the psychological conflict taking place both between father and son, and within each of them.⁷

Sir Austin intends, as we have seen, that Richard should not marry before he is twenty-five, and that he, Sir Austin, will select a bride for him:

a young lady, some years his junior, was to be sought for in the homes of England, who would be in every way fitted by education, instincts, and blood—on each of which qualifications Sir Austin unreservedly enlarged—to espouse so perfect a youth and accept the honourable duty of assisting in the perpetuation of the Feverels. . . . 'It is my duty, having thus brought him up' [he tells Lady Blandish], 'to see that he is properly mated—not wrecked upon the quicksands of marriage, as a youth so delicately trained might be; more easily than another! Betrothed, he will be safe from a thousand snares.' (xiii, 111, 112)

This interview is taking place in a temple in Sir Austin's grounds suggestively called Daphne's Bower; and in a stroke of dramatic irony, Meredith depicts him as engaged in restrained but unmistakable courtship of the lady (she is ready for a proposal if he ventures one) at the very moment when he is outlining his plans to rigorously control the course of his son's future relationships. Furthermore, as he bends above her hand (by way of concluding his discourse) and raises it to his lips (Lady Blandish takes this as a sign of being 'wooded and asked in wedlock', they hear 'a noise from the neighbouring beechwood. . . . They turned their heads and beheld the hope of Raynham on horseback surveying the scene. The next moment he had galloped away' (xiii, 112, 113).

This kiss of Lady Blandish's hand by Richard's father (in itself a sign of how far Sir Austin's practice deviates from precept) marks a turning-point in the narrative, a release for Richard from the agonizingly uncertain yearnings he has been experiencing before this moment. Its sensuality is restrained in adult terms, but for the innocent boy it is a startling revelation of a direct physical reason for his emotional turmoil. It transports him, as had Lady Blandish's bonnet, into an idealized realm of adolescent sexual desire he cannot yet recognize as sexual desire, beautifully described by Meredith in terms of chivalric self-sacrifice and reward—the reward of a woman's love.

All night Richard tossed on his bed with his heart in a rapid canter, and his brain bestriding it, traversing the rich untasted world, and the great Realm of Mystery, from which he was now

restrained no longer. Months he had wandered about the gates of the Bonnet, wondering, sighing, knocking at them, and getting neither admittance nor answer. He had the key now. His own father had given it to him. His heart was a lightning steed, and bore him on and on over limitless regions bathed in superhuman beauty and strangeness, where cavaliers and ladies leaned whispering upon close green swards, and knights and ladies cast a splendour upon savage forests, and tilts and tourneys were held in golden courts lit to a glorious day by ladies' eyes, one pair of which, dimly visioned, constantly distinguishable, followed him through the boskage and dwelt upon him in the press, beaming while he bent above a hand glittering white and fragrant as the frosted blossom of a May night. . . . He was intoxicated by anticipation. For that he was born. There was, then, some end in existence, something to live for! To kiss a woman's hand, and die! (xiv, 113, 114)

There is an underlying criticism in the narrative here, not so much of Richard—though Meredith calls his feverish condition 'nonsense' (xiv, 114)—as of Sir Austin, whose misguided System has conduced to it. Like his friend Ralph Morton, whom he meets as he rows down river in the early morning, the boy has come to the very 'frontiers of the Realm of Mystery' (xiv, 116). But unlike Ralph, who has fallen for the charming Clare Forey (overlooked, in his innocence, by Richard), Richard has been denied more conventional outlets for adolescent passion, such as writing poetry. Sir Austin recognizes that his son may well be arriving at those perilous sexual frontiers; but his purpose is to prevent him from crossing them before he, Sir Austin, has inspected and approved the female enticements on the other side. However, in another of the ironic turns of narrative that mark this novel, the supreme specimen of womanhood that he has informed Lady Blandish he is looking for as a match for his son is in process of discovery.

She was indeed sweetly fair, and would have been held fair among rival damsels. On a magic shore, and to a youth educated by a System, strung like an arrow drawn to the head, he, it might be guessed, could fly fast and far with her. The soft rose in her cheeks, the clearness of her eyes, bore witness to the body's virtue; and health and happy blood were in her bearing. Had she stood before Sir Austin among rival damsels, that Scientific Humanist, for the consummation of his System, would have thrown her the handkerchief for his son. (xv, 120)

Unfortunately for the boy, his father is not present at his first meeting with Lucy Desborough, and is thus precluded at this early stage from understanding not only the foolishness of his class prejudice but also that, as Meredith wrote to Samuel Lucas, 'the young fellow's luck in finding so charming a girl' crowns the System with brilliant success. The tragedy that ensues is of Sir Austin's making, as, driven by egoism, he 'strikes down [the] fabric' of his achievement (Cline 1970: 1. 40).

Meredith's presentation of Lucy is suffused with the idealism he brought into his marriage with Mary Ellen Nicolls before disillusionment set in. The early encounters with Richard Feverel take place near Raynham Abbey, 'in a certain Western county folding Thames' (i. 2); but Meredith's description of it is inspired by the Surrey countryside, that 'sweet, especial' scene of his young manhood. If Richard and Bella Mount will later make a tawdry Antony and Cleopatra, he and Lucy recall the more wholesome and innocent, but equally star-crossed, Romeo ('impulsive, headstrong, moody') and Juliet ('youthfully frank and unexpectedly obstinate' [Stevenson 1954: 62]), and the shifts, ending in tragedy, to which their love compels them. For a third Shakespearean connection, Chapter XV is entitled 'Ferdinand and Miranda'; and the setting, a description of which concludes the preceding chapter, establishes the close association between the natural world that Meredith loved, and the uncorrupted woman that he saw in the best of his heroines, and that he himself was to choose, as his

second wife (Marie Vulliamy), five years after publishing *Richard Feverel*. ‘When nature has made us ripe for love,’ he writes, as he prepares us for Richard’s discovery of Lucy, ‘it seldom occurs that the Fates are behindhand in furnishing a temple for the flame’ (xiv, 118)

Above green-flashing plunges of a weir, and shaken by the thunder below, lilies, golden and white, were swaying at anchor among the reeds. Meadow-sweet hung from the banks thick with weed and trailing bramble, and there also hung a daughter of earth. Her face was shaded by a broad straw hat with a flexible brim that left her lips and chin in the sun, and, sometimes nodding, sent forth a light of promising eyes. Across her shoulders, and behind, flowed large loose curls, brown in shadow, almost golden where the ray touched them. She was simply dressed, befitting decency and the season. On a closer inspection you might see that her lips were stained. This blooming young person was regaling on dewberries. They grew between the bank and the water. Apparently she found the fruit abundant, for her hand was making pretty progress to her mouth. . . . The little skylark went up above her, all song, to the smooth southern cloud lying along the blue: from a dewy copse dark over her nodding hat the blackbird fluted, calling to her with thrice mellow note: the kingfisher flashed emerald out of green osiers: a bow-winged heron travelled aloft, seeking solitude. . . . (xiv, 118, 119)

Like Diana Warwick, surprised by Dacier as she stands near a pool sheltered by the rocks and grassy mounds above Rovio, or like Hardy’s Tess, as she walks with Angel Clare towards the meadow where the cows lie waiting for them in the midsummer dawn, Lucy seems not so much a visitant in the natural world as an emanation from it (‘a daughter of earth’). Meredith has not finished with her appearance yet:

The wide summer-hat, nodding over her forehead to her brows, seemed to flow with the flowing heavy curls, and those fire-threaded mellow curls, only half-curls, waves of hair call them, rippling at the ends, went like a sunny red-veined torrent down her back almost to her waist: a glorious vision to the youth, who embraced it as a flower of beauty, and read not a feature. . . . Her brows, thick and brownish against a soft skin showing the action of the blood, met in the bend of a bow, extending to the temples long and level: you saw that she was fashioned to peruse the sights of earth, and by the pliability of her brows that the wonderful creature used her faculty, and was not going to be a statue to the gazer. Under the dark thick brows an arch of lashes shot out, giving a wealth of darkness to the full frank blue eyes, a mystery of meaning—more than brain was ever meant to fathom: richer, henceforth, than all mortal wisdom to Prince Ferdinand. For when nature turns artist, and produces contrasts of colour on a fair face, where is the Sage, or what the Oracle, shall match the depth of its lightest look? (xv, 120-21)

The extraordinarily rich notation of physical detail again reminds us of what Hardy will do with Tess. Both writers must surely have been drawing from life, or from living memory. And just as Tess, in the ‘spectral, half-compounded, aqueous light which pervaded the open mead’ was, for Angel Clare, ‘no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form’ (Hardy 1971: 128, 129); so Lucy, on the river bank, ‘[s]urrounded by the green shaven meadows, the pastoral summer buzz, the weirfall’s thundering white, amid the breath and beauty of wild flowers’, was for Richard a ‘sweet vision’; indeed, ‘[i]t was the First Woman to him’ (xiv, 119; xv, 120). As Walter F. Wright remarks: ‘Knowing nothing of his father’s Great Shaddock Dogma, which assumes that Eve invariably eats of the apple and persuades Adam to eat, he is in Eden before the coming of the serpent’ (1980: 87).

Meredith’s exquisitely lyrical prose-poetry in these pages, together with his description of Richard’s night-time wandering in the Rhineland forest (Chapter XLII) before he returns to England to confront his destiny, are unmatched in all his fiction. But the curiously hybrid texture of this early

novel, to which various critics have drawn attention,⁸ is evident here in the association of the very English setting for young love with the magical island of Shakespeare's romance, and the aristocratic young couple he places there. The theatre of comedy that Raynham Abbey and its environs have been so far, is giving way, just downriver from the Abbey, to pastoral romance. But unlike *The Tempest*, and in keeping with the earlier Shakespearean associations we have noted, the novel is to have a tragic outcome. Measured by the social calculus of the time, Lucy Desborough is very far from being a princess. She is a yeoman farmer's niece, whose uncle holds his lands at the pleasure of Richard Feverel's father, Sir Austin. And as exquisite as she looks, Meredith depicts her face in such finely observed detail that not only do we share his vision of her, which is also Richard's, but we find the idealism of it dissolving into the realism that yields to the artist's penetrating gaze. As it does so, we realize that Meredith has no intention of making a Dickensian angel of Lucy. She has a strength of character that Richard, in his romanticizing view, and in his obedience to his uncle's patriarchal interference, will always underestimate. It is hinted at in this early description of Meredith's, when he writes: 'you saw that [Lucy] was fashioned to peruse the sights of earth, and by the pliability of her brows that the wonderful creature used her faculty, and was not going to be a statue to the gazer' (xv, 121). After Richard has secretly married her in London, and cut short their honeymoon on the Isle of Wight to wait in London without her for reconciliation with his father, she resists his entreaties to join him. Sir Austin loves his son, but can only think that separation, from both father and wife, will help to bring him to his senses. Lucy, for her part, will not attempt to win Sir Austin over until Richard has done so first. She has a will of her own now, and later, when she is not as vulnerable to the wiles of Lord Mountfalcon as he wishes her to be. Unlike Richard, she cannot be seduced. In the strength of her convictions, and her loyalty of heart, she is an early predecessor of Clare Middleton. But since she is the heroine of a novel that mutates from comedy through pastoral romance into tragedy, her struggle with the patriarchal world, and her ordeal of love within it, are much more severe, and their issues are fatal to her. There is no Prospero at hand to watch over her, and through his wisdom make all things well and fair. There is only an elderly egoist convinced of the efficacy of his dogmas, who will use his control over his son to thwart her heart's desire until, when he meets her and realizes his mistake, it is too late to save her.

Meredith appeals here to the Comic Spirit as the guarantor of sanity and reason. 'A good wind of laughter,' he writes of Sir Austin, 'had relieved him of much of the blight of self-deception, and oddness, and extravagance; had given a healthier view of our atmosphere of life; but he had it not' (xxii, 194-95). The 'ordeal' of self-obsession, the overweening self-righteousness, make victims of those the egoist most wishes to possess, and generate a wilfulness of ego in return. Richard's good intentions towards his sweet young wife do not save him from betraying her. In London he falls in, as an anonymous, morally offended reviewer in the *Critic* put it (2 July 1859), 'with a dangerous woman [Bella Mount], a temptress and an enchantress, and his education having unfitted him for combating the wiles of such women, this promising youth, fresh from the side of a pure and beautiful wife, falls—falls miserably—to a rouged, champagne-drinking Paphian'⁹ (Williams 1971: 65).

Richard has some plan to rescue her from her ‘fallen’ state (‘this new knightly enterprise he had presumed to undertake’ [xxxvii, 418]), but instead is tempted into making love to her. The ideals of the System have not quelled the young man’s susceptibility to temptation—to which, indeed, his father’s insistence that he remain in London for a time has intentionally exposed him. It is one of Sir Austin’s tests of knightly virtue, and it is another mark of the impossibility of his ideals that Richard fails it.

The business with Bella Mount raises, in fact, a question as to Meredith’s narrative and thematic strategy in relation to the roles that women play in this novel. Clearly, Mrs Mount is drawn to contrast vividly, not to say repellently, with Lucy. The chapter in which Meredith exposes her at length to Richard, and to the reader, is entitled (in keeping with Richard’s role as a venturing hero), ‘The Enchantress’. Overcome, in London, by a sense of boredom and futility,

[t]he young man sought amusement. He allowed his aunt [Mrs Doria, Clare’s mother] to drag him into society, and sick of that he made late evening calls on Mrs Mount, oblivious of the purpose he had in visiting her at all. Her man-like conversation, which he took for honesty, was a refreshing change on fair lips. (xxxviii, 434)

The phrase ‘Her man-like conversation’ adds a stroke to the portrait we have already been given two chapters earlier, when we are informed that ‘[a] lady driving a pair of greys was noticed by Richard in his rides and walks’ (xxxvi, 396). As it continues, the paragraph describes Mrs Mount’s striking physical appearance—we see her as Richard does—but also contrives, as his eye registers the details, to make, with concise dramatic irony, an unmistakable moral case against the woman which the reader apprehends, but Richard does not. And it is subtly proleptic: we realize, as we read, that the young hero is about to undergo a test of his moral fibre.

She passed him rather obviously and often. She was very handsome; a bold beauty, with shining black hair, red lips, and eyes not afraid of men. The hair was brushed from her temples, leaving one of those fine reckless outlines which the action of driving, and the pace, admirably set off. She took his fancy. He liked the air of petulant gallantry about her, and mused upon the picture, rare to him, of a glorious dashing woman. He thought, too, she looked at him. He was not at the time inclined to be vain, or he might have been sure she did. Once it struck him she nodded slightly. (xxxvi, 396-97)

Richard passes one knightly test (not that Sir Austin had intended it for him) when he rescues his unfortunate mother from Diaper Sandoe, whom Meredith depicts, with a venom perhaps to be ascribed to his resentment at Henry Wallis, as ‘a prematurely aged, oily little man; a poet in bad circumstances; a decrepit butterfly chained to a disappointed inkstand’ (xxxviii, 430). ‘[P]oor, spiritless’ (xxxviii, 430) Lady Feverel is by now a very sad case, and Meredith, whose own experience of a maternal relationship had been cut short at the age of five, accords her the pathos he had been too young to feel:

The blood of her son had been running so long alien from her that the sense of her motherhood smote her now with strangeness, and Richard’s stern gentleness seemed like dreadful justice come upon her. Her heart had almost forgotten its maternal functions. She called him Sir, till he bade her remember he was her son. Her voice sounded to him like that of a broken-throated lamb, so painful and weak it was, with the plaintive stop in the utterance. When he kissed her, her skin was cold. Her thin hand fell out of his when his grasp relaxed. ‘Can sin hunt one like this?’ he asked, bitterly reproaching himself for the shame she had caused him to endure, and a deep compassion filled his breast. (xxxviii, 431)

Poor Lady Feverel had had her limitations as a woman and a marriage partner, but she has been twice a victim of male delusions: first of her husband's inordinate pride in being able to manage the destinies of those around him, particularly those of his son; and then of the romantic fantasies of the poet Sandoe, a failed writer, and (Meredith's sour description of him would suggest) a contemptible lover. On top of this Lady Feverel has to contend with the social opprobrium of her time reserved for female outcasts from the marital home, particularly of the upper class. In his rescue of her, which contradicts Sir Austen's System—it does not allow for succour to fallen women—we see Richard at his moral best.

But he is destined to fail with the 'Enchantress'. Young and inexperienced as he is, he is flattered to have been invited to a party in London thronged with pretty and responsive women, and even more so to have been singled out for attention by Bella Mount. Visiting her in her home, he is fascinated by her louche defiance of conventional society (she enjoys dressing up as a cavalier, 'Sir Julius', and striking dandified attitudes). Only twenty-one, she seems older. The portrayal is one from a subgenre in Meredith's fiction—other members include Margaret Lovell in *Rhoda Fleming*, Sir Lukin's London friend, Mrs Fryer-Gunnett, in *Diana of the Crossways*, and Mrs Marsett in *One of Our Conquerors*—comprising women who, in the moral climate of the time, are considered to have a dubious history. They are an interesting type in that they answer, in their various ways, to Meredith's admiration of the spirited and independent female, and yet do not match up to his standards of moral worth and integrity.¹⁰ Although he considered himself a political radical, and was far ahead of his time on gender issues, he was strictly moral in matters of personal, especially sexual, conduct. When Bella proposes to Richard 'that they should go out into the midnight streets arm-in-arm, and out they went and had great fits of laughter at her impertinent manner of using her eye-glass, and outrageous affectation of the supreme dandy' (xxxviii, 435), one thinks of Antony making much the same proposal to Cleopatra:

. . . and all alone
Tonight we'll wander through the streets and note
The qualities of people. (1. ii. 54-56)

In fact a few pages later the allusion to that earlier enchantress becomes explicit:

Love would have scared the youth: she banished it from her tongue. It may also have been true that it sickened her. She played on his higher nature. She understood spontaneously what would be most strange and taking to him in a woman. Various as the serpent of old Nile, she acted fallen beauty, humorous indifference, reckless daring, arrogance in ruin. And acting thus, what think you?—She did it so well because she was growing half in earnest. (xxxviii, 443)

The irony here is that there is no compensating splendour of *mise en scène*, no barge like a 'burnished throne' blazing on the Thames, nor any deep, self-sacrificial passion underlying the artful capriciousness, to counterbalance the moral squalor into which Bella Mount is gradually inveigling the young man. And of course Richard, for all his admirable qualities, bears no comparison with the flawed but majestic Antony. Bella has some feeling for Richard, as that last sentence indicates; but she is enticing and manipulative, a shape-shifter, conscious of her own advantage over vulnerable men, and only too willing to use it. In her role as victim, '[t]his lovely outcast almost made [Richard] think

she had the right on her side, so keenly her Parthian arrows pierced the holy centres of society, and exposed its rottenness' (xxxviii, 445). Rotten the society may be, but Meredith makes clear that Bella Mount partakes of it; and although she is not quite heartless, her ego, so strongly self-indulgent, overrides, as she and Richard go on drinking, any scruples she may have about his marriage. 'A lurid splendour glanced about her like lights from the pit' (xxxviii, 449). At this Gothic moment, the implied contrast with Lucy Desborough could hardly be more graphic. 'It is *The Shaving of Shagpat* over again,' comments Lionel Stevenson. 'Like Shibli Bagarag, Richard must suffer a series of hard knocks before learning to conquer his ego; and like Noorna, Lucy embodies supernatural forgiveness and intuition in her loyalty to him' (1954: 62).

Richard, however, has come to such a pitch of self-revulsion and despair at his dishonourable conduct that he takes refuge in Europe, where he meets his old friend Lady Judith accidentally in Paris. She is married to 'a lord incapable in all save his acres' (xlii, 514), and being a generous-hearted, altruistic woman, gives Richard what moral support she can, and indulges his reckless, expiatory fantasy of going asoldiering in Italy. But when that eternal, preternaturally detached, if amiable, emissary from Sir Austin, Adrian Harley (who relishes so much, in his egoistic way, the opportunity to influence the course of events) joins them (as Judith waits for her lord to sample 'all the baths in Nassau' [xlii, 517] in a vain quest for good health), and discloses that Richard has become a father, the young man suddenly perceives the path to self-redemption. Breaking away from his companions and walking at night in the Rhineland forest during a spectacular storm, he undergoes, as he presses through the verdant, rain-soaked landscape, a spiritual cleansing. His heart is stirred by the immediate physical responsibility of caring for Judith's little dog, which is following him, and for the young leveret he has picked up on the journey. The little wild animal intensifies, realistically and symbolically, his sense of renewed dedication to the cause of others by continually licking the palm of his hand with its 'small rough tongue' (xlii, 522). He is moved also, in the dawn, by the sight of a little forest-chapel, 'hung with votive wreaths, where the peasant halts to kneel and pray.'

Vivid as lightning the Spirit of Life illumined him. He felt in his heart the cry of his child, his darling's touch. With shut eyes he saw them both. They drew him from the depths; they led him a blind and tottering man. And as they led him he had a sense of purification so sweet he shuddered again and again. (xlii, 523)

The nature imagery with which Meredith closes the chapter intensifies for us the sense Richard has, at this moment, of spiritual revival, and rekindled hope for his marriage: 'When he looked out from his trance on the breathing world, the small birds hopped and chirped: warm fresh sunlight was over all the hills. He was on the edge of the forest, entering a plain clothed with ripe corn under a spacious morning sky' (xlii, 523). But alas, his marriage, and his self-esteem, cannot recover from the injuries he has inflicted on them. In fact guilt at his neglect of Lucy, and outrage at Lord Mountfalcon's attempt to take advantage of his neglect, cause him to leave her again, in spite of her pleas, on the very night he at last returns to Raynham, where she and their child have awaited him. As Richard C. Stevenson observes, he is intent on vindicating 'not her honour, but his own: like father, like son' (2004: 45). Like father, his idealism is misconceived. Mountfalcon, '[t]hat modern and practical

nobleman' (Kelvin 1961: 7), will discount the insulting terms of Richard's challenge for the price of a formal and perfunctory apology, but Richard rejects the offer. They duel on the French coast, and Richard is wounded, though not mortally; but for Lucy, who has crossed the Channel with Sir Austin to see Richard, the strain is too much: she loses her mind, and dies of cerebral fever. Women have proved to be Richard's 'ordeal', as Sir Austin had told him they would. 'Love of any human object is the soul's ordeal; and they are ours, loving them, or not' (xxi, 183). But the ordeal has been reciprocal: the greater suffering is Lucy's, and her death is a terrible indictment of the egoism that has led to it. Nor is she the only female casualty. Clare Forey, who, with her mother (Sir Austin's widowed sister) has lived at Raynham Abbey, and fallen in (sadly unrequited) love with Richard, is forced by her mother to marry an older man she does not love. In her misery she poisons herself. If, as Sir Austin says, women are men's ordeal, the suffering may be all too amply repaid—even unwittingly—by a man whose sympathy for his fellow-creatures has been deformed by the dogmas of a philosophic System. Lady Blandish, Sir Austin's neighbour and close friend, has been guilty, through her affection, of benignly tolerating the System, in spite of her scruples. But now, in a letter to Richard's cousin, Austin Wentworth, she makes a definitive final judgment:

'Oh! how sick I am of theories, and Systems, and the pretensions of men! There was his son lying all but dead, and the man was still unconvinced of the folly he had been guilty of. I could hardly bear the sight of his composure. I shall hate the name of science till the day I die.¹¹ Give me nothing but commonplace unpretending people! . . .

'Poor man! Perhaps I am hard on him. I remember that you said Richard had done wrong. Yes; well, that may be. But his father eclipsed his wrong in a greater wrong—a crime, or quite as bad; for if he deceived himself in the belief that he was acting righteously in separating husband and wife, and exposing his son as he did, I can only say that there are some who are worse than people who deliberately commit crimes. No doubt science will benefit by it. They kill little animals for the sake of science.' (xlv, 554, 555)

This is more than a severe indictment of Sir Austen's individual folly, and, by implication, a cry of self-condemnation for not indicting it sooner. Lady Blandish's bitter hostility (sharpened with as bitter an irony in her conclusion) towards science, and what she sees as its perversions, may also be read as the narrator's condemnation of an attitude towards individuals and society that purports to be progressive, but in fact is profoundly misguided as to those entities' best interests. Through Lady Blandish, he is articulating what is in effect an intensely sceptical view of the idea of progress often too facilely associated with the Victorians, but which in fact they questioned as much as any other received opinion, religious or secular. Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) maintained that 'Science is . . . nothing but *trained and organized common sense*' (italics his) (1906: 268). As Meredith presents Sir Austin Feverel's System and its tragic issues, we must surely conclude, as Lady Blandish seems to do, that common sense—and reason—were what was lacking in it. The *Spectator's* critic (9 July 1859) was inclined to be more charitable. Sir Austin is

high-souled and tender-hearted . . . not purely and simply a monomaniac. Make due allowance for the irony and comic exaggeration with which his ways and doings are set forth, and it will be found that these are not so abnormal as at first sight they may appear to be. The doctrines he holds on the mutual relations of father and son are such as are more or less vaguely entertained by multitudes of well-meaning blunderers of the present day; the only difference is that in Sir Austin's mind they

exist in peculiar clearness and force, and he acts upon them with peculiar consistency. (Williams 1971: 69, 71)

But in view of the devastation to human lives that arises from Sir Austen's application of his doctrines, we may feel this judgement of him to be rather too lenient, an indulgent journalistic view of a recognizable Victorian type; and that Meredith is presenting to us, rather, a patriarchal egoist, much more human, certainly, than Sir Willoughby (who is an animated hyperbole, the Comic Spirit's idea of a patriarch), but therefore capable of more real damage to others. A recently cited view sees him as guilty of 'pompous complacency, [an] exaggerated faith in reason, and [a] Puritanical fear of passion and impulse' (Spanberg 1974: 16; quoted in Stevenson 2004: 210). That is perhaps a little harsh, especially when one considers that Adrian Harley, Sir Austin's second nephew, is far from blameless in this saga. His 'principal characteristic,' writes Meredith, 'was his sagacity. He was essentially the wise youth, both in council and in action' (i, 8). But his wisdom is combined with a strong disinclination to exert himself except in his own interests. Self-gratification is his ruling motive, and his relations with others are marked by an amused, ironic detachment.

In the end, this novel, written during the pain and bitterness of marital collapse, with all that that entailed in mutual recrimination and self-reproach, is an indictment of radical male inadequacy in gender relations. The criticism is not quite of gross tyranny over women—that would be too Gothic—but it is certainly of unforgivable carelessness towards their true interests—a failure, in the end, of love for those who are much in need of it—a failure, indeed, of mutuality. Lady Blandish, who blames herself with lacerating irony ('I have the comfort of knowing that I did my share in helping to destroy [Lucy]' [xlv, 555-56]), is no less severe, as we have seen, on Sir Austin. As she contemplates the scene in the 'wretched French cabaret, smelling vilely' (xlv, 554), where Richard lies wounded, and Lucy dead, she does not imagine that Sir Austin 'will abuse women any more. . . . The doctor [she writes] called [Lucy] a "forte et belle jeune femme": and *he* said she was as noble a soul as ever God moulded clay upon. A noble soul "forte et belle!" She lies upstairs. If he can look on her and not see his *sin*, I almost fear God will never enlighten him' (xlv, 556).

The final, terrible irony for Richard, as Lady Blandish describes it in the last lines of the novel, is that now, at last, when he desperately wants to give Lucy his full attention, he cannot. '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' (xlv, 558).

The Egoist as Impostor

There is an interesting coincidence in the trajectory of the feminist movement as the century moved beyond the 1850s, and in that of Meredith's novel-writing career. Just as feminist ambitions grew in complexity and increasingly focused on the desirability of equal rights for men and women in the home, in marriage, education and the professions, so Meredith's attention in his fiction was increasingly given to the 'ordeal', for both sexes, of gender relations that were not premised on the

ideal of equality. As he showed in *Shagpat*, where he inverts not only narrative but intersexual conventions, his imaginative focus from the beginning is as much on his presentation of the female, and the exact nature of her relationship to the predominant male culture, as on the male. In *Evan Harrington* he portrays, in Louisa, the Countess de Saldar de Sancorvo (modelled after his Aunt Louisa) a woman who is determined to carry off, amongst her upper-class acquaintance, the imposture of being much more highly born than she is. She is married to a derelict and exiled Portuguese count, but she and her brother Evan are the children of a tailor, Melchisedec, ‘the great Mel’, at Lymport, just as Meredith was the grandson of Melchizedec, the naval outfitter in Portsmouth, also known as ‘the great Mel’. The latter’s elegant and gentlemanly bearing made him welcome, in spite of his humble calling, in high society, so that ‘[a]t many a county dinner the Portsmouth tradesman with his lively anecdotes and affable manners cut a more notable figure than the worthy squires who tolerated his presence’ (Stevenson 1954: 2). He was no impostor: he surmounted his position in life through sheer force of personality. This, in the novel, is what the Countess sets out to do; but she is consciously and implacably subversive, inasmuch as she not only aspires to the kind of society from which her birth would normally exclude her; she is also determined that her young brother Evan will overcome the same social handicap, and win the hand of Rose Jocelyn. E. M. Forster argues that in comparison with, say, the complexities of Thackeray’s Becky Sharp, ‘[s]he is a flat character’: we remember her for ‘her figure and the formula that surrounds it, namely “Proud as we are of dear papa, we must conceal his memory.” All her rich humour proceeds from this’ (1962: 77).

This has the feel of an oversimplification for rhetorical effect during Forster’s Clark Lecture. The Countess is one of several auxiliary females in Meredith’s fiction who exert an important influence on the leading characters and their actions. There is the self-indulgent *femme fatale*, like Margaret Lovell in *Rhoda Fleming*; the aristocratic philosopher, like Lady Jocelyn in *Evan Harrington*, or Emma Dunstane in *Diana of the Crossways*; the socially inferior but cherished quasi-family member of a noble household, like Rosamund Culling in *Beauchamp’s Career*; and the socially prominent, uninhibitedly sharp commentator on her friend’s affairs, Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson, in *The Egoist*. These and others are variously resourceful and intelligent, courageous and challenging in the way Meredith liked women to be. Louisa is indeed ‘snobbish, dishonest, unscrupulous and manipulative’, as Neil Roberts says; but contrary to Forster, he believes her to be ‘the greatest artistic triumph of the novel’, portrayed with a brio and affection that reveals the narrator’s ‘sympathy and even admiration for her belief that, despite her birth, she is more than the equal of the aristocrats and country gentry among whom she has infiltrated herself’ (1997: 52). She is the vehicle, we might say, for expressing a version of Meredith’s own lifelong, and assiduously cultivated, class-transgressiveness, and reflects his own delight in, yet capacity to criticize, the world of the country house. Like his grandfather, he was an interloper in the upper class; but unlike his grandfather, he took the trouble to conceal his humble origins—even though, paradoxically, he creates in *Evan Harrington* a hero who eventually owns up to them. Perhaps Meredith could come to terms with his lower-class origins only by refracting them through the creatures of his imagination.¹²

In *Evan Harrington*, Meredith gives Rose Jocelyn the charm, spirit and intelligence possessed by her real-life counterpart, Janet Duff Gordon. In her autobiography, Janet wrote: '*Evan Harrington* . . . was my novel, because Rose Jocelyn was myself. . . . With the magnificent impertinence of sixteen I would interrupt Meredith, exclaiming: 'No, I should never have said it like that;' or, 'I should not have done so' (Ross 1912: 50). In a letter to Janet on 17 May 1861, Meredith seems to confirm these youthful judgements. About his friend, Captain Maxse, he writes:

You would like him. He is very anxious to be introduced some day to Rose Jocelyn. I tell him that Janet Ross [in December 1860 Janet had married Henry James Ross, twenty years older than she, and head of a banking firm in Alexandria] is a finer creature. . . . Talking of Rose, did you see the *Saturday [Review]*? It says you are a heroine who deserves to be a heroine. And yet I think I missed you. (Cline 1970: 1. 80)

In choosing love before her social status (she is the daughter of yet another of Meredith's fictional baronets), as Janet did not (her father was Sir Alexander Duff Gordon, also a baronet), she foreshadows Clara Middleton, as she does in her struggles of conscience before finally breaking free of the young Lord Laxley:

And here she sat—in chains! 'Yes! I am fit only to be the wife of an idle brainless man, with money and a title,' she said, in extreme self-contempt. She caught a glimpse of her whole life in the horrid tomb of his embrace, and questions whether she could yield her hand to him—whether it was right in the eyes of heaven, rushed impetuously to console her, and defied anything in the shape of satisfactory affirmations. Nevertheless, the end of the struggle was, that she felt that she was bound to Ferdinand. (xliii, 527)

To the extent that she does, in the end, reject Laxley in favour of Evan, Rose Jocelyn asserts a claim for her own ego, her right to choose her life, thus inaugurating, as Neil Roberts comments, 'the brave and independent Meredithian heroine' (1997: 51). If we discount Renée de Croisnel in *Beauchamp's Career*, who, after all, is French, it is not until Constantia Durham and Clara Middleton in *The Egoist* (1879) that Meredith's heroines are prepared to risk social disgrace by flouting convention in order to escape marital arrangements made by males. Rose is fortunate in having parents who are willing to give way to her. Lady Jocelyn, in particular, drawn after Meredith's friend Lady Duff Gordon, is an admirable character, who 'equals the common folk in plain good sense and surpasses them in fairness and sensitivity to the feelings of others' (Muendel 1986: 67).

The Sister-Egoist

Rhoda Fleming, in the novel of that name (1865), is also 'brave and independent', but in no rebellious sense. Like her elder sister, Dahlia, she has a provincial's romantic idea of London, and when Dahlia has gone to be housekeeper to their Uncle Anthony there, she feels abandoned, wasted. Dubious about her physical attractiveness as compared to Dahlia's, she longs to be affirmed in her young womanhood.

As the sun is wanted to glorify the right features of a landscape, this girl thirsted for a dose of golden flattery. She felt, without envy of her sister, that Dahlia eclipsed her: and all she prayed for was that she might not be quite so much in the background and obscure.

But great, powerful London—the new universe to her spirit—was opening its arms to her. In her half sleep that night she heard the mighty thunder of the city, crashing tumults of disordered harmonies, and the splendour of the lamp-lighted city appeared to hang up under a dark-blue heaven, removed from earth, like a fresh planet to which she was being beckoned. (iv, 34-35)

There are intimations of emotional and moral danger in that imagery, and it becomes Rhoda's task to rescue Dahlia from her seducer, Edward Blancove. Her desire for adventure takes her to London, but her growing awareness of her sister's predicament as a 'fallen woman' arouses a strong will hinted at by Meredith in his description of her appearance: 'The face was so strange with its dark, thick eyebrows, and peculiarly straight-gazing brown eyes. . . . Rhoda's outlines were harder [than her sister's]. There was a suspicion of a heavenward turn to her nose, and of squareness to her chin' (iv, 34). And she exerts her strength of will in the cause of a strict morality she shares with her yeoman father, colluding with him in forcing Dahlia into marriage with the rascally Nic Sedgett to preserve the family honour. Unlike the Countess de Saldar's, Rhoda Fleming's fierce ego is in the service of tragic ends inasmuch as her sister, although rescued from the marriage by news of bigamy provided by the resourceful Mrs Lovell (Edward Blancove's more worldly lover), loses much of her will to live, and certainly any inclination to marry a repentant Blancove. The employee on the Fleming farm, Robert Armstrong, who has loved Rhoda since his arrival, but with little encouragement from the singleminded young woman, is given, as Rhoda weeps to think Dahlia lost to the hideous Sedgett, the reflections that accurately place Rhoda as a female egoist on the side of conventional Victorian morality:

[She was] a strange Biblical girl, with Hebrew hardness of resolution, and Hebrew exaltation of soul; beautiful, too, as the dark women of the East. He admitted to himself that he never could have taken it on his conscience to subdue a human creature's struggling will, as Rhoda had not hesitated to do with Dahlia, and to command her actions, and accept all imminent responsibilities; not quailing with any outcry, or abandonment of strength, when the shock of that revelation in the vestry came violently on her. Rhoda, seeing there that it was a brute, and not a man, into whose hand she had perilously forced her sister's, stood steadying her nerves to act promptly with advantage; less like a woman, Robert thought, than a creature born for battle. (xxxix, 415-16)

Edward Blancove is irresponsible and self-indulgent about women in the Richard Feverel manner, but has an added intensity of male chauvinism that places him squarely in the worst of the Victorian patriarchal tradition. His contempt for women in general—though not for Dahlia Fleming, whose loss he bitterly regrets even though he is responsible for it—looks forward to Sir Willoughby Patterne's (who usually manages, however, to overlay it with aristocratic graciousness). The following passage, in which he rails to his cousin Algernon against Dahlia's desertion, shows Edward at his egoistic worst, but also, as Meredith comments, 'in the dull unconscious process of transformation from something very like a villain to something by a few degrees more estimable' (xxviii, 290):

'I swear to heaven that my lowest cynical ideas of women, and the loathing with which their simply animal vagaries inspires a thoughtful man, are distanced and made to seem a benevolent criticism, by the actualities of my experience. I say that you cannot put faith in a woman. . . . Why, she is not a fool! How can she mean to give herself to an ignorant country donkey? She does not: mark me. For her, who is a really—I may say, the most refined nature I have ever met, to affect this, and think of deceiving me, does not do credit to her wits—and she is not without her share. . . . The difficulty is in teaching women that we are not constituted as they are, and that we are wilfully earnest, while they, who never can be so save under compulsion, carry it on with us, expecting that at a certain

crisis a curtain will drop, and we shall take a deep breath, join hands, and exclaim, “What an exciting play!”—weeping luxuriously. The actualities of life must be branded on their backs—you can’t get their brains to apprehend them.’ (xxviii, 291-92)

Dahlia Fleming is Edward’s innocent victim as Lucy Desborough, in spite of the legitimization of marriage, is Richard Feverel’s, and he dallies with Margaret Lovell as Richard does with Bella Mount, though Margaret’s wilfulness, while ruthless in its way, is of a somewhat more benevolent order than Bella’s, and her importance to the narrative is greater. She is what Meredith calls a ‘crucible-woman’ (xxviii, 296)—someone with whom a love-affair is a test of one’s mettle, an ordeal of the flesh and the spirit, an experience from which one will emerge with greater self-knowledge, whether heartening or demoralizing. Major Waring, with whom she has had a previous liaison, has remained her admirer, but she rejects him in the end because her inveterate betting has made her short of money. She marries Edward’s father, the banker, Sir William Blancove. Edward’s experience of her crucible, however, is chastening, an exposure of his serious faults of character. The egoist, in Meredith’s fiction, represents a challenge of survival to whomever he or she associates with, and the process is necessarily revealing of the virtues and vices of the challenged. Edward suffers in the test to which Margaret Lovell subjects him, but emerges, in the end, repentant and desperate to regain Dahlia. Meredith analyses the contenders in this way:

[The crucible-woman] may be inexcusable herself; but you—for you to be base, for you to be cowardly, even to betray a weakness, though it be on her behalf—though you can plead that all you have done is for her, yea, was partly instigated by her—it will cause her to dismiss you with the inexorable contempt of Nature, when she has tried one of her creatures and found him wanting.

Margaret Lovell was of this description: a woman fashioned to do both harm and good, and more of harm than of good; but never to sanction a scheme of evil or blink at it in alliance with another: a woman in contact with whom you were soon resolved to your component elements. Separated from a certain fascination that there was for her in Edward’s acerb wit, she saw that he was doing a dastardly thing in cold blood. (xxviii, 296)

Meredith had remarried by the time he published *Rhoda Fleming*, but the bitterness of past marital experience seems to surface here and there in his narrative. Lionel Stevenson remarks of Margaret Lovell that ‘[a]s a portrait of a charming, shallow, worldly woman, hardened by early emotional disaster, she is fully convincing; and she is also startlingly like . . . Mary Ellen Nicolls’ (1954: 147). *Rhoda Fleming* is given what reads like a confessional reflection on Meredith’s youthful error of judgement. She herself is wary of entanglement, and, hearing Robert Armstrong moving away as she leans out of her window to ‘breathe the cool night air’, she wonders at ‘the idleness of men—slaves while they want a woman’s love, savages when they have won it’; and all she can feel at that moment, having endured much anguish on Dahlia’s behalf, is a ‘dull exaltation, that she, alone of women, was free from that wretched mess called love’ (xlii, 446). The novel’s last words, spoken by her dying sister, are ‘Help poor girls’ (xlviii, 499), and ‘there is a sense, not an uncommon one in Meredith, that all women are to be pitied. Dahlia stands for her sex rather than for her depraved sisterhood’ (Howard 1971: 130).

The Reactionary Egoists

Beauchamp's Career (1876), which immediately preceded *The Egoist*, and was Meredith's only political novel, is about a young naval man whose political activity on behalf of the Radicals sets him at variance with his upper-class friends and family. As Meredith wrote to Moncure D. Conway (18 June 1874), a liberal American preacher, author and lecturer, the novel is 'philosophical-political, with no powerful stream of adventure; an attempt to show the forces round a young man of the present day, in England, who would move them, and finds them unalterably solid . . .' (Cline 1970: 1. 485). England is the 'land of his filial affection' (iii, 29), and he would give his life for her, on land or sea (as indeed he does, at the novel's end, when he drowns in Southampton Water, saving an urchin); but his heroism at war, and his exertions in peacetime for what would nowadays be called 'the ordinary English people', do not combine to accord him heroic stature on the national stage. In fact Meredith, in an address to the reader at the beginning of Chapter IV, explicitly eschews any intention to bestow it on him. Nevil's uncle, Everard Romfrey, calls him a 'jackass' for expressing, in a letter from the Dardanelles, his support for the man whom Romfrey calls 'the infamous miauling cotton-spinner' (iv, 38)—(probably Bright, notes Harris [1988: n. 31, 560]). This need not in itself disqualify Nevil, take him all in all, from being a hero; but in this respect the narrator is against him:

I am reminded by Mr. Romfrey's profound disappointment in the youth, that it will be repeatedly shared by many others: and I am bound to forewarn readers of this history that there is no plot in it. The hero is chargeable with the official disqualification of constantly offending prejudices, never seeking to please; and all the while it is upon him the narrative hangs. To be a public favourite is his last thought. Beachampism, as one confronting him calls it, may be said to stand for nearly everything which is the obverse of Byronism, and rarely woos your sympathy, shuns the statuesque pathetic, or any kind of posturing. (iv, 38-39)

And so on, as Meredith continues for another page and a quarter to deny his readers (as was his custom) any meretricious flourishes of plot or characterization that would fly in the face of what he most sought to achieve in his fiction: a steady contemplation of the underlying truth of things. One aspect of the truth is that England is 'indifferent' (iv, 40) to the virtues Nevil embodied, and his valiant attempts to deploy them on her behalf. 'The greater power of the two,' Meredith concludes,

she seems, with a quiet derision that does not belie her amiable passivity, to have reduced in Beauchamp's career the boldest readiness for public action, and some good stout efforts besides, to the flat result of an optically discernible influence of our hero's character in the domestic circle; perhaps a faintly-outlined circle or two beyond it. (iv, 40)

The final sentence of this extended caveat, however, is both a contradiction and an implied criticism of the national myopia, which 'does not forbid him to be ranked as one of the most distinguishing of her children of the day he lived in' (iv, 40). It was that same myopia about which Meredith complained to James Thomson on 16 March 1880. In England, he wrote, 'the activity of the mind is regarded with distrust and men live happier when mated with compromises than realities:—and the very sense of unsoundness resulting from their consequent position makes them all the more dread a breath of change' (Cline 1970: 2. 592).

But we are primarily concerned, in this section, with the position of women in the society of the novel, and in particular with Nevil Beauchamp's relationships with them. The patriarchs and egoists who in their various ways stand opposed to him—his uncle Everard Romfrey; his cousin, Cecil Baskett; Cecilia's father, Colonel Halkett; the Marquis de Rouaillout, who marries Nevil's beloved Renée de Croisnel; Renée's father, the Comte de Croisnel—all these members of the 'dominant male culture' (Harris 1988: viii), the wielders of inherited wealth and status, use their power to ensure that the women with whom Nevil Beauchamp is closely associated accede to that culture's demands. Even the progressive-minded Jenny Denham, otherwise the most compatible of them, cannot bring herself to dispense, as Nevil would, with the church's formal reception of her child into the world.

Rosamund Culling, a youngish widow who is housekeeper to Romfrey, is in much the same situation vis-à-vis Nevil as Lady Blandish is to Richard Feverel—a devoted, maternal figure, deeply anxious for his welfare and happiness, with a yearning to do more for the young man than her situation—and her courage—allow. Unlike Lady Blandish, she suffers for most of the novel from the ambiguities of her social rank: she is Romfrey's valued friend, but as his housekeeper she is vulnerable to less than courteous treatment by unworthy 'superiors', against whom Nevil is ever ready to defend her. In her turn, she wishes to protect him from the dread entanglements of Radical politics, in the person of his political mentor, Dr Shrapnel, and from (as she thinks) unsuitable young women who, she believes, thwart his progress in 'a society that panted for him to make much of him'. When Nevil is recovering in Venice from fever caught on an Eastern adventure, Rosamund is permitted to join him, and takes, in her conservative, protective way, a highly critical view of Renée de Croisnel. 'She is intensely French', she says to Nevil—'a volume,' comments Meredith, 'of insular criticism in a sentence'. Rosamund continues, in interior monologue, her condemnation of her beloved Nevil's *femme fatale*: '[H]ere he was, cursed by one of his notions of duty, in attendance on a captious young French beauty, who was the less to be excused for not dismissing him peremptorily, if she cared for him at all. His career, which promised to be so brilliant, was spoiling at the outset'. And the narrative voice provides her clinching judgement: 'Rosamund thought of Renée almost with detestation, as a species of sorceress that had dug a trench in her hero's road, and unhorsed and fast fettered him' (viii, 72).

Jenny Denham, Dr Shrapnel's charming and capable foster-daughter and assistant, is another object of Rosamund's suspicion; but Rosamund's conventional cast of mind, unreceptive, in any case, to the doctor's eccentric loquacity ('reinvented', suggests Gillian Beer, 'out of Carlyle's words'¹³ [1989: 82]), is apparent in judgements such as the following: 'Rosamund admitted to herself that the girl did not appear to be one of the wanton giddy-pated pussies who play two gentlemen or more on their line. Appearances, however, could be deceptive: never pretend to know a girl by her face, was one of Rosamund's maxims' (xii, 119).

Rosamund's sense of dependence on Romfrey, her alarm at his fiercely pertinacious questions as to what exactly had been Dr Shrapnel's demeanour towards her, and her conscientious, hesitant struggle

to define it as ‘not uncivil. I cannot exactly explain. . . . He certainly did not intend to be uncivil. He is only an unpolished, vexatious man; enormously tall’ (xiii, 128), convince Romfrey that the detested Radical must be horsewhipped, and by him. It is an atrocious abuse of feudal power on Romfrey’s part, and it alienates his outraged nephew (his heir presumptive) for much of the rest of the novel. As Margaret Harris notes, ‘Everard Romfrey personifies the kind of reactionary nobility which is reluctant or unable to make concessions in the nineteenth-century world, and which his nephew Nevil Beauchamp—in idealism and impetuosity very like his uncle—sees as an old order which must needs yield to new’ (1988: x).

Just as Nevil is drawn, though not in every detail, after Meredith’s old naval friend, Frederick Augustus Maxse, so is Everard Romfrey drawn after Maxse’s maternal uncle, Grantley Berkeley (1800-81) of Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire, the sixth son of the fifth Earl of Berkeley. Nevil is like his real-life counterpart (who, however, regressed later in life into extreme Toryism) in strongly reacting against this world. But it is a social order to which Rosamund owes her ultimate allegiance, as she signifies in agreeing to become Romfrey’s countess after his succession to the family earldom; in fact she had used the title previously in the hope that it would give her more influence on Nevil’s behalf when his French connection causes difficulty with his family. The ambiguity of her position in relation to the family is underlined at the end of the novel, when her child, who would be Romfrey’s heir apparent, dies at birth, but she survives to minister to Nevil’s child, and his widow.

The enchanting young woman (Meredith’s favourite amongst his heroines) Renée de Croisnel, whom Nevil meets in Venice while recuperating from a fever he and her brother had caught out East, disappears, against her better judgement and Nevil’s powerful dissuasion, into a marriage, at her father’s behest, with a dissolute older man. Meredith’s description of her establishes the sense of liberation, of infinite possibility for self-development, that the foetid but magnificent old city gives her. Margaret Harris observes in a note on this section of the novel that ‘some of Meredith’s own fascination with Venice is conveyed’ in it (1988: n. 43, 563). He had written to Frederick Maxse from Milan, on August 16 1861, after his first visit, that Venice was ‘a dream and a seduction to the soul of me’ (Cline 1970: 1. 96). And

Venice was the French girl’s dream. She was realizing it hungrily, revelling in it, anatomizing it, picking it to pieces, reviewing it, comparing her work with the original, and the original with her first conception, until beautiful sad Venice threatened to be no more her dream, and in dread of disenchantment she tried to take impressions humbly, really tasked herself not to analyze, not to dictate from a French footing, not to scorn. (v, 50)

Some fifteen years before he wrote of Renée de Croisnel, Meredith describes in that same letter to Frederick Maxse how he ‘followed Byron’s and Shelley’s footsteps there (in Venice) on the Lido’, and stood in the exact spot ‘where the two, looking towards the Euganean hills, [saw] the great bell of the Insane Asylum swing in the sunset. . . . I love both those poets; and with my heart given to them I felt as if I stood in a dead and useless time.’ Meredith took pride in his self-control and Roman stoicism, but in this context his affinity with the Romantics, and susceptibility to romantic emotion in the presence of an attractive young woman, are very clear. The letter continues:

I . . . floated through the streets in my gondola, and received charming salutes from barred windows: from one notably where a very pretty damsel, lost in languor, hung with her loose-robed bosom against the iron, and pressed amorously to see me pass, till she could no further: I meanwhile issued order to Lorenzo, my gondolier, to return, and lo, as I came slowly into view she as slowly arranged her sweet shape to be seen decently, and so stood, but half a pace in the recess, with one dear hand on one shoulder, her head slightly lying on her neck, her drooped eyelids mournfully seeming to say: 'No, no; never! Though I am dying to be wedded to that wish of yours and would stake my soul I have divined it!' (Cline 1970: 1. 97).

Meredith's description of Renée's appearance and manner recalls the spirit in which he wrote of the beautiful, though only 'half-discernible' (Cline 1970: 1. 97), young Venetian, and is infused with the iridescent liquefaction of the setting for both the real and the imagined woman. And as with his close perusal of his other heroines—Lucy Desborough, for example, and Rose Jocelyn, Clara Middleton, and Diana Warwick, he lingers on fine detail to enforce his conception of the feminine ideal:

She chattered snatches of Venetian caught from the gondoliers, she was like a delicate cup of crystal brimming with the beauty of the place. . . . Her features had the soft irregularities which run to rarities of beauty, as the ripple rocks the light; mouth, eyes, brows, nostrils, and bloomy cheeks, played into one another liquidly; thought flew, tongue followed, and the flash of meaning quivered over them like night-lightning. Or oftener, to speak truth, tongue flew, thought followed: her age was but newly seventeen, and she was French. (v, 49)

Not only is Renée very young, she is very confused as to her best course of action. On the one hand, 'Nevil had saved her brother's life, and had succoured her countrymen; he loved her, and was a hero.' On the other hand, she is engaged to be married, and '[h]e should not have said he loved her; that was wrong; and it was shameful that he should have urged her to disobey her father.' And yet, 'this hero's love of her might plead excuses she did not know of; and if he was to be excused, he, unhappy that he was, had a claim on her for more than tears' (vii, 67).

So far we are listening to Renée's self-communing. But now Meredith's voice intervenes with a significant commentary on the young woman's very troubled emotional state—significant in that in explicating her condition Meredith is speaking for all the young female victims of dominating fathers, libidinous future husbands, and insistent brothers, not only of his time but of any time, and any place. In being pledged to a man twice her age, for dynastic reasons, Renée is a human sacrifice in aid of the material appetites of the patriarchy, as much a propitiatory offering to the gods of worldly success as was, say, Iphigeneia to ensure her father Agamemnon a favourable wind to Troy. The poor young woman's imperfect understanding of her predicament, and her slender knowledge of herself, induce in her an incapacitating pathology of mind and body as she struggles to reconcile her conflicting impulses. Meredith's detailed diagnosis of her condition is surely definitive in the fiction that treats of similar states:

She wept resentfully. Forces above her own swayed and hurried her like a lifeless body dragged by flying wheels: they could not unnerve her will, or rather, what it really was, her sense of submission to a destiny. Looked at from the height of the palm-waving cherubs over the fallen martyr in the picture, she seemed as nerveless as a dreamy girl. The raised arms and bent elbows were an illusion of indifference. Her shape was rigid from hands to feet, as if to keep in a knot the resolution of her mind; for the second and in that young season the stronger nature grafted by her education fixed her to the religious duty of obeying and pleasing her father, in contempt, almost in abhorrence, of personal inclinations tending to thwart him and imperil his pledged word.. She knew she had inclinations to be tender. Her hands released, how promptly might she not have been confiding her

innumerable perplexities of sentiment and emotion to paper, undermining self-governance; self-respect, perhaps! Further than that, she did not understand the feelings she struggled with; nor had she any impulse to gaze on him, the cause of her trouble, who walked beside her brother below, talking betweenwhiles in the night's grave undertones. Her trouble was too overmastering; it had seized her too mysteriously, coming on her solitariness without warning in the first watch of the night like a spark crackling serpentine along dry leaves to sudden flame. A thought of Nevil and a regret had done it. (vii, 67-68)

This subtly empathetic analysis is of the process of a young woman's awakening (the word is used in the chapter title), not only to love, but to knowledge of the social imperatives that prevent her from choosing to surrender to it. There is no choice for a young woman in Renée's patriarchal world; obedience to its dictates is all. When she and Nevil are together in the 'big Chioggian fishing-boat' (viii, 73), sailing at night in the gulf off Venice, he realizes that '[a] word of sharp entreaty would have swung her round to see her situation with his eyes, and detest and shrink from it' (ix, 81). After all, in consenting to spend a night at sea with him, to the alarm of her father the Count and her fiancé the Marquis, she had already flouted a conservative code as to the behaviour expected of so young a woman, even though Rosamund Culling is there as chaperone. A comment of Meredith's however, puts Nevil's impetuosity in perspective. He says that Nevil 'committed the capital fault of treating her as his equal in passion and courage, not as metal ready to run into the mould under temporary stress of fire' (ix, 81-82). The fault is 'capital' in that it conforms to Meredith's ideal of gender relationship. But it points also to a fatal deficiency in Nevil's strategy, which means also in his understanding of the situation. In his determination to save Renée from her arranged marriage—he has a mad scheme in mind (which horrifies her brother Roland, another traditionalist) not to return to Venice, but to sail on to Trieste, and leave her there while he returns to Venice to confront her father—Nevil badly underestimates the hold that conventional thinking has over her. Her 'adieu to Venice' may have been 'her assurance of liberty', and she thrills to it in her romantic sea-girt position; 'but Venice hidden rolled on her the sense of the return and plucked shrewdly at her tether of bondage' (viii, 79). For Renée, the issue is not simply filial—it is profoundly ethical, and in trying to explain herself she puts her finger on what should be the office not only of a lover, but of a friend. A lover is by definition self-interested, an egoist: love of the other is implicated with love of self. But a friend, a true friend, is readier to feel real concern for the other's predicament; and Renée appeals to Nevil to understand this:

'Oh! You torture me,' she cried. Her eyelashes were heavy with tears. 'I cannot do it [go to her father and break off her engagement]. Think what you will of me! And, my friend, help me. Should you not help me? I have not once actually disobeyed my father, and he has indulged me, but he has been sure of me as a dutiful girl. That is my source of self-respect. My friend can always be my friend.' (ix, 83)

In the stress of the situation, however, Nevil reveals his own moral weakness, which masquerades as strength. He regresses from disinterested friendship into the egoism natural to his youth and gender, and it is his egoism that blinds him to any other consideration. '[D]o you know what you are doing?' asks Rosamund, to which he replies 'Perfectly. . . . She is a girl, and I must think and act for her' (ix, 83). And then there is Roland, her brother, whose dialogue with the headstrong Nevil is in itself a

commentary on the moral fallibility, in the latter's specific human condition, of the idealist doctrine *amor vincit omnia*.

'My dear Nevil, are you in a state of delusion? Renée denies . . .'

'There's no delusion, Roland. I am determined to stop a catastrophe. I see it as plainly as those Alps. There is only one way, and that's the one I have chosen.'

'Chosen! my friend. But allow me to remind you that you have others to consult. And Renée herself . . .'

'She is a girl. She loves me, and I speak for her.'

'She has said it?'

'She has more than said it.'

'You strike me to the deck, Nevil. Either you are downright mad—which seems the likeliest, or we are all in a nightmare. Can you suppose I will let my sister be carried away the deuce knows where, while her father is expecting her, and to fulfil an engagement affecting his pledged word?' (ix, 84)

Nevil is not mad, and with further experience he will gain more insight into women, until with Jenny Denham he is able to enter something approaching a mature partnership; but at this youthful stage he has an ingrained belief, common to his class at that time, and in spite of his professed Radicalism, that the opposite sex is in some sense mentally deficient in relation to males, and therefore to be led, like children, down the correct path to their patriarchally-determined salvation. Later, when he sees much of the sterling Jenny Durham, he makes the same mistake. Having lost Bevisham to the despised Tory, Cecil Baskett, he remarks:

'It's only a skirmish lost, and that counts for nothing in a battle without end: it must be incessant.'

'But does incessant battling keep the intellect clear?' was her memorable answer.

He glanced at Lydiard [her Liberal friend], to indicate that it came of that gentleman's influence upon her mind. It was impossible for him to think that women thought. The idea of a pretty woman exercising her mind independently, and moreover moving him to examine his own, made him smile. Could a sweet-faced girl, the nearest to Renée in grace of manner and in feature of all women known to him, originate a sentence that would set him reflecting? (xxvii, 296)

Meredith's comment contrives, in just fourteen words, to suggest that while male pride cannot admit it, the young woman's intelligence and insight is irresistible, and capable of denting the patriarchal carapace: 'He was unable to forget it, though he allowed her no credit for it' (xxvii, 296).

Renée's situation is worse than it is in the English upper-class society of her time, at least as Meredith depicts it. Lucy Desborough, the farmer's niece, cannot forever be kept from Richard Feverel, in spite of the machinations of his baronet father, and Rose Jocelyn chooses Evan Harrington for herself, in spite of the prejudice of her class against a tailor's son. Constantia Durham's and Clara Middleton's acquiescence in dynastic marriage is assumed until they reject the arrangement, and Diana Warwick takes permanent flight, notwithstanding society's sanctions, from a mentally and emotionally abusive husband. Renée de Croisnel eventually rebels against her marriage to the Marquis, and comes to England to convey as much; but her change of heart is too late for Nevil: she cannot now do more than tempt him to sacrifice politics, and England, for her. The moment when he would have acted on his youthful idealism, and played Perseus to her Andromeda, had passed when he took her back to Venice, her father, and her future husband.

The beautiful Tory heiress, Cecilia Halkett, has a mind of her own, and through her association with Nevil, whom she deeply loves, she becomes increasingly open to Radical ideas. At first, Nevil's

prospects with her, philosophically speaking, are not propitious. If Renée is agonizingly in thrall, until her too-long-delayed rebellion, to the demands of class and nationality, Cecilia is comfortably at home with them. Her hereditary advantages—which she would in time willingly bestow on Nevil with her father's and his uncle's approval, in spite of the futility, as they see it, of his candidacy in Bevisham—are epitomized in a paragraph such as the following:

Mount Laurels, a fair broad house backed by a wood of beeches and firs, lay open to view on the higher grassed knoll of a series of descending turf mounds dotted with gorse-clumps, and faced South-westerly along the run of the Otley river to the gleaming broad water and its opposite border of forest, beyond which the downs of the island threw long interlocking curves. . . . Cecilia led [Nevil] to her dusky wood of firs, where she had raised a bower for a place of poetical contemplation and reading when the clear lapping salt river beneath her was at high tide. She could hail the *Esperanza* from that cover; she could step from her drawing-room window, over the flowerbeds, down the gravel walk to the hard, and be on board her yacht within seven minutes, out on her salt-water lake within twenty, closing her wings in a French harbour by nightfall of a summer's day, whenever she had the whim to fly abroad. Of these enviable privileges she boasted with some happy pride. (xvii, 163-64)

Her father's stubborn Toryism, in its contrast with Nevil's passionate Radicalism, can provoke her into a spasm of sympathy with his position, when she feels 'fervid, positive, uncompromising' on social questions—'[r]adicalish, perhaps, when she looked eye to eye on an evil' (xvii, 172); but the condition is momentary. Meredith's comment subtly restores her to her accustomed psychic space, where vanity prevails: 'the intemperate feeling subsided while she was doing duty before her mirror, and the visionary gulf closed immediately' (xvii, 172-73). The metaphor reminds us of another gulf, a geographical one, which had closed no less decisively on the visions of two young people. In opposing, angrily, her father's tolerance of the 'pitch and tar in politics' (xvii, 172) that could harm Nevil, Cecilia 'had dimly seen that a woman can feel insurgent, almost revolutionary, for a personal cause, Tory though her instinct of safety and love of smoothness make her' (xvii, 173). Nevil loves her, as she does him, but he is not yet capable of arousing in her a settled conviction that his cause is just. As she ponders, through the day, the problem of the 'Tory squib' (xvii, 173) that had made her angry on Nevil's behalf, a sentence that is part of her own inner discourse encapsulates a standard conservative view of the time: 'Now what does it matter what a woman thinks in politics?' But the sentence is transitional, and can equally stand for a thought of Nevil's as the narrative switches to a voice that is recognizably Meredith's as well. In answer to that question, we read that

[Nevil] deemed it of great moment. Politically, he deemed that women have souls, a certain fire of life for exercise on earth. He appealed to reason in them; he would not hear of convictions. He quoted the Bevisham doctor: 'Convictions are generally first impressions that are sealed with later prejudices,' and insisted there was wisdom in it. (xvii, 174)

But as the paragraph goes on, we become aware that the Beauchamp ego is superseding Meredithian identification:

Nothing tired him, as he had said, and addressing woman or man, no prospect of fatigue or of hopeless effort daunted him in the endeavour to correct an error of judgement in politics—*his* notion of an error. The value he put upon speaking, urging his views, was really fanatical. It appeared that he canvassed the borough from early morning till near midnight, and nothing would persuade him that his chance was poor; nothing that an entrenched Tory like her father, was not to be won even by an assault of all the reserve forces of Radical pathos, prognostication, and statistics. (xvii, 174)

Meredith canvassed for Captain Maxse when he stood for the Radicals in Southampton, but, as he wrote to Augustus Jessopp from the constituency on 23 October 1868, he found it 'a dismal business' (Cline 1970: 1. 375). 'He was far too impatient with human stupidity,' remarks Lionel Stevenson, 'to find any satisfaction in the manipulating and temporizing expected of a politician' (1954: 170). That might be considered a manifestation of Meredithian ego, but in any event, in his novel he opposes the Tory ego to the Radical, and as in the historical contest, it is to the latter's disadvantage. Cecilia Halkett

think[s] of her position as the friend of Nevil in utter antagonism to him. It beset her with contradictions that blew rough on her cherished serenity; for she was of the order of ladies who, by virtue of their pride and spirit, their port and their beauty, decree unto themselves the rank of princesses among women, before our world has tried their claim to it. She had lived hitherto in upper air, high above the clouds of earth. Her ideal of a man was of one similarly disengaged and lofty—loftier. Nevil, she could honestly say, was not her ideal; he was only her old friend, and she was opposed to him in his present adventure. (xvii, 173)

Besides, she is doubtful of his ability to commit himself in view of his previous allegiance to 'the French lady', whom she regards as a 'yoke' she would prefer him to have 'flung off' (xvii, 173). She has reason to be doubtful. Summoned, on a whim, to France by the discontented Renée (a summons he obeys in spite of Cecilia's advice not to neglect his canvassing), his passion for her is revived, and he diagnoses her condition as graphically as when they were at sea together. 'You are not married,' he tells her, 'you are simply chained: and you are terrorized. What a perversion of you it is! It wrecks you. But with me? Am I not your lover? You and I are one life. What have we suffered for but to find this out and act on it?' (xxv, 279).

More passionate words pour out of him; but she is not yet ready to abandon France and her husband. Her 'call of distress' has been motivated less by passion for Nevil than boredom with her present lot: it was 'a whistle to a faithful dog, a display of power' by a young woman who is desperate for a change in her enforced social circumstances, to be free of the net of aristocratic triviality in which she has acquiesced in being trapped; but she is uncertain how to effect her escape, and in any case ambivalent, as she has always been, about doing so. For his part, Nevil has no intention of abandoning his political ambitions for the sake of a romantic obsession. What this encounter at Tourdestelle has done is to underline 'the impossibility of reconciling Renée and Radicalism' (Kettle 1971: 195). Nonetheless, to the extent that she remains embedded in Nevil's mind and heart until her fruitless visit to London, she compromises his love for Cecilia, and Cecilia knows it.

Nor is this Nevil's only handicap as far as any prospect of marriage to the Englishwoman is concerned. In his relentless concentration on issues beyond his relationship with her, whether the Marquise or his political campaign, he fails to see her for what she is becoming under the force of her passion for him, fails to see that she is developing beyond her inherited capacities. His Radicalism has aroused in her the possibility of 'radicalish' thinking in herself, so that when her father's Tory friend, Seymour Austin, talks to her of feminism in terms that Nevil (she realizes, in some bewilderment) has not done, and indeed might frown at, she eagerly responds, and asks him to recommend 'some hard books to study through the Winter'. The temperateness of Austin's views (which ironically, from this

Tory, accurately reflect Meredith's own)¹⁴ appeals to her in contrast to Nevil's, whom she chooses, at this moment, to think of as 'intellectually erratic' (xxviii, 303).

This conversation with Seymour Austin is in fact a crucial turning-point in the narrative involving Nevil and Cecilia. Her reflection as to Nevil's likely conservative reaction to the 'prospect of woman taking council, *in council*, with men upon public affairs, like the women in the Germania!' (xxviii, 301) shows both her awareness of a political limitation in him, and her own pride in having acquired the knowledge to make such a comparison. 'To be able to imagine Nevil Beauchamp intellectually erratic was a tonic satisfaction to the proud young lady, ashamed of a bondage that the bracing and pointing of her critical powers helped her to forget'. Furthermore, as the paragraph moves into her internal discourse, we learn that 'She had always preferred the society of men of Mr Austin's age.'

How old was he? Her father would know. And why was he unmarried? A light frost had settled on the hair about his temples; his forehead was lightly wrinkled; but his mouth and smile, and his eyes, were lively as a young man's, with more in them. His age must be something less than fifty. O for peace! she sighed. When he stepped into his carriage, and stood up in it to wave adieu to her, she thought his face and figure a perfect example of an English gentleman in his prime. (xxviii, 303)

In terms of narrative strategy, we are being prepared for the successful suitorship of another older Tory, Blackburn Tuckham (for whom Meredith's friend William Hardman supplied the model). Cecilia's lively mind is receptive to progressive ideas, but her temperament inclines Torywards, as do her values. The peace of her habitual surroundings is, after all, indispensable to her in contrast with Nevil's turbulent world. And an 'English gentleman' of the Austinian kind is a reassurance to her of the dignity and stability she yearns for. Intellectually speaking, too, she has drifted apart from Nevil, as her colloquy with Austin has revealed, both to her and the reader. Gillian Beer's judgement on the respective significance for Nevil of Renée and Cecilia is illuminating:

Beauchamp is attracted first to Renée, the gentle, sensual French girl, because he can play out the traditional masculine role towards her: protect her, condescend to her, worship her. He loses Cecilia finally because he cannot understand that she is growing independently of him through the force of her passionate love for him. He is unconscious of her passion. He comes to her for peace, seeing her always and only as an ideal upper-class Englishwoman: cool, peaceful, a princess. He never reaches to that centre of herself which is turbulent, 'radicalish' and argumentative. (1970: 88)

The young woman he does eventually marry, Jenny Denham, is intelligent, spirited, and as assistant to Dr Shrapnel, her guardian and Nevil's Radical counsellor, ostensibly more compatible, politically, than Cecilia; but she, too, is, in her own way, a victim of the dominant male culture. She does not love Nevil as Renée and Cecilia have loved him, but she admires him, and on the voyage to Europe by yacht that precedes the marriage she succumbs to the charm he acquires in his role as experienced sailor. Her guardian, in any case, is anxious that she should marry his political protégé. For Nevil's part, he is 'in a hurry to be married. Jenny's eyes were lovely, her smiles were soft; the fair promise of her was in bloom on her face and figure. He could not wait; he must off to the parson' (lvi, 620). For Jenny at sea has become pregnant. But Nevil's evident reluctance to undergo a religious, rather than a civil, ceremony, and his Radical contempt for churchmen and the Church are grievously hurtful to her, and she 'dropped some tears on her bridal day' (lvi, 622). Nevil had not troubled to court her amidst his political activity, but assures her on their wedding-day that he is not looking for "a toddling

chattering little nursery wife,” as she puts it; she would have ‘[a]s fair play as a woman’s lord could give her’ (lvi, 623). That last phrase is revealing: Nevil’s Radicalism is evidently not progressive enough to extend to complete equality between the sexes. In Venice Jenny gives birth to a son, but her insistence that he be baptized in due form is again offensive to her husband’s and guardian’s convictions. As she had realized in Madeira, the scene of the wedding, ‘[m]arrying Beauchamp was no simple adventure. She feared in her bosom, and resigned herself’ (lvi, 621).

CHAPTER THREE

The Egoist

Pride of birth is time and again a crucial element in the social context of Meredith's fiction. Amongst his baronets and peers, their wives, siblings and children, egoism, in the special sense of a consciousness of superiority to other classes, is a given, against which he can deploy his sense of what is truly admirable in human character as opposed to advantages that are merely an accident of birth. Sometimes, as with Lady Jocelyn, or Cecilia Halkett, or Emma Dunstane, the aristocratic and the admirable coincide to form exemplars (though, as to the first two, not without faults of their class) of civilized society. But there are those with whom egoism is not merely class-consciousness, more or less benign, but a disabling pathology producing misery for those who are victims of it, and for the egoists themselves. Sir Austin Feverel, Sir Willoughby Patterne and the Earl of Fleetwood (to take examples from early, middle and late Meredith) are, from the civilized point of view (which Meredith endeavoured to represent), a species of barbarian, in the Arnoldian sense, for all their material splendour. In short, they are undeveloped in heart, mind and spirit, those fundamental constituents of our human nature which must function healthily and harmoniously, Meredith thought, if we are to be true to our best selves. As he wrote in 'The Woods of Westermain':

Blood and brain and spirit, three
 (say the deepest gnomes of Earth),
 Join for true felicity.
 Are they parted, then expect
 Some one sailing will be wrecked. (Bartlett 1978: 1. 217)

Meredith's notion of the function of 'blood' in our nature is an interesting foreshadowing of D. H. Lawrence's. Both writers had as little doubt of the positive value of our physical nature as they had of the natural world itself, most specifically in regard to our sexuality. What was crucial was to recognize the body's proper place in the trinity completed by mind and spirit. To neglect, or excessively indulge, any one element is to disable us as responsible human beings, responsible to ourselves as well as our fellows, and to the sentient world in general. Meredith would have no truck with any kind of religiously-inspired asceticism. His friend Lady Butcher records in her memoirs that she could not induce him to read any recent books published on Buddhist teaching and Vedantic philosophy.

It was his opinion that Oriental religious ideas taught the negation of life. He himself thought that we should accept life and all the experiences that come to us as part of our spiritual training. The body should be dominated and disciplined, not starved and denied. . . . 'The body and its senses [he said] are necessary and good to be trained to do their work, not to be starved out of existence. If a man tries to escape from his body, still more if he tries to escape from his brain, and brains hold on fast and allow spirit to contradict mind, there is no way out for him.

'Earth will be accepted before she helps!'

Our lives should, in his own words, 'be steered a true course between the Ascetic rocks and the Sensual whirlpools.' (1919: 110-11)

Those rocks and whirlpools symbolize what might be called the egoistic polarities to which most human beings are prey. With varying degrees of success, Meredith's protagonists (though not Sir

Willoughby Patterne, whose criteria of conduct are entirely self-referential) struggle to steer a 'true course' between them, and bring reason and common sense to bear in their relations with individuals and society. How successful their struggle is differs, of course, from one character to another. Richard Feverel's, for example, ends in disaster, both for himself and the woman he loves. Sir Willoughby Patterne is forced into compromising with his strongest desires by accepting the only way he is offered to avoid the deepest humiliation. Diana Warwick also has to compromise, sacrificing a substantial degree of the personal freedom she cherishes to a man she respects and will be respected by in return. The Earl of Fleetwood's arrogance and impetuosity lose him the woman he should have loved instead of victimized, and in his self-revulsion he escapes into the ascetic life as a monk. In these instances, and others, there is a necessary balance to be found between wilfulness and wisdom. If the will, or ego, has been excessively indulged, and the access to at least a degree of wisdom too long delayed, the penalty is commensurate.

In his 'Prelude' to *The Egoist*, a distilled version of his *Essay on Comedy* (the brief title for *The Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, 1877), Meredith guides us through the nature and function, as he conceives it, of comedy in literature towards his idea of the egoist in general, and of Sir Willoughby Patterne in particular. Personifying comedy, he writes that

[s]he it is who proposes the correcting of pretentiousness, of inflation, of dullness, and of the vestiges of rawness and grossness to be found among us. She is the ultimate civilizer, the polisher, a sweet cook. If . . . she watches over sentimentalism with a birch-rod, she is not opposed to romance. You may love, and warmly love, so long as you are honest. Do not offend reason. A lover pretending too much by one foot's length of pretence, will have that foot caught in her trap. In Comedy is the singular scene of charity issuing of disdain under the stroke of honourable laughter: an Ariel released by Prospero's wand from the fetters of the damned witch Sycorax. ('Prelude', 4)

The joke Meredith is playing on us (aptly enough) in these lines is that of mock-Carlylean grandiloquence. Carlyle's 'impassioned, prophetic spirit pervades the "Prelude"', notes Margaret Harris in her edition of *The Egoist*, and she quotes from Meredith's letter of 22 March 1898 to Henry-D. Davray, who was planning to translate the novel into French: 'You will find the introductory chapter rather stiff work, and should be told that the pretended testimony to the merits of Comedy is in the vein of Carlyle' (1992: 550).

'Pretended' the testimony may be (Meredith has attributed it to a supposed 'enthusiast' ['Prelude', 4] who is perusing the infinite complexities of human nature as enshrined in the 'Book of Egoism' ['Prelude', 1]); but both in manner and matter there is an underlying seriousness, an intention on Meredith's part to employ his wit, his command of the 'Comic Spirit' that he appeals to in his *Essay on Comedy* (1877), in the cause of moral renovation. As Richard C. Stevenson writes, 'The comic spirit was to be above all a reforming force, one that would induce the individual to develop a sharpened vision of himself and others and thereby would lead to a more humane and civilized society' (2004: 29). James Gindin supports this argument: 'The aim of comedy is socially prescriptive, reforming the individual vagary or egoism and assuming that a collection of individual reforms would beneficially alter the society as a whole' (Gindin 1971: 59; quoted in Stevenson 2004: 29). '[T]o love comedy,' wrote Meredith in his *Essay*, 'you must know the real world, and know men and women

well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for good' (1956: 24). He was thinking in particular of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*, but his comments on theatrical comedy in this essay have a wider relevance. The rationality and common sense he found so praiseworthy in Molière were qualities he strove for in his own work, and looked for in the world around him. It is not fanciful, indeed, to trace a connection linking as his feminine ideal the women he admired in great comedy, such as Dorine in *Le Tartuffe*, Célimène in *Le Misanthrope*, and Millamant in Congreve's *The Way of the World*; the attractive and intelligent women he counted amongst his friends; and the spirited, articulate, courageous young women he created for his novels, such as Jocelyn Rose in *Evan Harrington*, Jenny Denham in *Beauchamp's Career*, Clara Middleton and Laetitia Dale in *The Egoist*, Diana Warwick in *Diana of the Crossways*, Nesta Radnor in *One of Our Conquerors*, Aminta Farrell in *Lord Ormont and His Aminta*, and Carinthia Jane Kirby in *The Amazing Marriage*. In all of them he found—or, in the case of his fictional characters, imbued them with—that all-important Comic Spirit which was his personification of the principles of rationality and common sense—the spirit, in short, of critical intelligence.¹ The essay is not only a superb piece of literary criticism on the plays of ancient Greek and Roman, Restoration and French comic dramatists, in particular Aristophanes, Menander, Congreve, and, above all, Molière; there are glances towards Chaucer, Shakespeare, Rabelais, Voltaire, Cervantes and Fielding, and the essay is also a treatise in social and ethical philosophy, in which Meredith's views on right conduct are given concrete illustration through his examination of the dramatists. Nor is he concerned only with individual morality. The very quality of our civilization, he says, depends on how well the comic idea and comedy flourish within it. Indeed, 'there never will be civilization where comedy is not possible' (1956: 32). Again we touch on matter of particular relevance to *The Egoist*, and Clara Middleton's relentless, anguished search for a way to escape from the threat of marital imprisonment embodied in the ultra-patriarch, Sir Willoughby Patterne. A vital element in the civilized culture that a clear vision of the Comic Spirit makes possible comes, says Meredith, of 'some degree of social equality of the sexes.' It is necessary that 'cultivated women [should] recognize that the comic Muse is one of their best friends.'

They are blind to their interests in swelling the ranks of the sentimentalists. Let them look with their clearest vision abroad and at home. They will see that, where they have no social freedom, comedy is absent; where they are household drudges, the form of comedy is primitive; where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place, and a sentimental version of them. Yet the comic will out, as they would know if they listened to some of the private conversations of men whose minds are undirected by the comic Muse; as the sentimental man, to his astonishment, would know likewise, if he in similar fashion could receive a lesson. But where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty—in what they have won for themselves, and what has been granted them by a fair civilization—there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure comedy flourishes, and is, as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions. (1956: 32)

The three young heroines of *The Egoist*, Constantia Durham, Clara Middleton and Laetitia Dale, are indeed, if we consider the state of society at this time (the 1870s) beyond the walls of the Patterne estate, 'on the road to an equal footing with men'; but they are at different stages on the road. Judging by her very rapid alienation from Sir Willoughby Patterne, Constantia Durham—'that mad thing', as

those unable to understand her (that is, everyone at Patterne Hall) call her, who is off the scene, except as a persistently rankling memory for Willoughby, by the end of Chapter 4—has a clear idea of her own worth, and how it should be recognized. She knows it is futile to expect such recognition from Willoughby: she has seen how disgracefully he has humiliated Lieutenant Patterne. Clara, like Constantia, meets Willoughby's criteria for engagement—she is rich, healthy and beautiful; but her relative docility is deceptive. Young as she is (she is eighteen when she meets him), and limited as her commerce with the world has been, she possesses a considerable store of common sense and sound judgement. It will not be long before she has to begin using it. Her deeply problematic relationship with the Egoist is set in train by her momentary failure of judgement in accepting him as her fiancée. And yet her own growth in understanding, both of herself and of the characters around her, depends on her having done so. Apart from exposing Willoughby in all his bizarre complexities, the juxtaposition of these polar opposites will gradually reveal to her (and the reader) the narrator's view of what in her nature it is necessary to deploy in order to extricate herself from a self-created nightmare of sexual politics. The process will give much scope to Meredith for disclosing his feminine ideal. Nor must we overlook the role played by his chief subheroine in *The Egoist*, the relatively poor, no longer very young, but still beautiful (though Willoughby thinks her faded in comparison with the dazzling Constantia and Clara) Laetitia Dale, who lives with her ailing father in a cottage on the Patterne estate. Laetitia has worshipped Willoughby from childhood, but as a mere tenant, and she is twice displaced by younger women. What she lacks, however, in youthful attractions (at least in Willoughby's eyes) she makes up for in intelligence; and as the story unfolds she uses it to work out a difficult but tenable long-term position vis-à-vis the lord of Patterne Hall. Clara and Laetitia are part of a society, in late Victorian England, where they are subject to the pressures of patriarchal custom, where both the men and the women around them (with the exception of the deceptively diffident Vernon Whitford, and poor Mr Dale, who is too humble and infirm to do more than exclaim in bewilderment at his daughter's behaviour) combine to support strict social conventions. The two young women have to find their individual escape-routes, each falling back on her own particular strengths.

Meredith believed, as he indicates in his *Essay on Comedy*, that 'our civilization is founded in common sense', the exercise of critical intelligence, and that 'it is the first condition of sanity to believe it' (1956: 47). In characterizing the Spirit of Comedy, Meredith emphasizes fineness of temper, excluding satire, but 'showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity' (1956: 48). And as he moves through his paragraph at this point, he elevates his rhetorical trumpet, so to speak, to deliver a resounding peal of criticism of men's conduct at its worst. It is a magnificent summation of his social, political and ethical philosophy. We must not think, he says, that it is '[m]en's future upon earth' that attracts the finely-tempered judgement of the Comic Spirit. It is 'their honesty and shapeliness in the present . . .':

and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, 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 overhead will look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.² (1956: 48)

If we are to judge him severely, this description of man in society at his most grotesque is entirely applicable to Sir Willoughby Patterne. As his name implies, he is set up by Meredith as a template for all that is undesirable, especially when taken to extremes, in the character of a Victorian patriarch. And it is against him that all the other characters in the novel are defined.

Meredith's presentation of character, in the strict sense of the phrase—his propelling them on to the stage of *The Egoist*—is reminiscent of the theatre (as the metaphor implies). His characters follow one another on in the orderly way suggested by the chapter titles, and proceed to make a contribution to the advance of the narrative. He begins by introducing what Willoughby considers to be an unwelcome excrescence on the family tree in the form of one of the '[p]auper Patternes [who] were numerous when the fifth head of the race was the hope of his county' (i, 7). Lieutenant Crossjay Patterne (of the socially inferior Marines) comes to visit at Patterne Hall, by longstanding invitation. (Willoughby, in his would-be heroic way, would like to be known for a military association he has himself avoided.) But after a ten-mile walk from the station, the poor man finds himself rejected. He is older than Willoughby has expected, he is 'thick-set' and 'stumpy', and 'he ha[s] the appearance of a bankrupt tradesman absconding; no gloves, no umbrella' (i, 9). Willoughby cannot be 'at home' to such a sorry creature. The metaphorical knife of the chapter title ('A Minor Incident, Showing an Hereditary Aptitude in the Use of the Knife') is swiftly used to detach him from Patterne's respectable purlieus, and off he has to trudge another ten miles back whence he came. The visit is a minor vexation for Willoughby, while he is taking the afternoon air on his stately terrace, and swiftly dealt with. But it has major consequences for the narrative. Willoughby's companion on his stroll is the 'beautiful and dashing Constantia Durham' (i, 9), and her response to this treatment of his relative—her 'startled look', her seeming 'personally wounded', and her 'face of crimson' (i, 10)—brands him, barely ten pages into the novel, as snobbish, ruthless, and lamentably obsessed with keeping up his class presumptions and status. They are characteristics he will continue to display, and they will contribute to alienating those he most wishes to conciliate, namely Constantia Durham, Clara Middleton, and Laetitia Dale. Constantia does not reply when he says he will 'drop [the lieutenant] a cheque' (i, 10). It is Meredith's wonderfully concise way of giving notice of her imminent departure. The 'ring of imps' he describes in the final paragraph of the chapter, those familiars of the Comic Spirit, ever ready to be evoked by the Egoist's crassness, are compared to watchful, hungry monkeys who perceive in him 'a fresh development and very subtle manifestation of the very old thing from which he had sprung' (i, 10). The Darwinian reference is also a brand. This 'civilized' gentleman, this scion of a noble house with, apparently, every possible material advantage and glittering prospect, is, in his darkest depths, regressive in sentiment and appetite. It is an early indication of the vicious dimension in Willoughby's character he hides so skilfully beneath the aristocratic veneer, and which contributes to Clara's growing estrangement from him. The episode with the lieutenant is a disturbing element, too, in the experience of the lieutenant's twelve-year-old son Crossjay, who is grateful for his

translation to Patterne Hall from a jostling crowd of hungry siblings in Portsmouth, but can never forget the humiliation suffered by his father.

A crucial question to consider, as we observe Willoughby's conduct towards Constantia, Clara and Laetitia, is the displacement in him of what is normally understood by 'love' in a would-be intimate relationship in favour of those elements in his personality that together constitute his colossal egoism. Reading those passages in the second chapter that elaborate in extraordinary arabesques of metaphor—appropriate to Willoughby's absurd vanity—on Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson's declaration that Willoughby '*has a leg*' (ii, 11), we have to wonder if a man who grows up treated like a 'born cavalier' (ii, 13), like a 'prince' (ii, 14), even like one of the 'Indian gods' (ii, 15), has not been fatally damaged as a potential lover. Meredith describes him as having been 'drenched' in 'showers of adulation' (ii, 15). The effect is actually to deprive him of humanity, and turn him into a kind of aristocratic mechanism, programmed to behave in every minute physical particular like someone born to his station, but incapable of natural movement and feeling. Where a heart should be there is only meticulous attention to the imperatives of ego, even in his very posture and movement. His chief desire is to maintain social poise and balance. Like a tightrope walker, or classical dancer, he is intently focused on forms of abstract representation rather than actual human concourse. Unlike the Indian gods, however,

he reposed upon no seat of amplitude to preserve him from a betrayal of intoxication; he had to continue tripping, dancing, exactly balancing himself, head right, head to left, addressing his idolaters in phrases of perfect choiceness. This is only to say, that it is easier to be a wooden idol than one in the flesh; yet Willoughby was equal to his task. The little prince's education teaches him that he is other than you, and by virtue of the instruction he receives, and also something, we know not what, within, he is enabled to maintain his posture where you would be tottering. Urchins upon whose curly pates grey seniors lay their hands with conventional encomium and speculation, look older than they are immediately, and Willoughby looked older than his years, not for want of freshness, but because he felt that he had to stand eminently and correctly poised. (ii, 15-16)

What motivates Willoughby, then, to woo Constantia Durham, and later Clara Middleton, is no irresistible prompting from the instinctual human depths of him, no warm, outward flow of commingled eros and agape. As Lady Busshe, who is 'for Constantia Durham' (iii, 17), and in her narrow way at least as shrewd about high society as her friend and rival Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson (though without her sense of humour), pronounces: "'Patternes marry money: they are not romantic people'" (iii, 17). What Willoughby goes for is what he calculates to be good for his 'house', and what he and those around him will perceive as an accolade for himself—health, wealth and beauty, those 'three mighty qualifications for a Patterne bride' (iii, 17)—'the triune of perfect starriness,' comments Meredith, 'which makes all men astronomers' (v, 42). Having lost Constantia, he turns to Clara, because she has them too. But Laetitia, whom he values for her constancy in adulation, her standing reassurance that his vanity is justified, and his power over others undiminished, he twice overlooks because she is poor and losing her youthful bloom. He will accept her only when he loses Clara, and also loses face, intolerably, in county society through being twice jilted. No matter that when he came of age, she had written a song for him, and 'almost proposed to her hero in her rhymes' (iii, 17). No matter, also, that at that time '[s]he was pretty; her eyelashes were long and dark, her eyes dark blue,

and her soul was ready to shoot like a rocket out of them at a look from Willoughby' (iii, 17). She was 'portionless' (iii, 17)—a conclusive disqualification.

As we have noticed at the beginning of the previous chapter, the definition of an 'egoist' developed in the nineteenth century from its more restricted eighteenth-century sense of 'egotist', meaning someone who too frequently used the first person pronoun,³ or continually talked about himself. The sense of a selfish or conceited person was available, but it seems to have intensified in the next century and attached itself to 'egoist' as meaning '[a] *systematically* selfish person [italics supplied]; a self-centred or self-opinionated person' (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 1993: 788, 789). Both the earlier and the later definitions could hardly have been more apt for Willoughby, but they give us his malady only in its bare bones. The degree of selfishness and self-conceit in him, the degree to which the egoism they constitute consumes and guides him in his dealings with the three young women, is in its very monstrosity inconceivable to them in its full dimensions. So selfish is he that even though Constantia Durham's beauty 'was of a kind to send away beholders aching, [and] had the glory of the racing cutter [Mrs Mountstuart's fine phrase] full sail on a winning breeze' (iii, 20), he is not entirely sure that he wants her: 'he loved his liberty; he was princelier free; he had more subjects, more slaves; he ruled arrogantly in the world of women; he was more himself. His metropolitan experiences did not answer to his liking the particular question, Do we bind the woman down to us idolatrously by making a wife of her?' (iii, 20-21).

The trouble is, those 'metropolitan experiences' have contributed to a delay in declaring himself to Constantia, and she herself has mingled with other men, and 'been nibbled at, all but eaten up, while he hung dubitative; and though that was the cause of his winning her, it offended his niceness.'

She had not come to him out of cloistral purity, out of perfect radiancy. Spiritually, likewise, was he a little prince, a despotic prince. He wished for her to have come to him out of an eggshell, somewhat more astonished at things than a chicken, but as completely enclosed before he tapped the shell, and seeing him with her sex's eyes first of all men. (iii, 21)

The chicken metaphor is a little masterstroke of concise comic writing, placing Willoughby before us in all his absurd, we could say paranoid, idealism. The point to be made here about Meredith's characterization of him is that it is precisely through his inability, or at any rate refusal, to see things about himself and his prospects with women as in themselves they really are, that the women he woos (or, in Laetitia's case, delays wooing until he sees his princely world falling around him) make crucial discoveries not only about him, but about themselves. Constantia has her eyes opened by his contemptuous behaviour towards Lieutenant Patterne, and flees to the relative sanity of Captain Oxford and London. Clara, even before the first day of her arrival at Patterne with her father, is made to begin the taxing struggle between her desire to be courteous and her growing realization that she has allowed herself to become engaged to a monster of egoism. The tension, the self-doubt, the self-contempt she feels in being driven to one shift or another, firstly to avoid his lover's advances, and then, as her revulsion intensifies, to try to avoid him altogether by running away, are a revelation to a young woman who would rather stare at flowers, play with her friend Crossjay, and try to understand her growing attraction to Vernon Whitford. As for Laetitia, her story at Patterne is one of growing

disillusionment with the man she once worshipped, as she watches her friend suffer. The process of self-discovery, however, does not drive her physically away, although it alienates her from Willoughby. Like Elizabeth Bennett's friend in *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Lucas, she eventually has to take what she can get.

The task of establishing reason in the micro-society at Patterne Hall—that is to say, a wise calculation, by the chief protagonists, of the real state of things there and how best to deal with it—is the task that Meredith sets himself in writing *The Egoist*. In short, the Comic Spirit must be made to prevail. A species of dramatic irony sets events in train, inasmuch as Willoughby expects to restore stability to life at Patterne, and contentment to himself after Constantia Durham's flight, by becoming engaged to Clara Middleton. Instead, by bringing the Middletons to his home, he ensures a long period of emotional disorder, which only the application of critical intelligence can overcome. The young Clara, as she deals with the intolerable pressures of coping with the demands of an absurdly patriarchal suitor, who is utterly unconscious of his absurdity, discovers that she possesses such an intelligence; and she is encouraged in its use (though not at once: he has first to give his serious attention to her case, and this takes a little time) by the sympathetic and sagacious Vernon Whitford. Together they succeed in restoring a harmony and balance to their lives which is lacking as they contend with the egoist who is so reluctant to set them free. Laetitia Dale also contributes to an ultimate settlement, but only by sacrificing herself to Willoughby, who turns to her as compensation for losing Clara. Through these three characters, Meredith invokes the common sense and rationality which are accessible to Willoughby only at the end, after much pain to himself and the two young women with whom he is involved. But it is Clara who takes the lead in finding a way out of the patriarchal labyrinth, asserting, against the alarming social and emotional odds of her time and place—and her extreme youth—a woman's right to choose a husband for herself. '[O]ne sees again and again,' comments Richard C. Stevenson,

how principle feminine figures in [Meredith's] fiction tend to possess—or to be in the process of acquiring—the commonsensical qualities he associates with the comic spirit in the *Essay*, while central male figures most often do *not* have these qualities. It is, in fact, in their relations with women that the male characters are repeatedly shown to be most prone to the artificial conduct and egotistical insensibility that are prime Meredithian targets. . . . (2004: 20-21)

If, as Stevenson remarks, '[c]lear-sightedness and a strong sense of spiritual equality are the two great attributes that mark the comic heroine and provide her with resources for her battle with men—the same battle that is repeatedly the subject of Meredith's novels' (2004: 34-35), it is in Meredith's major novels of the century's last two decades that his heroines are particularly in need of those attributes. By the time he writes *The Egoist*, he is ready to make his heroine confront the idea of marriage as physical imprisonment, with all the mental suffocation, the emotional and spiritual starvation, that that implies; and it is necessary for her to weigh the advantages of freedom in spinsterhood (as Clara Middleton does, until she realizes how much she values Vernon Whitford), or simply freedom outside an existing marriage (as Diana Warwick, for example, does, until she is finally persuaded that Tom Redworth will not materially compromise her yearning for independence). In the final chapter we shall

briefly consider the position of some ‘New Women’ writers on the matter, but it is interesting that Meredith anticipates aspects of their response as early as 1879, with *The Egoist*. Time and again, he provides Clara Middleton with imagery expressive of her sense of entrapment in Willoughby’s sentimental fantasies about marriage. Already in Chapter 5 we read of Willoughby’s desire to bind Clara to an engagement from which, given the courtship ethic of the period, she cannot, without difficult contrivance, honourably escape. After having her desire for a year’s grace (‘to see a little of the world’) reduced to six months, ‘[s]he was implored to enter the state of captivity by the pronouncement of vows—a private but a binding ceremonial. . . . Captive she must be’ (v, 44). Already the disjunction between herself and Willoughby, destined only to become wider, is apparent in that wish to postpone marriage to the already overbearing baronet for as long as she can. Her longing for freedom is as yet a humble one, and envisaged as only a temporary relief from his suffocations—but it is already compelling, with a young woman’s genuine curiosity about the world. But Willoughby is as patronizing in this area as in others. He had carried his parochial lordliness abroad with him, regarding foreigners with mingled amusement and contempt—‘holding an English review’ in his letters home ‘of his Maker’s grotesques’ (iv, 28).⁴

The disjunction between Clara and Willoughby is also apparent in the radically different conceptions they have of ‘love’. As befits her youth and optimism, and her innocence of any previous experience of the state, Clara is a romantic idealist: ‘She had only dreamed of love as one of the distant blessings of the mighty world, lying somewhere in the world’s forests, across wild seas, veiled, encompassed with beautiful perils, a throbbing secresy, but too remote to quicken her bosom’s throbs. Her chief idea of it was, the enrichment of the world by love’ (v, 45). Her chief idea, that is to say, is somehow to participate in giving the world what she believes it most needs, through giving of herself and her capacity to love; whereas Willoughby, who is as certain of his aims in regard to the opposite sex, and life in general, as poor Clara is dreamily vague, engages in a step-by-step campaign, not to give of himself, selflessly, to the woman concerned, much less to the world, but to take everything that may be offered him until there is nothing left to take. His guiding principle, as egoist—and it is symbolized by his position as a county magnate with extensive estates and a vast rental income—is to possess, and to do so with no question as to his natural entitlement. During his courtship at Upton Park, before Clara and her father move to Patterne Hall, he makes the discovery that his mind and Clara’s differ ‘on one or two points’; but ‘a difference of view in his bride was obnoxious to his repose’ (v, 52), which depended utterly on his not only winning her hand, and (he believed) her heart; he needed also to possess her soul. In harbouring this aspiration, however, he is blind to that which a less pathologically self-absorbed suitor—incapable of recognizing, let alone accepting, the ‘otherness’ of women—would surely have noticed, and which Mrs Mountstuart partly notices in dubbing Clara “‘a dainty rogue in porcelain’” (v, 47), a phrase which Willoughby, of course, does not understand. What he fails to notice about Clara (and it is a failure that lies at the heart of the disaster that his relationship with her increasingly becomes), even before the move to Patterne, is that

[her] features were legible as to the mainspring of her character. He could have seen that she had a spirit with a natural love of liberty, and required the next thing to liberty, spaciousness, if she was to

own allegiance. Those features, unhappily, instead of serving for an introduction to the within, were treated as the mirror of himself. (v, 51-52)

We have already encountered this constitutional habit of the Egoist's—to see, not that which is before him in a young woman's face, much less read in it an index to her character, but to assume that what he sees has reference to himself, indeed, is 'the mirror of himself' (v, 52). On his return to Patterne after three years' absence, the first friend he meets is Laetitia Dale. He greets her with great warmth, enquires as to her welfare, and then, 'read[ing] deeply into her eyes' (iv, 29) he sees, not what Laetitia may be feeling at that tender moment for which she has so patiently waited; instead, Meredith conveys simultaneously the physical occurrence of Willoughby's image in the mirror of Laetitia's eyes—it is there twice over, of course, for, we may assume, the Egoist's particular gratification—and the emotional significance—for himself, not Laetitia—of what he sees: 'He found the man he sought there, squeezed him passionately, and let her go' (iv, 29-30).

The bizarre portrait which Meredith is constructing is of the Egoist as victim of a particular pathology, or neurosis, which, in being projected, makes victims of others. His victims are of various kinds, depending on the demands he makes of them. The aunts at Patterne, Eleanor and Isabel, for example, are expected to be what they always have been, Willoughby's idolaters; they form a choric duet, and in never deviating from their role, they are part of the stability Willoughby must have for his peace of mind. Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson, Lady Busshe and Lady Culmer also have a choric function in their role as gossipers as well as admirers; but Mrs Mountstuart, the cleverest of them, tempers her admiration of the patriarchal Willoughby by being perceptive and witty, and to his face, about his emotional situation. To the extent that he reads her comments as a reflection on the conduct of his love affair (as he does with 'dainty rogue in porcelain'), he is puzzled, and therefore disquieted. Vernon Whitford is too detached and intelligent to be upset by Willoughby's amused patronage, and in any case is looking forward to moving to London to lead the life of an independent, if penurious, writer and scholar. Laetitia Dale is Willoughby's emotional refuge, on whose reassuring reflection of himself he can rely until she understands why Clara is so unhappy. But even she begins the long process of withdrawal from uncritical adulation when she realizes that she has been twice rejected, first for Constantia Durham, and then for Clara Middleton. It is a deepening shadow on her hitherto happy life at Patterne, this insight she is acquiring, from her own observation, into Willoughby's true nature.

But the shadow metaphor applies even more to Clara, as the chief and unrelenting focus of Willoughby's attention. Even before she arrives at Patterne, she has become aware that their 'difference of view' is 'obnoxious to his repose', and the realization impels her to remark, woundingly, "'It is not too late, Willoughby'" (v, 52). It is an extraordinarily bold utterance at this early stage, but it sounds the note that will recur to Clara with increasing conviction in the coming weeks. It also evokes from Willoughby the first of his rhapsodies on the theme of their unity in love against the world, a rhetoric Meredith uses to contrast Willoughby's intentions towards Clara with her aspiration for liberty and spaciousness. The imagery works to achieve the direct opposite of her

intense desire, as the narrative voice alternates with Willoughby's reported discourse, and then supplies Clara's doom-laden reflection:

He desired to shape her character to the feminine of his own, and betrayed the surprise of a slight disappointment at her advocacy of her ideas . . . he wanted her simply to be material in his hands for him to mould her; he had no other thought. He lectured her on the theme of the infinity of love. How was it not too late? They were plighted; they were one eternally; they could not be parted. She listened gravely, conceiving the infinity as a narrow dwelling where a voice droned and ceased not. However, she listened. She became an attentive listener. (v, 52)

The dialogic variation, even in these few lines, is brilliantly apt, as is Meredith's slyly ironic comment on Clara's attentiveness: it concisely anticipates the following chapter, in which she is required to absorb, to her increasing dismay, the insistent themes of Willoughby's courtship. Her attentiveness is to the emerging truth that she has made a very grave mistake in allowing him to woo her. The first dozen words of the quotation above, a thought of Willoughby's ventriloquized by the narrative voice, convey the essence of his intention: he wants not simply to possess Clara, but to replicate her as himself. She will be a duplicate and automaton under his control, and compelled to renounce the world (that world which Willoughby, in his pride of possession, finds so threatening), and join him in his self-worship.

'The world,' in fact, 'was the principal topic of dissension between these lovers,' the narrative voice informs us. '[Willoughby's] opinion of the world affected [Clara] like a creature threatened with a deprivation of air' (vi, 52) (an image that recurs in Diana Warwick's account of her marriage). She knows that under cover of a lover's desire for exclusive possession, Willoughby is talking of complete loss of the freedom that she realizes, even at this early stage of his courtship, is indispensable to her. His case for rejecting the world could hardly be less persuasive, replete as it is with the imagery of claustrophobia to which Clara is now reacting so badly:

He explained to his darling that lovers of necessity do loathe the world. They live in the world, they accept its benefits, and assist it as well as they can. In their hearts they must despise it, shut it out, that their love for one another may pour in a clear channel, and with all the force they have. They cannot enjoy the sense of security for their love unless they fence away the world. It is, you will allow, gross; it is a beast. Formally we thank it for the good we get of it; only we two have an inner temple where the worship we conduct is actually, if you would but see it, an excommunication of the world. We abhor that beast to adore that divinity. This gives us our oneness, our isolation, our happiness. This is to love with the soul. Do you see, darling? (vi, 52-53)

But Clara is much stronger, much more determined to stand up for herself, than Willoughby, or anyone else at Patterne, is aware.

She would not burn the world for him; she would not, though a purer poetry is little imaginable, reduce herself to ashes, or incense, or essence, in honour of him, and so, by love's transmutation, literally be the man she was to marry. She preferred to be herself, with the egoism of women! She said it: she said: 'I must be myself to be of any value to you, Willoughby.' (vi, 54)

The quotation is significant in two respects: firstly, for its reference to *suttee*, in which Meredith is known to have been interested (allusions to it recur in this novel and elsewhere in his fiction). This was the Hindu practice (abolished by law in British India in 1829, but practised intermittently thereafter) of self-immolation by the grieving widow on her husband's funeral pyre, or, if he had died elsewhere, on her own. Her purpose being to rejoin her husband after death, it would have greatly

appealed to Willoughby, who, later in the chapter, has a hilariously agonized dialogue with Clara in which he indulges a prospective posthumous jealousy at the thought of her vulnerable widowhood.⁵

The second item of significance in the quotation is Clara's internal recognition of her own egoism. We have come across powerful female egoists in Meredith's *oeuvre*—the Countess de Saldar, Margaret Lovell, Bella Mount—but they have been of the louche variety that interested Meredith because he admired courage, spirit and intelligence in women; there are others in the later fiction. Rhoda Fleming is an egoist of another kind, as is Jenny Denham—also intelligent, spirited and courageous, but fighting for a cause rather than merely personal survival in a predatory society. They are precursors, in this respect, of Meredith's later heroines. For it is when he comes to Clara Middleton, Diana Warwick, Nesta Radnor, Aminta Farrell, and Carinthia Kirby that the feminine issue becomes not just one of personal survival (psychically rather than physically), but the possibility of asserting oneself resolutely against male assumptions as to the fitness of things between the genders. The issue, in short, is feminism, and it has been brewing in Meredith's fiction from the beginning. One of the ways in which we can recognize in Meredith a precursor of later, and indeed contemporary, progressive thought in matters of gender is that he understood that sexual relationships that are more than fleeting are a matter of competing egos, and that the male ego does not have to be deferred to.

Professedly radical in politics (though he wrote for money for Tory newspapers like the *Ipswich Journal*, and the *Morning Post*), Meredith tended to be socially conservative. He was, after all, a Victorian (and latterly Edwardian) gentleman, with the decencies of conduct (as they judged them) to which the best of that class aspired. Except for Constantia Durham, of whose ultimate fate we are not informed, the young Meredithian heroines mentioned above all settle, in the end, for marriage (in prospect, if not in the novel itself) to men with whom they—and the reader—believe they can be happy. To that extent, Meredith is a disappointment to the modern feminist. Kate Millett, for example, writes that 'Meredith knows how to save [Clara] from the egoist, but he can think of nothing else to do for her.'

A life more occupied and interesting than mere mating—for good or ill—never seems to have occurred to him in connection with an intelligent young woman. This is a notably deficient and a rather tritely masculine attitude; for all his good intentions regarding the crippling character of feminine education, the feudal character of patriarchal marriage, and the egotism of male assumptions, Meredith appears incapable of transcending them and consequently mistakes the liberating turmoil of the sexual revolution for the mundane activities of a matchmaking bureau. (1977: 139)

The last phrase in that quotation recalls Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson (who, amongst her other social activities, relishes the role of matchmaker), and her piquant description of Clara as 'a dainty rogue in porcelain'. The older woman has obvious limitations of her class and time: for example, too ready an acceptance of Willoughby's patriarchal assumptions as to what is good for him, even at another's expense; but she is a keen student of whatever specimens of human nature English county society may afford. She can accept Willoughby largely at his own estimate, but unlike the unshakeably loyal aunts Eleanor and Isabel she does not do so uncritically, and finds considerable diversion, now and then, in wittily undermining, with great good humour, his stately certainties. As we see with her comment on

Clara, she has a way of being, up to a point, remarkably perceptive. Her words follow one of Meredith's characteristically detailed expositions of comely female appearance that, like Hardy's, convey moral judgement in the detail, as well as physical attraction:

Aspens imaged in water, waiting for the breeze, would offer a susceptible lover some suggestion of her face: a pure smooth-white face, tenderly flushed in the cheeks, where the gentle dints were faintly intermelting even during quietness. Her eyes were brown, set well between mild lids, often shadowed, not unwakeful. Her hair of lighter brown, swelling above her temples on the sweep to the knot, imposed the triangle of the fabulous wild woodland visage from brow to mouth and chin, evidently in agreement with her taste; and the triangle suited her; but her face was not significant of a tameless wildness or of weakness; her equable shut mouth threw its long curve to guard the small round chin from that effect; her eyes wavered only in humour, they were steady when thoughtfulness was awakened; and at such seasons the build of her winter-beechwood hair lost the touch of nymph-like and whimsical, and strangely, by mere outline, added to her appearance of studious concentration. Observe the hawk on stretched wings over the prey he spies, for an idea of this change in the look of a young lady whom Vernon Whitford could liken to the Mountain Echo and Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson pronounced to be 'a dainty rogue in porcelain.' (v, 46-47)

Clearly, it is a face with a most striking combination of charm, beauty and intelligence (the hawk image hinting at a reserve of formidable determination), which Meredith is careful to relate to elements of the natural world, both mythical and real, the ground, for Meredith (and therefore, in this description, for Clara), not only of our physical and mental health, but of our moral being. In tracing the significance of connections between his fictional characters and nature, it is useful to refer for greater clarity to certain passages in his poems. In his early 'South-West Wind in the Woodland', for example, he writes:

The voice of nature is abroad
This night; she fills the air with balm;
Her mystery is o'er the land;
And who that hears her now and yields
His being to her yearning tones,
And seats his soul upon her wings,
And broadens o'er the wind-swept world
With her, will gather in the flight
More knowledge of her secret, more
Delight in her beneficence,
Than hours of musing, or the lore
That lives with men could ever give!
Nor will it pass away when morn
Shall look upon the lulling leaves,
And woodland sunshine, Eden-sweet,
Dreams o'er the paths of peaceful shade;—
For every elemental power
Is kindred to our hearts, and once
Acknowledge [*sic*], wedded, once embraced,
Once taken to the unfettered sense,
Once claspt into the naked life,
The union is eternal. (From 'South-West Wind in the Woodland' [*Poems*, 1851], Bartlett 1978: 1.

28-29)

Vernon, the vigorous walker and lover of the Alps,⁶ instinctively responds to the spirit of nature he can discern in Clara. In this he differs radically from his two egoist associates, Willoughby and De Craye, both predators, both bent on possessing Clara wholly, but De Craye, of course, with all possible

Irish charm, wit and finesse. When Clara, at the beginning of Chapter 18, comes along ‘chatting and laughing with Colonel De Craye, young Crossjay’s hand under one of her arms, and her parasol flashing’ (xviii, 200), the terms in which she is described have reference to the three men whose focus of interest she is. De Craye’s light touch she can easily respond to: she is not aware how calculated it is, how intently the goat is slaving behind the badinage. For Willoughby, her aerial wit and grace are themselves a source of resentment and jealousy, in that they are not reserved for him. Meredith is reading Willoughby’s mind, so to speak, when he describes Clara as

a dazzling offender; as if she wished to compel the spectator to recognize the dainty rogue in porcelain; really insufferably fair: perfect in height and grace of movement; exquisitely-tressed; red-lipped, the colour striking out to a distance from her ivory skin: a sight to set the woodland dancing, and turn the heads of the town. (xviii, 200-01)

Clara is unquestionably beautiful; but just as Meredith indicates, for realism’s sake, in the course of her narrative, this or that fault of character she has on account of her youth and inexperience, so here he is careful to withhold classical perfection. ‘[T]hough beautiful, a jury of art-critics might pronounce her not to be. Irregular features are condemned in beauty’ (xviii, 201). Art critics, Meredith is implying, exalt beauty at the expense of human reality. In this they are like Sir Willoughby Patterne, who wants the daintiness in Clara that Mrs Mountstuart has noted, and the fixity represented by the ‘porcelain’; but he does not want the roguishness, because he cannot bear unpredictability, especially not in his chosen woman. Meredith’s sensuous evocation of Clara in the open, the random, mobile attractions of her appearance as she moves, are themselves a threat to Willoughby’s peace of mind (as his last duchess’s smiles were to Browning’s Duke of Ferrara) in being appealing to all observers, including a rival.

A description of her figure and her walking would have won her any praises: and she wore a dress cunning to embrace the shape and flutter loose about it, in the spirit of a Summer’s day. Calypso-clad, Dr. Middleton would have called her. See the silver birch in a breeze: here it swells, there it scatters, and it is puffed to a round and it streams like a pennon, and now gives the glimpse and shine of the white stem’s line within, now hurries over it, denying that it was visible, with a chatter along the sweeping folds, while still the white peeps through. She had the wonderful art of dressing to suit the season and the sky. . . . Millinery would tell us that she wore a fichu of thin white muslin crossed in front on a dress of the same light stuff, trimmed with deep rose. She carried a grey-silk parasol, traced at the borders with green creepers, and across the arm devoted to Crossjay, a length of trailing ivy, and in that hand a bunch of the first long grasses. These hues of red rose and green and pale green, ruffled and pouted in the billowy white of the dress ballooning and volleying softly, like a yacht before the sail bends low. . . . (xviii, 201)

We note that Meredith, himself not unacquainted with the pleasures of yachting, uses gentle, even voluptuous, terms to describe Clara’s nautical associations. To use the phrase he gives to Mrs Mountstuart to describe Constantia Durham, Clara is not a ‘racing cutter’. She is far from dashing: her charms are more subtle. ‘[S]he walked not like one blown against; resembling rather the day of the South-west driving the clouds, gallantly firm in commotion; interfusing colour and varying in her features from laugh to smile and look of settled pleasure, like the heavens above the breeze’ (xviii, 201).

Clara’s ravishing appearance has a present function and, so to speak, a postponed one, both relevant to the three men under discussion. In the first place, it is a physical representation that would fascinate

a conventionally lusty, well-disposed, susceptible man such as De Craye. In fact her appearance is expressive of her current mood in having had an exhilarating adventure on the open road, away from Willoughby's suffocations, and involving an attractive, witty Irishman. The passage fully justifies De Craye's love at first sight. Secondly, however, it is precisely his obvious admiration for Clara that now arouses Willoughby's lasting resentment. Willoughby is also susceptible, the text informs us, 'intensely' so, to 'the charms of women' (xviii, 202); but he 'was no poet: he was a more than commonly candid English gentleman in his avowed dislike of the poet's nonsense, verbiage, verse; not one of those latterly terrorized by the noise made about the fellow into silent contempt; a sentiment that may sleep, and has not to be defended' (xviii, 201-02). Sentiments like these disqualify him from responding to Clara as both an aesthetic phenomenon (as De Craye does), but also as something much more than that—an embodiment, in her 'summer's day' aspect (matching the season and the sky), with its elements of 'silver birch', 'deep rose', 'green creepers', 'trailing ivy' and 'long grasses', the whole billowing and subsiding ensemble 'resembling rather the day of the South-west driving the clouds'—an embodiment, or emanation, of the natural world that Vernon, who is not present at this scene, has recognized in comparing Clara to the Mountain Echo. Vernon's perceptions will become, cumulatively, as her tale proceeds, what Clara most respects; she will come to feel that he knows her for whom she really is, and as no one else does (not even her conventional father), except Laetitia, and she only late in the novel. Hence his appreciation of her wit, which he has early on (Chapter 5) realized is 'natural wit, crystal wit, as opposed to the paste-sparkle of the wit of the town', which no one else, with their 'corrupted hearing', has noticed: 'The corrupted hearing of people required a collision of sounds, Vernon supposed. For his part, to prove their excellence, he recollected a great many of Miss Middleton's remarks; they came flying to him; and as long as he forbore to speak them aloud, they had a curious wealth of meaning.' Vernon becomes increasingly aware of the 'refreshment and enjoyment' (v, 47) of intellectual compatibility with the young woman, a more gratifying attraction, to him, than her appearance, which, as Meredith notes above, is not perfect, in the sense that it is not a stereotype of female beauty like a porcelain figure.

In this subtle and complex way, Meredith is establishing a communion of mind, heart and soul between Clara and Vernon of which she is slower to become aware than Vernon, entangled as she is in the convolutions of Willoughby's courtship, and puzzled as she is by Vernon's calm rationality, which seems to her, as her crisis deepens, to be lacking in empathy. In Chapter 5, the authorial voice, which follows some lines of close observation and attention to her by Vernon, reinforces his perception of her appearance with the comment that Clara's beauty was 'a possession in which he did not consider her so very conspicuous', and '[t]he eulogies of [it] . . . irritated him in consequence' (v, 47). His contrariness seems perverse amongst the general judgement, but again, it reveals Meredith's intention to attribute to him an appreciation of what is genuine and of lasting value that Clara will in time recognize as matching hers. Vernon's 'fancy' of the Mountain Echo, which the narrative voice suggests 'must have sprung from [Clara's] prompt and most musical responsiveness' (v, 47), recalls, amongst other references, the poem by Wordsworth on the subject—surely known to Meredith, and

thus to the literary Vernon—in which the outward Echo is given an internal, or spiritual, analogue. Like the ‘shouting Cuckoo’ in the poem, to which the Echo gives ‘Sound for Sound’,

we have
Answers, and we know not whence;
Echoes from beyond the grave,
Recognised intelligence[.]

Such within ourselves we hear
Oft-times, ours though sent from far;
Listen, ponder, hold them dear;
For of God—of God they are! (Curtis 1983: 255-56)⁷

Vernon’s own responsiveness, then (we may infer), is to what he can discern of the inner Clara as much as the outer; and the former being of such quality, no wonder he somewhat discounts the latter.

On the other hand, Willoughby’s attention, since childhood, has been focused on what is polished, exterior, and artificial (like his dancing), especially if it reflects himself. Behind the front that he presents to Clara is no true wish for compatibility, no true focus on the young woman for her own sake. Rather she must exist, like his horse, to be possessed and used for self-aggrandisement. Willoughby is looking to Clara to serve, like Laetitia, as a mirror, or echo, of himself—not as Echo, the elusive force of nature inviting search and exploration of a mystery, but a mundane worshipper whose self will be meaningful only as much as she strikingly draws attention to her lord. Unlike Vernon, Willoughby is incapable of being anything more than a Narcissus. Just as in that legend the beautiful boy fell in love with his own image reflected in water, so Meredith is depicting Willoughby’s fixation on female beauty as, in effect, a fixation on himself. The image, as in porcelain, so in still water, must be static, permanent, incessantly available for contemplation. Willoughby has the egoist’s ‘ideal of a waxwork sex’ (xxxiv, 420), and as with her affinity with a summer’s day, so in her affinity with Crossjay (another force of nature in his countryside roamings, enthusiasm for bird’s-nesting, running, swimming, eating wild fruit and so on), Willoughby is up against fundamental elements in Clara’s character that are beyond his ‘civilized’ understanding, and thus a threat.

She certainly had at times the look of the nymph that has gazed too long on the faun, and has unwittingly copied his lurking lip and long sliding eye. Her play with young Crossjay resembled a return of the lady to the cat; she flung herself into it as if her real vitality had been in suspense till she saw the boy. Sir Willoughby by no means disapproved of a physical liveliness that promised him health in his mate; but he began to feel in their conversations that she did not sufficiently think of making herself a nest for him. Steely points were opposed to him when he, figuratively, bared his bosom to be taken to the softest and fairest. (x, 104-05)

It is in the light of all this that we can see the limitations of Mrs Mountstuart’s ‘porcelain’ image, and of another two paragraphs later, where Meredith comments that ‘[t]o flatter Sir Willoughby, it was the fashion to exalt [Clara] as one of the types of beauty: the one providentially selected to set off his masculine type. She was compared to those delicate flowers, the ladies of the Court of China, on rice-paper’ (v, 48). Fragile and delicately moulded Clara certainly seems, with a graceful deportment that befits her youth and status as a guest in a grand, unfamiliar environment; but there is nothing artificial about her, in manner or appearance; and as the indented passage above is hinting, she has hidden

strengths that will increasingly emerge the more Willoughby puts her to the test. The porcelain and rice-paper images are elements in the *chinoiserie* motif that Meredith inserts into his text as both a positive and negative in the associations developing around Clara. In so far as they suggest a vulnerable object, easily destroyed, they indicate a misreading of Clara's character by those with imperfect knowledge of her. In this they look forward to further porcelain episodes involving two more figures in the narrative who know less about Clara than they like to believe, namely, Horace De Craye and Lady Busshe. With the shattering of De Craye's porcelain vase (his wedding-present) in the coach accident just outside Patterne, and the nullifying of Lady Busshe's gift, also porcelain, by the turn of events against Willoughby, we have further confirmation of the inadequacy of the symbolism the material is being made, by interested parties, to carry: for the young lady is going to disappoint the expectations of nearly all the principal figures around her. For Willoughby in particular, the irony is excruciating. This man so averse to change, with so much ego invested in the promise for himself and his 'line' in Clara's health, wealth and beauty, has committed himself, unlike Vernon, to everything about her which is perishable, like De Craye's vase. Like Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, Willoughby suffers from 'the hubristic male aspiration to transcend body, time and process' (Sagar 2005: 118) as far as possessing a young woman is concerned, and his acolytes follow his lead in wishful thinking—except for the shrewd Mrs Mountstuart. 'Why rogue?' Willoughby enquires of Mrs Mountstuart, in his dread of flightiness in Clara that will remind him of Constantia's; but Mrs Mountstuart will only say, bafflingly, "Porcelain explains it," and ". . . prize the porcelain and play with the rogue" (v, 49), the latter of which injunctions we may understand as 'cherish her delicate beauty, but mould the rogue to your own pattern'. But neither he nor Mrs Mountstuart understand that this is precisely what he is unable to do. Since his 'original conclusion' had been that Clara 'was essentially feminine', which the narrative voice (echoing his thought) defines as 'a parasite and a chalice' (v, 50)—thus, with beautiful economy, placing Willoughby the patriarch as, in essence, both contemptuous of and greedy for the young woman, indeed any young woman—he shrugs off what Mrs Mountstuart seems to intend as a warning; but as Meredith notes, '[I]ike all rapid phrasers, Mrs Mountstuart detested the analysis of her sentence. It had an outline in vagueness, and was flung out to be apprehended, not dissected' (v, 51). Perhaps she knows that her logic cannot bear very much dissection. There is a strain of mischief in Mrs Mountstuart: her interlocutors must make what they can of her flung-out phrases, while she sails on to her next provocation.

What, more precisely, is the warning? Ironically, it is embodied in the blue Willow Pattern plate which is both an emblem of the patriarch's name, and a guide, if only he would realize it, to the possible fate in store for him. (Mrs Mountstuart is not credited with psychic powers, but with her avid interest in the possibility of another jilting for Willoughby, she may well have taken a gossipmonger's pleasure in referring him to the pattern.) As Robert D. Mayo explains, 'Willoughby Patterne' suggests

[t]he blue Willow Pattern, named for the willow tree which figures in its center . . . undoubtedly the most popular single design ever to be employed on English earthenware. The pattern originated about 1780 at the Caughley porcelain factory in Shropshire, where it was adapted from conventional forms on Chinese porcelain. . . . (1942b: 71)

'In Meredith's day, as in our own, Willow-ware was undoubtedly the best known variety of English china,' Mayo adds (71), and the legend inscribed on it ('probably not oriental in origin' [72]) was familiar through published accounts in issues of *Bentley's Miscellany* and *The Family Friend* in 1838 and 1849 respectively, and two stage productions in London. The first, in December 1851, was entitled *The Mandarin's Daughter; or, The Willow Pattern Plate*; the second, *A Tale of Old China*, was a production with music, and ran from 19 April to 3 July 1875, four years before *The Egoist* was published. A comic operetta, *The Willow Pattern*, was performed at the Savoy Theatre on 14 November 1901. Meredith could therefore count on his readers to make the connections he intended between the name and the artefact.

According to the legend, the daughter of a prosperous mandarin refuses to marry the rich aristocrat he has chosen for her, because she has lost her heart to her father's secretary, a virtuous man, but with no money, with whom she has exchanged lovers' vows under the blossoming trees depicted on the plate. Her father punishes her with imprisonment in his garden pavilion, with the order to marry as he wishes when the peach tree is in blossom. But the secretary releases her, and they escape, pursued by the mandarin ('in some versions by . . . the rejected suitor' [Mayo 1942b: 73]), over the Willow Bridge. They have other adventures, but in the end the gods reward them for their love by turning them into birds.

The parallels and variations between the legend and the situation at Patterne Hall are obvious—too obvious, Mayo believes: the porcelain figure 'is pursued beyond mere recapitulation.'

Now Clara is 'prettily moulded in a delicate substance'; later she is one of those 'delicate vessels' that 'ring sweetly to a finger nail'; and, after her struggle for freedom, she looks 'like a bit of china that wants dusting'—until as we approach the end of the story we feel, like Clara, that we have been 'overdone with porcelain' and are constrained to exclaim with Mrs Mountstuart 'Porcelain again!' and 'Toujours le porcelaine!' (1942b: 75)

Mayo concludes that although the porcelain conceit plays a part in the novel's design, Meredith, 'who, . . . like Mrs Mountstuart, was "mad for cleverness"' (1942b: 78), was displaying his virtuosity for the sake of it.⁸ In another article in the same year he complains that Meredith 'has been so oblique that we shall never be sure what he meant' (1942a: 362); but he offers the interesting suggestion that the commonplace quality of porcelain may be intended as a reflection on Willoughby; he himself was a mere ornament, 'everyday stuff' (1942a: 362). This notion would converge with the story Robert Louis Stevenson recounts in his article 'Books Which Have Influenced Me', in the *British Weekly* of 13 May 1887. 'A young friend of Mr Meredith's . . . came to him in an agony. "This is too bad of you," he cried. "Willoughby is me!" "No, my dear fellow," said the author; "he is all of us"' (Williams 1971: 521).

Perhaps the convergence most worth noticing, because of its apparent importance to Meredith's idea of the usefulness of the legend in his narrative, is the matter of trees, in particular the wild cherry. Meredith begins alerting us to its significance early in Chapter 9, when he has young Crossjay arriving on the lawn '[a]n hour before the time for lessons . . . with a big bunch of wild flowers' (ix, 89) for Clara. When she examines them, she realizes that the beautiful arrangement must have been the work

of Laetitia Dale; ‘and rising out of the blue was a branch bearing thick white blossom, so thick, and of so pure a whiteness, that Miss Middleton, while praising Crossjay for soliciting the aid of Miss Dale, was at a loss to name the tree’. Her father observes that ‘[i]t is a gardener’s improvement on the Vestal of the forest, the wild cherry. . . . Call this the Vestal of civilization, then . . .’; to which Willoughby replies, in the mocking tone he reserves for comment on his cousin, ‘It is Vernon’s Holy Tree the young rascal has been despoiling’ (ix, 89). And Clara is told that ‘this double-blossom wild cherry-tree was worshipped by Mr. Whitford’ (ix, 90).

Having established Vernon’s attitude, Meredith is able to point up a damning contrast with Willoughby’s, which is purely self-referential: the use, for him, of the blossom is to mark the difference, in his eyes, between Clara’s complexion and Laetitia’s. Placed side by side under the blossom, he says—at least ‘within a dozen yards of it’—Laetitia’s would become ‘old lace’. As Dr Middleton exclaims, ‘that is investing the hamadryad with novel and terrible functions’ (ix, 90). It is indeed, in that Meredith’s intention is to link both Clara and Vernon with the wild double-cherry, with Clara the mortal representation of the tree nymph, associated in particular with the lovely blossom. She is the ‘Vestal of civilization’, and Vernon (though she is not yet aware of it) is her worshipper. These pages prepare us for Chapters 11 and 12, ‘The Double-Blossom Wild Cherry-Tree’ and ‘Miss Middleton and Mr. Vernon Whitford’, in which Meredith’s lyrical prose, and an extended, discreetly flirtatious conversation foreshadows the union of these figures. Led by Crossjay, Clara comes across Vernon, fallen asleep, book in hand, under the boughs of what Willoughby had referred to as his ‘Holy Tree’. That sardonic dismissal, together with the terms of Meredith’s description, serve emphatically to exclude the Egoist from this encounter. Trying to glimpse the page Vernon has been reading, Clara

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. From deep to deeper heavens 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. Her reflection was: ‘He must be good who loves to lie and sleep beneath the branches of this tree!’ (xi, 134-35)

Clara’s relationship here with Vernon is more than one of physical proximity. She is beginning to understand that she is falling in love with him. The imagery itself, with its insistence (as in the passage from Chapter 18) on whiteness, or ‘a flush of white’, refers us to her youth and purity, indeed (together with the delicacy and fragrance of the blossom) to her very skin. It represents life, as opposed to the death-principle embodied in Willoughby—if not physical death, then the death of joy, hope, peace of mind, and worst of all, the ability to love. In Chapter 24 Clara thinks of her room as a ‘sanctuary’, a ‘pure white room so homely to her maidenly feelings, [which] whispered peace’; but (her thoughts continue) ‘[i]f she stayed in this house her chamber would no longer be a sanctuary. Dolorous bondage! Insolent death is not worse. Death’s worm we cannot keep away, but when he has us we are numb to dishonour, happily senseless’ (xxiv, 286). When she awakes she is strengthened and reassured by hearing Crossjay’s voice, so often her accompaniment in the natural world he loves, as here: “‘I can love still, for I love him,’” she said, as she luxuriated in young Crossjay’s boy’s voice,

again envying him his bath in the lake waters, which seemed to her to have the power to wash away grief and chains' (xxiv, 286). As so often in Meredith, the water of the sea, or a lake, or a pool, has power to refresh the spirit as well as the body, and it is the power Clara comes slowly to realize Vernon has. The reference to 'the higher Alpine snows, in noon-sunlight', in the passage above from Chapter 11, is emblematic of the life- and freedom-affirming principle he, like Crossjay, represents, and a foreshadowing of his immediate destination, with Clara, when the novel ends.

Meredith's presentation of Vernon is not unproblematic, in that, as Judith Wilt puts it, '[t]here is an astonishing dryness in [him] for most of the book' (1975: 115). Leslie Stephen, after whom Vernon is drawn, is described by Lionel Stevenson as having been '[m]elancholy in temperament, shy and silent in manner . . . lean, red-bearded . . . the antithesis of handsome, talkative Meredith' (1954: 187), which fits, except for the beard, the portrayal of Vernon. The gradual rapprochement between Vernon and Clara is marked for some time by his disconcertingly clear-sighted refusal to raise her hopes as to her predicament any more than his reason and conscience will allow. His position as Willoughby's cousin and secretary, and his cautious, scholarly nature, prevent him from too openly encouraging her disaffection. She confesses it to him, in one of Meredith's famous hidden scenes (between Chapter 13, 'The First Effort after Freedom', and 15, 'The Petition for a Release'), but she finds it difficult to be sure of his sympathy (which increases her sense of isolation) until her abortive attempt, in foul weather, to catch a train to London, from which, with the aid of some hot brandy and water, he tactfully rescues her. The narrative, in fact, tells us more about him than Clara knows, as when he follows her vigorously to the station, worrying intensely about her predicament:

His principal hope was that Clara would have missed her way. Another pelting of rain agitated him on her behalf. Might she not as well be suffered to go?—and sit three hours and more in a railway-carriage with wet feet!

He clasped the visionary little feet to warm them on his breast.—But Willoughby's obstinate fatuity deserved the blow!—But neither she nor her father deserved the scandal. But she was desperate. Could reasoning touch her? If not, what would? He knew of nothing. Yesterday he had spoken strongly to Willoughby, to plead with him to favour her departure and give her leisure to sound her mind, and he had left his cousin, convinced that Clara's best measure was flight: a man so cunning in a pretended obtuseness backed by senseless pride, and in petty tricks that sprang of a grovelling tyranny, could only be taught by facts. (xxvi, 317)

Judith Wilt comments that 'Meredith obviously knows what he is doing in creating [Vernon] so, opposing his bleak and tearless profile to the devouring smile of Willoughby and the gleaming teeth of De Craye, the hunter-chevalier' (1975: 155-56). His formidable exterior in fact belies the romantic within, to which the narrative voice, modulating into Vernon's own, gives access. Having put his pupil Crossjay to bed, we are told, Vernon

was lonely, bereft of the bard. . . . Books he could not read; thoughts were disturbing. A seat in the library and a stupid stare helped to pass the hours, and but for the spot of sadness moving meditation in spite of his effort to stun himself, he would have borne a happy resemblance to an idiot in the sun. He had verily no command of his reason. She was too beautiful! Whatever she did was best. That was the refrain of the fountain-song in him; the burden being her whims, variations, inconsistencies, wiles; her tremblings between good and naughty, that might be stamped to noble or to terrible; her sincerity, her duplicity, her courage, cowardice, possibilities for heroism and for treachery. By dint of dwelling on the theme, he magnified the young lady to extraordinary stature. And he had sense enough to own that her character was yet liquid in the mould, and that she was a creature of only naturally youthful wildness provoked to freakishness by the ordeal of a situation shrewd as any

that can happen to her sex in civilized life. But he was compelled to think of her extravagantly, and he leaned a little to the discrediting of her, because her actual image unmanned him and was unbearable: and to say at the end of it ‘She is too beautiful! whatever she does is best,’ smoothed away the wrong he did her. Had it been in his power he would have thought of her in the abstract—the stage contiguous to that which he adopted: but the attempt was luckless; the Stagyrite would have failed in it. What philosopher could have set down that face of sun and breeze and nymph in shadow as a point in a problem? (xxx, 365-66)

At least six important conclusions may be drawn from this resplendent encomium: (1) Its heartfelt eloquence and power ring of Meredith’s own commitment to the ideal of womanhood Clara embodies; (2) there is nothing in the passage that is not consistent with what we have learnt or sensed about Clara to this point—the judgement Meredith lends to Vernon is both brilliantly perceptive in its weighing of her strengths and weaknesses, and incontrovertible by the reader; (3) one element in that judgement again confirms the realistic view of Clara that ‘a rogue in porcelain’ distorts: ‘her character was yet liquid in the mould’; (4) that Vernon should be so capable an analyst of character is consistent with what Clara has concluded of him: her own favourable assessment of him, in so far as she is capable of penetrating his reserve, is an accurate one; (5) the increasing esteem and affection she has for him must be based on this assessment: it matters less and less to her, as she gets to know him, that he lacks the social graces of a Willoughby or De Craye. What she values, obviously, is integrity; (6) Vernon’s ‘dryness’ is highly deceptive. He is passionately romantic, but has not yet had the opportunity to show it (except that Crossjay, who enjoys talking about Clara in the classroom, seems to suspect his tutor’s condition).

We must therefore infer, not only that ‘Meredith knows what he is doing’ in creating Vernon, but that as in life, so in this novel, it is not required of a man to dazzle with his brilliance and sophistication in order to win a good woman’s love. Meredith is always interested in what is true to life, not in making a character arresting for the sake of it. What is wanted, in this case, he seems to be saying, is virtue and intelligence: that is what is going to get Clara out of her predicament. It is difficult to make a good man interesting as a character in fiction: the devil has the best tunes, as in *Paradise Lost*. But the passage goes some way to compensating for Vernon’s rather colourless persona.

The Egoist being a comedy, and Meredith, above almost all other English novelists, a trader in, as he writes, ‘the laughter of the mind’ (1956: 51), that throws the light of critical intelligence on its subject for the sake of truth, we know before we begin reading that Sir Willoughby Patterne is destined for a humiliating experience. In terms of the novel’s structure it is apparent as early as Chapter 5, in the early days of courtship at Upton Park, that Willoughby will lose Clara in the end, and that Vernon will be the beneficiary. The egoism expressed in sentences such as the following cannot prevail against ‘reason, common sense, rightness, and justice’ (1956: 17), which it is the business of high comedy—and was always Meredith’s endeavour—to vindicate:

There was nothing of rogue in himself, so there could be nothing of it in his bride. Elfishness, tricksiness, freakishness, were antipathetic to his nature; and he argued that it was impossible he should have chosen for his complement a person deserving the title. It would not have been sanctioned by his guardian genius. (v, 50)

The passage is weighted with both immediate and proleptic irony. Willoughby's ineffable self-assurance (until his egoistic worldview begins to crumble), the sheer hubris of his assumption that circumstances cannot possibly be other than what he desires them to be, smack of radical immaturity, a child's whistling in the dark. They signify a man who has been unable to turn his limited experience of the world into a mature view of things as they really are. This being so, he faces a future of increasing disillusionment, which in the end will justify the mock epitaph that closes the 'Prelude': 'Through very love of self himself he slew' (6). Perhaps it was the very inevitability of Willoughby's nemesis that made Meredith so discontented in working his way towards it. On 30 May 1879, about three months after he had handed his manuscript in to Kegan Paul, he wrote to G. W. Foote that he had 'finished a three-volume work rapidly, and as it comes mainly from the head and has nothing to kindle imagination, I thirsted to be rid of it soon after conception, and it became a struggle in which health suffered, and my unfailing specific of hard exercise was long in restoring me' (Cline 1970: 572). Meredith had confessed to Robert Louis Stevenson six weeks earlier that he doubted 'if those who care for my work will take to it at all. And for this reason, after doing my best with it, I am in no hurry to see it appear. It is a Comedy, with only half of me in it, unlikely, therefore, to take either the public or my friends' (Cline 1970: 569). Certainly he had mostly denied himself his usual philosophical excursions. *The Egoist* unfolds more like a well-knit play than any of his other novels: it is heavily dependent on revelation of character through dialogue, and it conforms to the unity of place, if not entirely of time. In its relative economy and organic structure it is artistically his most satisfying novel.⁹ But it might also have been Meredith's very success in portraying the Egoist that was the source of his misgivings. The character of Sir Willoughby Patterne is remarkable at two extremes: he is both superbly comic and a monster, the more comic in being totally unaware of it, and the more monstrous in being totally uncompromising, until he realizes that without Laetitia he will be beyond redemption as the pride of his county—'jilted' (as the gossipy trio would gleefully have it) not just twice, but three times. However, the portrayal in these terms is so fully realized that Meredith has created for him a world of his own, not simply in Patterne Hall and its appurtenancies, but as an imaginative phenomenon. Just as Willoughby is lost in a fantasy of feudalism, he is lost, from the narrative point of view, in a world beyond the 'real' world his fellow-protagonists inhabit. The problem for Constantia, Clara and Laetitia is that without properly understanding their situation, their encounter is that of 'real' people with an intellectual construct, a caricature, their creator's ultimate experiment in egoism. Such a creature, an alien, so to speak, from the depths of Meredith's subconscious (and possibly the grotesque issue of an overwhelming sense of guilt over his treatment of Mary Ellen Nicolls), cannot be negotiated with in realistically reasonable terms. Only towards the end, when Willoughby feels his egoistic core, his very sense of all that is most valuable in himself, to be more threatened than it has ever been, does he turn to Laetitia, in 'the great midnight scene', as E. M. Forster calls it (1962: 99), in Chapter 40. The three chapters, 39 ('In the Heart of the Egoist'), 40 ('Midnight: Sir Willoughby and Laetitia: with Young Crossjay under a Coverlet'), and 41 ('The Rev. Dr. Middleton, Clara, and Sir Willoughby') record his egoistic climacteric, when the 'fountain-head'

of egoism, 'primeval man' (xxxix, 476), whose sole concern is his own survival, emerges in this 'civilized' man and setting to confront, in all his hypocritical, self-seeking force, first Laetitia, and then Clara. Ironies crowd on Willoughby like vultures as his fortunes decline. Not only is Laetitia proof, at this time, against his passionate, desperate proposal, and his accustomed cry to the intended of 'We two against the world! we are one' (xl, 485). She is no longer the young woman who 'adored him, by decree of Venus' (xxix, 355). The late-returning Crossjay, finding his own room locked, has taken refuge in the drawing-room, and is under cover on an ottoman, listening as Willoughby immolates himself in vain. And incredibly (as he thinks), Willoughby is twice thwarted: for Clara (to whom he immediately turns, repenting, with the daylight, of his 'madness', his 'ridiculously generous proposal' [xli, 496] to Laetitia, and his resolve to bestow Clara on Vernon) rejects him also, in spite of what she feels is her father's distressingly emphatic support of his suit. Although, to spare her father's feelings, she cannot frankly express her objections to marriage with Willoughby, she has understood them with increasing clarity. In the early days at Patterne Hall, Willoughby had himself unwittingly identified his essential malady in warning her to '[b]eware of marrying an Egoist,' and 'this word was her medical herb, her illuminating lamp, the key of him . . . the advocate pleading in apology' [x, 115] for her intense desire to escape. And now, when he is pressing her with more intensity than ever for her hand, he seems still the 'immoveable stone-man', the 'petrification of egoism' (x, 116), who will never let her go.

But Clara's instincts have always served her well. In the earlier time she had thought 'how must a man despise women, who can expose himself as he does to me!' (x, 111). Now the narrative voice supplies an expansion of this thought, and it is part of what Clara cannot articulate to her father:

[H]owever it may have been in the case of Miss Durham, in that of Miss Middleton it is almost certain she caught her glimpse of his interior from sheer fatigue in hearing him discourse of it. What he revealed was not the cause of her sickness: women can bear revelations—they are exciting: but the monotonousness. He slew imagination. There is no direr disaster in love than the death of imagination. He dragged her through the labyrinths of his penetralia, in his hungry coveting to be loved more and still more, more still, until imagination gave up the ghost, and he talked to her plain hearing like a monster. It must have been that; for the spell of the primitive upon women is masterful up to the time of contact. (xxxix, 477)

The tone of controlled anguish here is given to Clara's reflections, but it is in Meredith's voice, and, like *Modern Love*, carries the authenticity of personal experience. It is passages such as this which induce the thought, touched on above, that one way of looking at *The Egoist* is to see it as an extended exercise in self-mockery, of expiation for the author's sins of commission and omission during his marriage to Mary Ellen Nicolls. As he said, '[Willoughby] is all of us' (see 87 above)—that is, all men: we are all, in our relationship with women, immoveable stone-men, all slayers of imagination, unless (Meredith would say) redeemed by the Comic Spirit, our critical intelligence. It might be that the prolonged pain of self-revelation, mediated through his portrayal of Sir Willoughby, was yet another reason for his alienation from the writing of it.

In the end, of course, Willoughby is thrown a social lifeline, though hardly, on the thrower's part, an emotional one. In return for security for herself and her father, Laetitia will give Willoughby, not the uncritical devotion she has learnt that he does not deserve, but her hand in marriage and a measure

of respect, which may or may not ripen into love beyond the novel's end, depending on his behaviour. To the extent that he reveals to her his vulnerability, he moves out of caricature and into realism.

The actual world, far from the fantasy too long endured, awaits the other survivors. De Craye, that charming predator, has been requisitioned for his witty company by Mrs Mountstuart. For Clara and Vernon there are the Alps, and for Crossjay the sea, both potent symbols for Meredith of physical and spiritual refreshment and renewal, both as yet beyond contamination by human agency. His next major heroine, Diana of the Crossways, will revel in both.

CHAPTER FOUR

Diana of the Crossways

Diana of the Crossways was one of a number of novels published in the Victorian century's last two decades that reflected their authors' awareness of the 'Woman Question', in particular the advent in society of feminists of varying degrees of militancy who were becoming known as the 'New Women'. The phrase seems to have come into vogue as a capitalized version of a by then familiar title only in the early 1890s; but there were other names for her in the publications of the time, such as 'Novissima', the 'Odd Woman', the 'Wild Woman', and the 'Superfluous (or Redundant) Woman'. Those who deplored her revolt against the sacrosanct conventions of marriage and motherhood, class, sex and gender, her transformation from 'a relative creature into a woman of independent means' (Ardis 1990: 1), did not scruple to write with sometimes almost apocalyptic fervour as to the danger she represented for society. An anonymous article, 'The Apple and the Ego of Woman', which appeared in an 1889 issue of the *Westminster Review*, connected the New Woman with 'the stirrings and rumblings now perceivable in the social and industrial world, the "Bitter Cries" of the disinherited classes, the "Social Wreckage" which is becoming able to make itself unpleasantly prominent, the "Problems of Great Cities", the spread of Socialism and Nihilism' (377). Woman's ego, it would seem, is a powerfully destructive force which needs to be kept under control. Once offered the apple of emancipation it will rise like a liberated genie, 'and the acrid smoke of its ascent may disintegrate many precious superorganic structures' (382). Clearly, this is a critic with a very powerful emotional investment in the cultural status quo.

In writing *Diana of the Crossways*, Meredith took a more moderate position. (In any case, his novel was not written as a feminist manifesto.) He wanted, in the first place, to make his heroine a beautiful woman 'with brains' (see below), and thus different, in his view, from the real woman, Caroline Norton, on whom she was partially modelled. Meredith had met Caroline (who 'was not greatly impressed by the still gauche young man' [Stevenson 1954: 255]), but had decided that 'though witty and charming, she had a shallow mind' (Jones 1999: 159). Nor would he encumber his fictional heroine with children, and the appalling marital and legal complications they had led to for poor Caroline. Diana Warwick would have to endure, for a while, a disastrous marriage, but her subsequent career as a single woman would be free of the public legal battles for custody of children and financial security in which Caroline was involved. Meredith's focus is on Diana's private life, and we see the public notoriety that follows her separation from her husband in its personal effects on her and her friends. Her political involvement, too, although inspired by strong feminist convictions, is conducted primarily through her relationships with the politicians she befriends (Lord Dannisburgh and Percy Dacier), not as a public crusade marked by the writing of pamphlets for the purpose of initiating legislation and following it through.

The egoism that Clara Middleton ruefully claims for herself in her spasms of remorse about her rebelliousness is much more justly to be attributed to Diana, who is proud of her ability as a political thinker and strategist in her role as Princess Egeria, first to Lord Dannisburgh, then to Percy Dacier—‘forgetting,’ comments Gillian Beer, ‘that Egeria was not only the adviser but the mistress of Numa’ (1970: 145). Some feminist critics of the time, such as Adeline Sargeant, were inclined to question the authenticity of Diana’s feminism, and to decry any suggestion in the novel (as they construed it) that women were wholly dependent on men for relief from their oppression, and were bent only on securing a kind of licensed equality by grace and favour. Meredith’s description of Diana’s role in her reformist partnership with her friend Emma suggests some inadequacy in Sargeant’s reading of her:

Her fine ardour and resonance, and more than the convincing ring of her voice, the girl’s impassioned rapidity in rushing through any perceptible avenue of the labyrinth, or beating down obstacles to form one, and coming swiftly to *some* solution, constituted her the chief of the pair of democratic rebels in questions that clamoured for instant solution. (iv, 46-47)

In any case, as Beer notes, ‘Meredith is always interested by the individual’s will towards *freedom* rather than by responsibility within society. And the effects of society upon the individual are seen in terms of “social” prejudice, rather than in broader economic or sociological terms.’ Diana’s ‘ardour and resonance’ are manifested in her own, not the public, ‘activist’ domain. ‘Both Diana and Victor Radnor are in a sense *entrepreneurs*: she a political hostess and novelist, he a manipulator of money in the City’ (1970: 147).

The portrait of Diana that Meredith purports, in the opening chapter, to filter through various diarists and journal writers of her acquaintance is distilled, according to Jane Marcus, from his knowledge of several women besides Caroline Norton. They included ‘the learned recluse, Mrs Wood, who paid Meredith to read to her; her niece Kitty O’Shea, Parnell’s mistress; Meredith’s first wife . . . and Janet Duff Gordon’ (1976: 169). In addition to their personal acquaintance, an anonymous reviewer in the *Westminster Review* of July 1864 had seen a connection between Caroline’s novel *Lost and Saved* (1863) and *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, inasmuch as the reviewer judged both novels worthy of praise for breaching ‘the prudish conventionalities of our present English style.’

It certainly put winds into the sails of the self-styled champion of free women to be linked with a famous woman who had actually accomplished radical political goals; he was now a serious novelist like her. And it did his ego no harm (after the disastrous failure of his first marriage) to be mentioned in the same breath with a lady so sexually attractive, charming, and witty. (Marcus 1976: 169)

Certain phrases in the first chapter reveal an admixture of Meredith himself in his characterization of Diana. He, too, as we notice in other opening chapters (see, in particular, *One of Our Conquerors*), is a ‘make[r] of phrases, [with a] desire to prune, compress, overcharge’; and until his late fifties he also wrote ‘under a sharp necessity for payment’ (i, 11). He, too, was a man committed to truth, honourable dealing with his fellow creatures (which is why his treatment of Mary Ellen Nicolls preyed on him so persistently), and ‘the celestial refreshment of having a pure decency in the place of sham; real flesh; a soul born active, wind-beaten, but ascending’ (i, 16). What he, a man of brains, wanted in fiction, above all, was ‘brainstuff. . . . Matter that is not nourishing to brains can help to constitute nothing but the bodies which are pitched on rubbish heaps’ (i, 17). As he wrote to Mrs Leslie Stephen on 24 March

1884, Diana, ‘the terrible woman afflicting me,’ is ‘a positive heroine with brains, with real blood, and demanding utterance of the former, tender direction of the latter’ (Cline 1970: 2. 732). He wrote to Robert Louis Stevenson that day on the same subject, saying he ‘[had] had to endow [Diana] with brains and make them evidence to the discerning’ (Cline 1970: 2. 731). It was a vital part of Meredith’s project that Diana should be convincing as a woman who contradicted the male stereotype of female desirability, which was ‘a still woman, who can make a constant society of her pins and needles.’ Amongst the pronouncements attributed by the diarists to Diana is her recognition that most women, even if the walls of their marital prison were beaten down, ‘would yearn in shivering affright for the old prison-nest’ (i, 13), and that is what men would expect of them. Diana, on the other hand, sees herself as part of ‘a valiant few [forming] a vanguard’ (i, 14) of female combatants. And confirming what Meredith wrote in the letters just mentioned, he says, as her narrator, that ‘we are informed’ (in the diaries) of her conviction ‘that the beginning of a motive life with women must be in the head, equally with men’¹ (i, 14).

Many years later (9 November 1906), Meredith commented to a Dr H. R. D. Anders that ‘[i]n *Diana of the Crossways* my critics own that a breathing woman is produced, and I felt that she was in me as I wrote’ (Cline 1970: 3. 1578). In that letter to Mrs Leslie Stephen of 24 March 1884 he had written of the Diana-writing process as a ‘delivery’. The metaphor of child-bearing (Jane Marcus says that Meredith wrote to Julia Stephen ‘as worried mother to worried mother’ [1988: 178]) in relation to artistic production

has been part of our culture since the Greeks, but few artists have been so openly sisterly about their ‘pregnancies’ with actual women. As Meredith grew more aware of how his creative processes mimicked nature, his respect for women deepened. There is some measure of experience behind his portrait of Diana’s ‘involuntary twitch’ at the thought of motherhood, which concludes the novel on a realistic note. The wedding-bells of Diana’s marriage to Redworth signal not a happy ending but the beginning of physical sexual life and the dangers of childbirth. (Marcus 1976: 178-79)

Of course, Meredith had seen two wives through the agonies of childbirth, as the literal part of his experience alluded to above; but his own creative process was apparently exhausting enough. On 23 August 1884 he wrote, after various social interruptions to his work, to Mrs Leslie Stephen that

[m]y *Diana* still holds me; only by the last chapter; but the coupling of such a woman and her man is a delicate business. She has no puppet-pliance. The truth being that she is a mother of Experience, and gives that dreadful baby suck to brains. I have therefore a feeble hold of her; none of the novelist’s winding-up arts avail; it is she who leads me. (Cline 1970: 2. 743)

At last, on 10 October, he could tell Robert Louis Stevenson that ‘[m]y Diana is out of hand, leaving her mother rather inanimate’ (Cline 1970: 2. 747); and in the following year she caught the gathering wave of feminism (women had narrowly missed being given the vote in the 1884 general election), going through three editions.

Women had been delighted when they discovered how *The Egoist* punctured male complacency; and they decided that Diana Warwick, who retained all her feminine charms and yet consorted with men on their own ground, was the embodiment of their dreams. From that hour, Meredith was the chosen novelist of the ‘emancipated’ woman. (Stevenson 1954: 261)

As Caroline Norton had found in her terrible struggle to obtain justice and fair treatment from the monstrous George, ‘emancipation’ in the Victorian century could come at a very high price; in fact for all her legal triumphs poor Caroline was never free of the shadow Norton had cast over her life. He even died too late for her to have more than a few months of married happiness with her old friend of many years, the ‘kind, intelligent, cultivated’ (Chedzoy 1992: 256) Scottish landowner, Sir William Stirling-Maxwell, ten years her junior. She had said that a title would be necessary to restore her good name after the scandal of the court cases involving the Whig Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne. The chronically impecunious Norton had attempted extortion by having him arraigned in 1836 for ‘criminal conversation’ (the lawyers’ term for adultery) with Caroline. Now, at the age of sixty-nine, she had her title; but she had been too unwell, too immobile, to go to church, and the marriage took place at home. Three months later she was dead.

Meredith lets Diana off more lightly. Her legal battle with Augustus Warwick, which arises from his suspicions of her close friendship with Lord Dannisburgh, badly damages her name in society; but her struggle to free herself from him does not entail, as it did with Caroline, a prolonged and agonizing separation from three very young children. She succeeds in escaping, and living as an independent woman, though the sanctions that Warwick can bring to bear, in a society where, being married, she is legally a nonentity, are an ever-present danger until he dies.

Meredith is intent less on delineating correspondences between Diana and Caroline Norton, or evaluating Diana’s contribution to the feminist cause, than on exploring the emotional, psychological and intellectual resourcefulness of a young woman who wishes to survive on her own terms in a society dominated by predatory males—not all of them malign, but all capable of compromising her integrity. The novel is, to that extent, a *Bildungsroman*, tracing Diana’s progress through a variety of encounters with men as she attempts to navigate towards an understanding of her place in the early Victorian milieu, and in particular an understanding of herself. Her orphaned state is both a handicap and an advantage. On the one hand, she is deprived of the advice and protection of her parents. On the other, her vulnerability obliges her to be self-reliant, and to value real friendship when she finds it. Emma, Lady Dunstane (a kindlier portrait of Meredith’s Esher friend, Lady Duff Gordon, than Lady Jocelyn in *Evan Harrington*) she has known since childhood, and Emma’s country home, Copsley, is her place of refuge, until Sir Lukin compromises it by making advances to her during a walk. She has one other genuine friend, the only man in the novel who is more concerned with her welfare than with taking advantage of her weaknesses. It is Thomas Redworth, whose name signifies both his merits and the vigour with which he cultivates them. He has been a ‘weather-prophet’, says Sir Lukin in introducing him to Emma, and ‘generally safe for the cricketing days’ (ii, 24); in other words, he is a man of foresight and sound judgement. His enterprising spirit in the development of railways, and the reliability and good sense he brings to this and other activities, are notes struck about him from his first appearance in the narrative at the Irish Ball, as is his devotion to Diana. If she stands for Ireland, Redworth does for England, but being English on her mother’s side contributes to a compatibility she will for long only partially acknowledge. She has yet to understand, through bitter experience of men

in society, the inadequacies in her character that her ego has obscured. This deeper realization will take almost the rest of the narrative to come home to her. As it happens, much of the responsibility for nudging her towards more rational thinking and wiser courses, beginning with soldier heroes and the martial arts, will be taken on by Redworth, already deeply smitten, and concerned, in his practical, commonsensical way, to show her the limitations of her idealism. Realizing, as he assists her at the dinner-table during the Ball, that '[s]he had a woman's inveterate admiration of the profession of arms', he tries to persuade her that war is not the 'finest subject for poets', nor does it 'bring out the noblest traits in human character' (iii, 35). But this romantic young woman, this 'beautiful virgin devoted to the sanguine coat', is far from ready, at barely nineteen, to assent to the idea of civilian heroes. Poor Redworth must for now admire her 'easy, peerless vivacity' without being able to divert it into more prudent channels, and play the part, as best he may, of 'disengaged and unaspiring philosophical bachelor' (iii, 36). As the narrative proceeds, it will be seen that he does so with consummate tact, in spite of his ongoing uncertainty not only about her feelings for him, but also as to his being entirely eligible for her.

In bringing Redworth and Diana together at the Ball, Meredith is careful to attribute to him aspects of mind and character that an intelligent young woman will learn to value, when she has ceased to be dazzled by the soldierly glamour and patriotic appeal of General Lord Larrian and his ilk. Far from being merely a philistine entrepreneur, Redworth discourses knowledgably of music, poetry, and the writers of letters, both English and French. He also does not let his intense admiration for Diana deter him from upholding the virtues of civilian life. 'Mr Redworth endeavoured to render practicable an opening in her mind to reason' (iii, 35); and that, in essence, is his function in the novel—to show her the way of common sense, of a rational course of action, at times of crisis; or, to put it another way, to show her the advantages of a thoughtful and selfless kind of love over the rash and self-indulgent kind. The last two sentences of Chapter 3 are one signal, amongst others, of Meredith's intentions for his heroine and her friend. Redworth's comment on the 'natural shamrock' (iii, 43) of the Irish crowd waiting outside to cheer their hero, Larrian, as opposed to the artificial variety present at the Ball (he is thinking, presumably, of the 'burlesque Irishman' [iii, 39] Sullivan Smith, who wanted to duel in defence, as he thought, of Diana's honour), is perfectly in accord with her feelings at that moment. 'She turned and sent one of her brilliant glances flying over him, in gratitude for a timely word well said. And she never forgot the remark, nor he the look' (iii, 43).

For Emma and Diana, back at Copsley, the emphasis is on leisurely exploration of intellectual resources, with a strong emphasis on social reform, and largely free of male intrusion. Sir Lukin spends much of his time living up to the stereotype of middle- and upper-class Victorian husbands by philandering in London, which Emma tolerates because she is fond of him in spite of it, and it leaves her free to enjoy Diana's exhilarating company. The intense, multifaceted communion between these two women makes their life at Copsley an example of enterprising, exploratory independence not normally available to women, of any class, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, or later.² Contentedly at peace within their rural fastness, the two women read many books, 'political,

philosophical, economical, romantic; and they mixed the diverse readings in thought, after the fashion of the ardently youthful' (iv, 46). In a phrase cited by Jane Marcus from an essay by William Taylor and Christopher Lasch, their intellectual friendship is a 'sisterhood of sensibility', like that of the American novelists Sarah Edgerton and Mrs Case: 'an ideal of pure friendship between women, based on a shared sensitivity':

What they sought in literature was not so much craft as companionship, and their most eloquent flights—expressed in the amorous language which was the characteristic style of feminine friendship in the nineteenth century—were addressed not to the muse but to each other. But the ideal of pure friendship, given the peculiar moral atmosphere of the period, grew quite logically out of a devotion to literature. With whom, after all, could a woman converse, assuming she was endowed with the refinement which qualified her in the first place to write of the beauties of the 'spiritual' life, except with other women so endowed? (Lasch 1973: 25; quoted in Marcus 1976: 173)

The passage, though, is not quite a perfect fit for Emma and Diana, inasmuch as their studies are more than literary. They have more than 'a pastoral vision in female terms of the free life dreamed of by the young heroes of nineteenth-century novels' (Marcus 1976: 173). Unusually for members of their class, they are both dedicated proponents of social justice, Diana in particular wanting immediate answers; but she is persuaded by Emma to take a more reasonable view, in that neither of them are in a position to change society. Emma is ailing, and will get worse, Diana hardly has enough money for her own needs, and both of them are precluded by ancient patriarchal fiat from strenuous public action in a political cause. The time of the suffragists, still more the suffragettes, has yet to come. Copsley is the wrong location, in any case, for effecting social reform. Delightfully situated as it is on a Surrey rise, with a view of seven counties, and the 'flaming horizons' to east and west—'[s]o much of the heavens and of earth is rarely granted to a dwelling' (iv, 45)—it is a symbol of old aristocratic custom and tradition, a 'cowslip-bedecked bastion of retreating British imperialism' (Gordon 1971: 247), enisled in the mechanisms of change signalled by the smoke of London's chimneys visible not far to the north, and the encroaching railways that Emma feels threatened by. The setting is static, feudal, like Patterne Hall's; 'any Victorian woman who stepped out of [such a] frame struck her contemporaries as a monster—sometimes a monster of goodness (like Florence Nightingale), more often the other kind' (Sage 1985: n.p.). Diana is shortly to find that even a platonic friendship with Dannisburgh not only compromises her marriage (a development that in itself she is far from regretting), but exposes her to endless gossip and speculation amongst the more malicious of her social circle, her husband's natural allies.

Diana's departure from Copsley in the spring on a round of country-house visits is the beginning of an extended rite of passage through the thickets of male desire, with 'The Crossways' as her first station, and appropriately named for the painful dilemmas that are in store for her. Her mythological counterpart, in the form of Hecate, was 'worshipped at crossroads (i.e. wherever one road meets another). In statues she was often represented in triple form (perhaps looking along three roads)' (Howatson and Chilvers 1993: 251). These are the roads, we might say, that bring her the men who, apart from Dannisburgh (not a potential lover, as Diana makes clear to Emma), are the most significant in her life, for good or ill: Augustus Warwick, Percy Dacier, and Thomas Redworth. (There is also

young Arthur Rhodes, but in spite of his aspirations, he too is not a potential lover.) And it is Warwick whom she meets at 'The Crossways', where his aunt and uncle are the tenants. Her judgment of him, in a letter to Emma, that he is a 'gentlemanly official', and seemed 'fond of her scenery' (iv, 50) is the only notice that the reader, and Emma, receive that he has the power to draw Diana back. Meredith, in fact, prepares for Diana's capitulation to him by making it highly improbable, thus increasing its impact. Another letter, as Diana continues her journey, speaks of 'the wearifulness of constantly wandering, like a leaf off the tree . . . of looking for a return of the dear winter days at Copsley. That was her station.' The shrewd Emma infers (rightly) 'that the unprotected beautiful girl had suffered a persecution, it might be an insult', a surmise confirmed by a later remark: 'How brutal men can be!' (iv, 51). At this point Meredith interpolates a paragraph of narratorial comment on the vicious habits (and not just then, but later) towards young and vulnerable women of the predatory, drunken English male in the provinces, full of *droit de seigneur*, with 'his famous ancestral plea of "the passion for his charmer"', and conviction that 'the beauty which inflamed the sons of men . . . was held to be in coy expectation of the violent effects upon their boiling blood' (iv, 51). The passage is a vivid encapsulation of the type, and is worth extended quotation as evidence of what 'the unprotected beautiful girl' had to put up with:

There were, one hears that there still are, remnants of the pristine male, who, if resisted in their suing, conclude that they are scorned, and it infuriates them: some also whose 'passion for the charmer' is an instinct to pull down the standard of the sex, by a bully imposition of sheer physical ascendancy, whenever they see it flying with an air of gallant independence: and some who dedicate their lives to a study of the arts of the Lord of Reptiles, until they have worked the crisis for a display of him in person. Assault or siege, they have achieved their triumphs; they have dominated a frailer system of nerves, and a young woman without father, or brother, or husband to defend her, is cryingly a weak one, therefore inviting to such an order of heroes. Lady Dunstane was quick-witted and had a talkative husband; she knew a little of the upper social world of her time. She was heartily glad to have Diana by her side again. (iv, 51-52)

It is a Diana reticent about her experiences, only once crying out (flushing 'swarthy crimson') 'Oh! I have discovered that I can be a tigress!', and 'Women have to fight' (iv, 52). She has obviously suffered some kind of trauma, but with '[a]ir, light, books, and her friend' she recovers. Other companions at Copsley include Tom Redworth and Lord Larrian, 'her declared admirer', whom 'she would not have had the heart to refuse' (iv, 53). But in a passage which moves from her direct voice to Meredith's, and then to her inner voice (but Emma's, also, shadows the whole unquoted part of the paragraph: it is a subtle confluence of voices), we are given a definitive statement of her view on marriage. As with her later comments in this strain, she is preoccupied with, in fact afraid of, male sexuality, which is felt, in the metaphors of physical disempowerment, as a gross imposition, a kind of incubus:

'[S]peaking generally, [she says to Emma] I cannot tell you what a foreign animal a husband would appear in my kingdom.' Her experience had awakened a sexual aversion, of some slight kind, enough to make her feminine pride stipulate for perfect independence, that she might have the calm out of which imagination spreads wing.³ Imagination had become her broader life, and on such an earth, under such skies, a husband who is not the fountain of it, certainly is a foreign animal: he is a discordant note. He contracts the ethereal world, deadens radiance. He is gross fact, a leash, a muzzle, harness, a hood, whatever is detestable to the free limbs and senses. (iv, 53)

The indictment is devastating, and foreshadows in its ‘sense of defilement turn[ing] to guilt’ (Murray 1987: 138) both the episode with Sir Lukin and the experience of marriage to Warwick. Although Diana marries Warwick under the intense emotional pressure of what she sees as an enforced departure from Copsley, her fear of losing her freedom is with her to the end. It is always the pressure of the immediate situation, and her immediate feelings, that will make her consider losing it, as when she nearly elopes to Europe with Dacier. She is the kind of woman, it seems, who remains single at heart (or at least insists on enough freedom to keep her from being miserable), whatever her legal status, and a husband will have to adjust to that.

Diana hopes for the best from Warwick, who is associated, by his presence there, with her intense nostalgia for the old family home. But the marriage is really a desperate expedient, a flight to imagined protection; it is the only way she can think of to erase, or at least ensure the non-repetition of, the shock she has received from Sir Lukin. It is also a kind of moral debt, contracted without Emma’s knowledge, which she believes she can pay only by marrying, and ceasing her solitary visits to Copsley (much to Emma’s puzzlement, though not the guilt-nipped, but only half-contrite, Sir Lukin’s). ‘This house, her heart’s home, was now a wreck to her: nay, worse, a hostile citadel’ (iv, 56). And the violence of her immediate reaction is a response not only to Sir Lukin’s amorousness, but her own vulnerability to it.

As Gillian Beer notes, ‘intelligence does not automatically bestow self-knowledge’ (1970: 142)—nor sound judgement of others, as both Diana and Emma have painful reason to realize. Diana’s marriage is a terrible mistake, and Emma, on being informed of it by her letter, concludes that Diana has let not only herself down badly, but her devoted friend. The friendship between Emma and Diana ‘is crucial throughout the book and invokes Diana’s only sustained feeling. . . . [Her] intellect and emotions are unified only in her relationship with Emma. In her relationships with men sexual stress fragments her responsiveness’ (Beer 1970: 150). So ardent are these two friends, so desirous of being frankly confessional about their feelings, except at periods of mutual misunderstanding, and reticence born of doubt as to what should be said and what not, that their relationships with males seem to be a derogation from the ideal of true friendship. One possible exception is Diana’s with Dannisburgh, though even with him the goat-legs are discernible; but she is too much in control, and too fond of him, to take offence, unlike her husband. A definite exception, as becomes increasingly clear to both women, is their involvement with Tom Redworth, who (they more than once acknowledge) is that rare creature, ‘a friend to women’.

At this moment of startling revelation for Emma of Diana’s self-precipitation into marriage, she can read the situation only in the light of what she knows, or can infer; but the reader has been privy to more than she knows, and can make allowances that she cannot.

[I]t might now, after such an example, verily seem that women are incapable of a translucent perfect confidence:—their impulses, caprices, desperations, tricks of concealment, trip a heart-whole friendship. Well, tomorrow, if not to-day, the tripping may be expected! Lady Dunstane resigned herself sadly to a lowered view of her Tony’s character. This was her unconscious act of reprisal. Her brilliant, beloved Tony, dazzling but in beauty and the gifted mind, stood as one essentially with the common order of women. She wished to be settled, Mr Warwick proposed, and for the sake of

living at The Crossways she accepted him—she, the lofty scorner of loveless marriages! Who had said—how many times! that nothing save love excused it! She degraded their mutual high standard of womankind. Diana was in eclipse, full three parts. The bulk of the gentlemanly official she had chosen obscured her. (v, 66)

When Diana brings Warwick on a visit to Copsley, Emma has her instinctive dislike confirmed. She finds him socially accomplished to some degree, but proud with no substantial reason for being so—a dull, conventional, essentially average man. She is chilled by his cold, authoritative, ‘unparticipating’ stare from eyes of ‘a kind of hueless grey’, his disinclination (or inability) to talk about anything outside his narrow professional or social range, and his occlusion of Diana, who is anxious that he should make a good impression, and leads him out, ‘submerg[ing] herself, content to be dull if he might shine’ (vi, 71,72). Emma’s ‘first and . . . final impression likened him to a house locked up and empty:—a London house conventionally furnished and decorated by the upholsterer, and empty of inhabitants.’

How a brilliant and beautiful girl could have committed this rashness, was the perplexing riddle: the knottier because the man was idle: and Diana had ambition; she despised and dreaded idleness in men.—Empty of inhabitants even to the ghost! Both human and spiritual were wanting. The mind contemplating him became reflectively stagnant. (vi, 72)

It is a superbly drawn portrait of an unimaginative, unsympathetic and unrelenting Victorian patriarch—but not altogether bad, not a villain. Diana had said he had been ‘generous’ on their honeymoon, she had seen ‘fine qualities’ in him, he had been ‘unselfish, kind, affable with his equals [and] cordial to the acquaintances he met’ (vi, 70). He is reported by Sir Lukin (who is inquisitive, in London, about anything to do with his wife’s enchanting, if prickly, young friend), to be ‘a goodish sort of fellow; good horseman, good shot, good character. In short, the average Englishman, excelling as a cavalier, a slayer, and an orderly subject’ (vi, 70). But it is as a husband on his own territory that he is at his worst, and it is his behaviour towards Diana in that character and setting—his malice, his possessiveness, his bullying—that Meredith is concerned to illuminate, as being the incitement to Diana’s desertion of him. Meredith’s reference to an entry in Perry Wilkinson’s diary gives one of ‘two or three’ reports of Warwick’s ‘playing the churlish domestic tyrant . . . [i]nstances incredible of a gentleman’. It occurs at the whist-table,

where the fair Diana would let loose her silvery laugh in the intervals. She was hardly out of her teens, and should have been dancing instead of fastened to a table. A difference of fifteen years in the ages of the wedded pair accounts poorly for the husband’s conduct, however solemn a business the game of whist. We read that he burst out at last, with bitter mimicry, ‘yang—yang—yang!’ and killed the bright laugh, shot it dead. She had outraged the decorum of the square-table only while the cards were making. Perhaps her too-dead ensuing silence, as of one striving to bring back the throbs to a slain bird in her bosom, allowed the gap between the wedded pair to be visible, for it was dated back to prophecy as soon as the trumpet proclaimed it. (i, 7)

This account (written in a direct, vivid, dramatic style one cannot help wishing Meredith had employed more often) is the closest we come to a direct view of Warwick’s brutality. After his visit to Copsley, ‘Warwick exists only as an ogre or pathetic wreck, offstage. His individuality is allowed no expression: this is Meredith’s method of insisting that he has no individuality—and hence no rights’ (Beer 1970: 158). It is an aspect of the writer’s partisanship with his heroine which we shall notice further below.

In her letter to Emma that gives the news of her engagement, Diana had written: 'I shall have Dada in his best days, and all my youngest dreams, my sunrise and morning dew, surrounding me; my old home for my new one' (v, 65). Marriage to Warwick, ostensibly an adult decision, is in fact a regression under the stress of a traumatic physical encounter to virtually a pre-adult state, where her father has a child's nickname, existence will be clean and bright and wholesome, and the only male desire to be encountered will be her husband's. But Diana pays a heavy price for an action that she later, after she has escaped, admits to herself is 'past credence, in the retrospect' (xii, 133). Admitting also, before her trial, that Warwick 'has not cause to like his wife. I can own it, and I am sorry for him heartily', she explains how the marriage had become so offensive to both of them:

'No two have ever come together so naturally antagonistic as we two. We walked a dozen steps in stupefied union, and hit upon crossways. From that moment it was tug and tug; he me, I him. By resisting, I made him a tyrant; and he, by insisting, made me a rebel. And he was the maddest of tyrants—a weak one.' (xiv, 156)

She tries to be fair to him: 'He is not a contemptible man before the world. . . . He is an upright man; I have not seen marked meanness. . . . He is not eminently, that is to say, not saliently, selfish; not rancorous, not obtrusive'. Nonetheless, '[h]usband grew to mean to me stifler, lung-contractor, iron mask, inquisitor, everything anti-natural.' He was 'dull!—dull as a woollen nightcap over eyes and ears and mouth. Oh! an executioner's black cap to me' (xiv, 156-57).

It is an extraordinary tirade, amounting, like the earlier one about the 'foreign animal', to a confession of revulsion, in those metaphors of suffocation (suffocation as a kind of death sentence), from the sheer physical proximity of the male. Those objects of Emma's suspicion, Lord Wroxeter and Captain Rampan of the country house circuit, might have been the first to arouse Diana's sexual distaste, but it had been greatly exacerbated by Sir Lukin's advances; and now, after Warwick, Diana's response to male desire is decidedly ambivalent. She will find that she can love Percy Dacier, but she denies him the intimacy he craves (notwithstanding his appeal—in both senses—to her), because her determination to maintain her self-respect is stronger than any wish to please him; and Redworth will endure almost to the end the impression that he is insufficiently attractive, in whatever ways define attractiveness for Diana, to win her hand and heart. It does not come naturally to the free-spirited young woman—'surely a woman,' as Emma reflects, 'to kindle poets and heroes, the princes of the race' (vi, 74)—to perceive the sterling worth, relative to the dazzling Lord Larriars, Dannisburghs or Daciers of this world, of a man who is merely 'excellent, emotionless, ordinary . . . bent upon scoring the country to the likeness of a child's lines of hop-scotch in a gravel-yard' (vi, 74). Her aspiring to be extraordinary in her own right is a function of her knowledge of the gifts she can bring to a man's world. She wants to be so much more than a sexual object, a sexual prisoner, a trophy-wife; but Warwick has no use for her as an intelligent, articulate, witty partner. In a letter to the anxious Emma, waiting helplessly at Copsley (for 'London was death to her' [vi, 75]) for news from her dear friend, instead of the gossip retailed by Sir Lukin of a possibly dangerous political liaison, Diana succinctly alludes to her marital catastrophe. It is one she suffers in common with so many gifted, capable wives (such as Caroline Norton) in the real Victorian world:

'We women [she writes to Emma] are the verbs passive of the alliance, we have to learn, and if we take to activity, with the best intentions, we conjugate a frightful disturbance. We are to run on lines, like the steam-trains, or we come to no station, dash to fragments. I have the misfortune to know I was born an active. I take my chance.' (vi, 75-76)

In keeping with the increasing activism of the real feminist world, Meredith's later heroines become more assertive; and Diana's ego is apparent in the full flow of her abundant spirit. The metaphor of liquidity is appropriate, inasmuch as it is employed repeatedly by Meredith as part of the natural setting for which, like her mythical namesake (and other Meredithian heroines, early and late) she has such an affinity. When she brings Dannisburgh to Copsley, she has

a spirit leaping and shining like a mountain water. She did not seduce, she ravished. The judgement was taken captive and flowed with her. . . . Adorable as she was to her friend Emma at all times, she that day struck a new fountain in memory. And it was pleasant to see the great lord's admiration of this wonder. One could firmly believe in their friendship, and his winning ideas from the abounding bubbling well. (vii, 79, 80)

However, the incongruity of the Warwick/Diana marriage, so evident as to be unfathomable to Emma, cannot survive this exercise of Diana's freedom of action in her husband's absence. On his return she is served with a process; and so begins a trial of her character, of her moral principles, her intelligence and common sense that does not cease until Warwick's death. As George Norton was for Caroline, Warwick remains a baleful background presence in Diana's life that must always be taken account of, in both amatory and financial matters. As a single but separated woman her relationships with men become a staple of society gossip; and as a relatively poor woman she becomes largely dependent on her earnings from her novels. She has arrived, in short, at a crossroads, one of several to come, and to negotiate her way to a form of safety she will have to rely on the two friends, Emma Dunstane and Thomas Redworth, who provide her moral compass in this novel.

It is at this juncture, when Diana is taking refuge at The Crossways, hellbent on fleeing to France rather than suffer the indignity of the ordeal Warwick intends to put her through, and the tiresomeness of presenting a courageous front to the avidity of ill-disposed gossips like Lady Wathin, that Redworth is given a major opportunity in the narrative to demonstrate that he is what Emma says he is, "the one man known to me who can be a friend of women" . . . an open-minded clear-faced English gentleman' (viii, 91, 93). If he cannot be Irish or Welsh, this is the type of which Meredith can approve; and Emma dispatches him to Diana's rescue through Meredith's adored southern English landscape,⁴

on a southward line from chalk-ridge to sand, where he had a pleasant footing in familiar country, under beeches that browned the ways, along beside a meadow-brook fed by the heights, through pines and across deep sand-ruts to full view of weald and Downs . . . over rolling fallow-land to the meadow-flats and a pale shining of freshets. (viii, 94)

This being the landscape he has traversed with the maiden Diana, and one he instinctively assesses, as he rides, for its railway potential (something he knows she deprecates), the associations it has with the woman he loves, and with his own qualities, are strong. And his reflections are recognizably Meredithian, in the admiration they reveal (as did the pages on Lord Larrian) for the man of action—businessman, politician, soldier—devoted to the right cause, of the type that Meredith counted amongst his friends and included in his novels:

That the people opposing railways were not people of business, was his reflection, and it returned persistently: for practical men, even the most devoted among them, will think for themselves; their army, which is the rational, calls them to its banners, in opposition to the sentimental; and Redworth joined it in the abstract, summoning the horrible state of the roads to testify against an enemy wanting almost in common humaneness. (viii, 94)

Redworth is here presented as a moral force, not only in the doctrine he propounds, but also in the skill and persistence with which he finds his way to the wayward Diana through the confusions of the darkened village to her home. His journey by horseback is a knightly quest to rescue a maiden in peril, the moral peril of presenting Warwick, and society, with a confession of guilt, which is what her fleeing the country would amount to. And Diana is to be judged (Meredith is implying) by her ability to weigh both what Redworth has come to say to her, and Emma's words, in her heartfelt note imploring Diana to return; and make the right decision.

In Chapters 9 ('A Position of Delicacy') and 10 ('The Conflict of the Night') the huntress Diana (her quarry being freedom) is herself at bay in the arena of a once inviolate selfhood. '[I]n this very house of her happiness with her father, she had bound herself to the man: voluntarily, quite inexplicably' (x, 114). Speaking both for her and for himself, Meredith exposes not only her revulsion at the dire situation in which she finds herself, but also his own at the societal, legal and gender imperatives that have forced her into it. He comments, for example, that

[t]he wild brain of Diana, armed by her later enlightenment as to the laws of life and nature, dashed in revolt at the laws of the world when she thought of the forces, natural and social, urging young women to marry and be bound to the end.

It should be a spotless world which is thus ruthless.

But were the world impeccable it would behave more generously.

The world is ruthless, dear friends, because the world is hypocrite! The world cannot afford to be magnanimous, or even just. (x, 115)

These lines are followed by a passage expressive of Diana's inner torment, indirectly a cry of anguish, but also a tirade written not only on her behalf by her narrator, but on his own, as a convinced proponent of women's rights, and a one-time fellow-sufferer in marriage—a sufferer not only as tormented but tormentor: the passage is redolent of Meredith's remorse at the damage he inflicted; Warwick's egoism, like Willoughby's, is also his own; and 'the troops defiling through [Diana's] head' defile through his.⁵

Her dissensions with her husband, their differences of opinion, and puny wranglings, hoistings of two standards, reconciliations for the sake of decency, breaches of the truce, and his detested meanness, the man behind the mask; and glimpses of herself too, the half-known, half-suspected, developing creature claiming to be Diana, and unlike her dreamed Diana, deformed by marriage, irritable, acerb, rebellious, constantly justifiable against him, but not in her own mind, and therefore accusing him of the double crime of provoking her and perverting her—these were the troops defiling through her head while she did battle with the hypocrite world. (x, 115)

The passage is a passionate protest, from a woman's point of view, as *Modern Love* was from a man's, against an irremediable pain—not, this time, the pain of the death of a marriage, which she welcomes, but one of a peculiar intensity. It springs from knowing that the deformations of this marriage, the forcible exposure of aspects, perversions, of herself ('hare, serpent, tigress!' [x, 115]) that are so

distressing in their difference from the ideal to which she has aspired, have all been self-inflicted. The marriage should never have happened.

Beer makes an interesting comment on Meredith's moral identification with his heroine:

For Meredith himself she existed so entirely that he continued to argue about her behaviour. . . . But this full realisation of Diana makes Meredith partisan rather than chronicler. He sees beyond her ego, but, even more, he *participates* in it. And this relationship towards his heroine defines the limits of his realism. Despite his insistence on his heroine's failures of intelligence and emotion, Meredith as artist and commentator is aligned with her. (1970: 157)

The extent to which he impersonates, or channels, his heroine in order to support her is clear from a paragraph such as the following:

The very things awakening a mad suspicion proved her innocence. But was she this utterly simple person? Oh, no! She was the Diana of the pride in her power of fencing with evil—by no means of the order of those ninny young women who realize the popular conception of the purely innocent. She had fenced and kept her guard. Of this it was her angry glory to have the knowledge. But she had been compelled to fence. Such are men in the world of facts, that when a woman steps out of her domestic tangle to assert, because it is a tangle, her rights to partial independence, they sight her for their prey, or at least they complacently suppose her accessible. Wretched at home, a woman ought to bury herself in her wretchedness, else may she be assured that not the cleverest, wariest guard will cover her character. (x, 116)

The paragraph is hinting at trouble about which Diana becomes explicit in the next one. She knows she is innocent of any wrongdoing with Dannisburgh.

But the holding of her hand by the friend half a minute too long for friendship, and the overfriendliness of looks, letters, frequency of visits, would speak within her. She had a darting view of her husband's estimation of them in his present mood. She quenched it; they were trifles, things that women of the world have to combat. (x, 116)

And then the segue into Meredith's direct voice, to reiterate the themes of female innocence and experience in a predatory world, and the mask of hypocrisy required to maintain the appearance of innocence:

The revelation to a fair-minded young woman of the majority of men being naught other than men, and some of the friendliest of men betraying confidence under the excuse of temptation, is one of the shocks to simplicity which leave her the alternative of misanthropy or philosophy. Diana had not the heart to hate her kind, so she resigned herself to pardon, and to the recognition of the state of duel between the sexes—active enough in her sphere of society. The circle hummed with it; many lived for it. Could she pretend to ignore it? Her personal experience might have instigated a less clear and less intrepid nature to take advantage of the opportunity for playing the popular innocent, who runs about with astonished eyes to find herself in so hunting a world, and wins general compassion, if not shelter in unsuspected and unlicensed places. There is perpetually the inducement to act the hypocrite before the hypocrite world, unless a woman submits to be the humbly knitting house-wife, unquestioningly worshipful of her lord; for the world is ever gracious to an hypocrisy that pays homage to the mask of virtue by copying it; the world is hostile to the face of an innocence not conventionally simpering and quite surprised; the world prefers decorum to honesty. (x, 116-17)

The issues that Diana contended with remained alive for Meredith until the end. As he wrote to a Miss Rachel Wheatcroft on 13 April, 1907, '[a]t present our civilization is ill-balanced, owing to a state of things affecting women. It depends chiefly upon women that this shall be altered' (Cline 1970: 3. 1591]. And six months earlier he had written to the editor of *The Times* that

[women] in their present development [are] given to be subservient to laws written or unwritten. Men had called them slavish. [But] sentimental prattle of the mother, the wife, the sister is not

needed when we see, as the choicer spirits of men do now see, that women have brains, and can be helpful to the hitherto entirely dominant muscular creature who has allowed them some degree of influence in return for servile flatteries and the graceful undulations of the snake—admired yet dreaded. Women must have brains to have emerged from so long a bondage. (Cline 1970: 3. 1576-77)

Diana, who certainly has brains, is entirely aware of the kind of woman here referred to, and refuses ‘bondage’ to the male as she does for her sisters. As Redworth (the one man in the novel with soul and sense enough to see her—and accept her—for what she is) reflects, incited by her dusky beauty in the glow of the fire she prepares for him at The Crossways, ‘[d]id the miserable tyrant suppose of a woman like this, that she would be content to shine as a candle in a grated lanthorn?’ (ix, 105). He considers the predicament of ‘[a] woman doubted by her husband’, and the imagery that follows refers us back to history and myth: she is ‘a creature of the wilds, marked for our ancient running. . . . The doubt casts her forth, the general yelp drags her down; she runs like the prey of the forest under spotting branches’ (ix, 106). The huntress is the hunted, with Warwick the contemptible Actaeon in pursuit.

Redworth loves Diana, and therefore believes in her, and can subdue ‘the reptile part of us’ (ix, 106). But he must bide his time, only assisting when he can, while giving way to Percy Dacier who, beneath a civilized exterior of remarkable plausibility, is essentially reptilian, in that he does not, ultimately, ‘look at her with the eyes of a friend’ (ix, 106), but with those of an egoist. The point brings us to the fundamental issue Meredith is raising in these relationships of Diana (indeed, one might say in all his realist fiction, but notably in the later work), which is whether true friendship is possible between men and women, as it is between women such as Diana and Emma Dunstane. Or does the erotic element inevitably compromise the friendship—does the male or female ego, seeking its own satisfaction more than the other’s, overbalance the relationship with selfishness on one side or the other? Redworth’s interview with Diana at The Crossways is crucial in clarifying for him his own situation. Meredith does not claim any kind of sanctity for him: he ‘bore a strong resemblance to his fellowmen’—he is as vulnerable as they are to the ‘unhallowed fry in attendance upon any stirring of the reptile part of us’. But the difference between him and his fellowmen is ‘his power of faith in this woman’, only confirmed, not dispersed into an urge to mastery, by the aesthetic/erotic view of her kneeling to prepare the fire. ‘He knew and was sure of her’, and though she ‘fetch[es] a sweat to his brows . . . his heart was hers! He hoped he could be charitable to women’ (ix, 106).

Redworth has already passed this test—has already received Emma’s accolade (and by now Meredith has ensured that we understand how clearsighted her judgement is) of being ‘truest friend of women’ (xii, 129)—though Diana wishes he would not assume that his friendship means he can try to effect a reconciliation between her and her husband. Even Dannisburgh (‘the one man among men who gives me notions of a soul in men’ [vii, 80]) falls short, now that Diana is being driven to objectivity by the imminence of her court case: ‘[H]e was never a dishonourable friend,’ she tells Emma, ‘but men appear capable of friendship with women only for as long as we keep out of pulling

distance of that line where friendship ceases. They may step on it—we must hold back a league. I have learnt it' (xii, 131).

Diana's friendship with Percy Dacier proceeds, in its first phase, through gradually mounting mutual attraction, to the point of the imminent elopement to France, where both are confronting, and accepting, the possibility of social (and, in Dacier's case, political) ruin. As is the way with real-life friendships, the two young people begin in mutual delusion, born of ignorance of themselves and each other. At the beginning of Chapter 15, which '[i]ntroduces the Hon. Percy Dacier' (161), Meredith offers an extended, and delicately nuanced, judgement of his heroine's state of mind and feeling following her victory over Warwick in the courts. The narrative is poised between her marital disaster and the emotional recovery represented by her reclaimed independence, that will in turn lead (ironically enough, in view of her passion for her personal freedom) to her relationship with Dacier. She is capable of reviewing her attitudes and behaviour towards her husband, and with sufficient objectivity ('always bearing a comical eye on her subterfuges') to acknowledge her own faults. She was 'the wife who would laugh ringingly, and would have friends of the other sex, and shot her epigrams at the helpless despot, and was at times—yes, vixenish; a nature driven to it, but that was the word'. Meredith comments that thus far she is using 'her unerring brains', using them to understand that her faults are natural; she can forgive herself for them. But the real offenders were 'her marriage; it was marriage in the abstract: her own mistake and the world's clumsy machinery of civilization' (xv, 162).

But the narrative undermines her even as it expresses her attitude. Being physically detached, especially when she is afloat on the Mediterranean, from the male world of parliamentary business, she imagines herself to be morally and intellectually detached from it, like a wise judge. As Meredith puts it, 'she conceived her separateness high aloof, and actually supposed she was a contemplative, simply speculative political spirit, impersonal albeit a woman'. The mildly sceptical tone of the narrator, carried, for example, in the phrase 'actually supposed', contradicts Diana's conviction, 'the belief in her possession of a disengaged intellect' (xv, 167).

Meredith establishes, with beautiful economy, a salient difference between Dacier and Redworth—a physical difference, but with moral implications that Diana, not yet experienced in the body language of either of them, is incapable of registering in full. She notices—and it is flattering to her—Dacier's 'open look, larger than inquiring', when they are introduced; 'and it recurred when she uttered anything specially taking'. The reader understands, as Meredith obviously intends, even if Diana does not, that Dacier's erotic, not just his intellectual, interest in her begins here. But what Diana does understand is the difference between the way Dacier looks at her and 'the frank directness of Redworth's eyes, [in which] she saw the difference between a look that accepted her and one that dilated on two opinions' (xv, 170). The ambivalence suggested here is elaborated, as the friendship develops, into a conflict between what we are told is Dacier's essential contempt for women, that is, his inability, in the conventional, patriarchal Victorian sense, to take women entirely seriously beyond

their ability to satisfy his needs, and his admiration, both intellectual and sensual, for a woman who is unusually gifted in mind and body.

The relationship that follows advances step by step towards two climaxes: the first brings a slowly intensifying, but, of course (as the conventional dance of the time dictates), immensely tentative sexual dimension to an abrupt end when Emma's critical state of health prevents Diana, at the last possible moment, from eloping. The second marks the end of the relationship when Diana, short of money in spite of her political services to the rich Dacier, sells a confidential briefing from his chief that Dacier had disclosed to her to a newspaper editor of her acquaintance. It is an incident we shall return to. For the moment, let us notice the immediate aftermath of the Nile expedition, when Diana and her companions make their way to the vicinity of Lake Lugano, and she begins a process of post-Warwick regeneration in those beautiful surroundings.

It was there that Diana reawakened, after the trance of a deadly draught, to the glory of the earth and her share in it. . . . She could have imagined a seraphic presence in the room, that bade her arise and live; take the cup of the wells of youth arrested at her lips by her marriage; quit her wintry bondage for warmth, light, space, the quick of simple being. (xv, 171, 171-72)

It is a 'strange, pure ecstasy' (xv, 172) Diana is experiencing, and Meredith sustains the elevation for her in a prose poem that relates her closely to her natural surroundings:

[S]he was illumined, like the Salvatore she saw in the evening beams and mounted in the morning's; and she had not a spot of secrecy; all her nature flew and bloomed; she was bird, flower, flowing river, a quivering sensibility unweighted, unshrouded. Desires and hopes would surely have weighted and shrouded her. She had none, save for the upper air, the eyes of the mountain. (xv, 172-73)

It is a waking dream of nature's freedom, and her own, after the nightmare in the city she has left behind: 'Freedom to breathe, gaze, climb, grow with the grasses, fly with the clouds, to muse, to sing, to be an unclaimed self, dispersed upon earth, air, sky, to find a keener, transfigured self in that radiation—she craved no more' (xv, 173). But there is a dramatic irony shadowing this rapture. Like an ambassador from the world of men and their business, freighted with ambivalences about women and the role they should play in his life, young Dacier hovers on the threshold of Diana's paradise; and having encountered her in this setting, where Meredith's 'mythical and psychological themes become mutually illuminating' (Baker 1976: 73), he will not be satisfied until he has drawn her back into his world, back into materiality. Meredith at this point is intent on presenting both these characters in mutually irresistible terms; but once Diana has, with, to be sure, extreme caution (for she is wary of placing herself once more in a man's power) accepted a form of partnership with Dacier, her dream of paradise is gone for ever.

If, as the narrator remarks, Dacier 'rather despised the power of women over men' (xvi, 176), and has 'the active man's contempt of the petticoated secret attractive to boys and graylings'—which is about as explicit as this politically progressive but morally Victorian author will allow himself to be in his fiction—what is it that attracts him to Diana? Is he (as the noisy bell in Rovio's campanile tells him) 'flounder[ing] in quags, like a silly creature chasing a marsh-lamp'? Or is he, as he believes, in 'serious pursuit of the secret of a woman's character'? It is to Dacier's credit, as Meredith portrays

him, and, of course, to Diana's, that she arouses his calculating, egoistic spirit to a high pitch of poetic imagination. If '[o]rdinary women . . . had no secret to allure' a man like him, '[t]his one had: she had the secret of lake waters under rock, unfathomable in limpidness.' We have seen, in Meredith's portrait of her near Lake Lugano, how powerfully she responds to the elements of nature. Dacier's intense admiration for her has equipped him to perceive this kinship: 'He could not think of her without shooting at nature, and nature's very sweetest and subtlest, for comparisons.' He believed that 'in her he hunted the mind and the spirit: perchance a double mind, a twilighted spirit; but not a mere woman. She bore no resemblance to the bundle of women. Well, she was worth studying; she had ideas, and could give ear to ideas' (xvi, 177).

The phrases 'not a mere woman' and 'bundle of women' reiterate Dacier's contempt for 'the sex', as does his suspicion that 'the multitude of them, and notably the fairest, yet more the cleverest, concealed the serpent somewhere'. Chapter 16, in fact, is crucial in presenting Dacier's sexual ambivalence. He is strangely detached from women, wary of their 'arts', coolly judgemental of their merits and demerits, and the advantages and disadvantages to himself in forming a close relationship. On the one hand, he has the sensibility to appreciate—if only he could find them—'charm, wit, ardour, intercommunicative quickness, and kindling beauty, airy grace', qualities (it is here implied), he believes Diana to possess. On the other, he doubts if she has what the 'transparent, only Arctic' Constance Asper has, 'a serene possession of the inestimable and eminent one outweighing all' (xvi, 178): absolute purity. Diana's other attractions will make up for this lack for the time being. Meredith stages Dacier's encounter with her in the hills above Rovio in an appropriately seductive setting. He particularly excels in descriptions of countryside he is deeply familiar with, as when in Chapter VIII he sends Tom Redworth riding through a moonlit Surrey to Diana's home; and here, in his favourite mountain scenery, where water abounds in falls and streams and pools, he makes explicit reference to the goddess after whom Diana is named. Dacier spies her standing alone by a pool, and this is itself enough to absolve her, he decides, from Warwick's indictment:

She who found her pleasure in these haunts of nymph and Goddess, at the fresh cold bosom of nature, must be clear as day. She trusted herself to the loneliness here, and to the honour of men, from a like irreflective sincerity. She was unable to imagine danger where her own impelling thirst was pure. . . . (xvi, 180)

Meredith assumes the reader's complicity in discerning that these thoughts of Dacier's (it is another subtle dramatic irony) 'were but flashes of a momentary vivid sensibility' (xvi, 180-81). A little later he remarks that Dacier had never been 'particularly poetical about women' (xvi, 181), and two pages earlier, when Dacier is still trying to decide whether this remarkable-looking young woman is innocent or 'hounded by haggard memories', we are told that 'Great Nature'—the magnificent surroundings Diana for the moment, like her mythical namesake, inhabits—'brought him thus to drink of her beauty, under the delusion that the act was a speculation on her character' (xvi, 178). The point Meredith is making is that Dacier is to some extent capable of responding to Diana's exceptional charm of appearance and manner, and his capacity extends (as the narrative continues, and Diana increasingly believes in his eligibility for an intimate friendship) to combining perceptible ardour with

sufficient self-restraint to convince her of his 'knightliness'. But there are limitations to his ability to understand her complexities, as that reference to his 'delusion' indicates; and it is here, amongst the Rovio hills, in these first moments of their deeper acquaintance, that signs of incompatibility appear. Although he can make her blush when he takes her hand to assist her up the stony path, and she is busily thinking how he can advance her favourite political cause, she finds herself constrained to resist what she feels to be an invasion of emotional privacy. 'She listened, trying to think of the manner in which he might be taught to serve that cause she had at heart; and the colour deepened on her cheeks till it set fire to her underlying consciousness: blood to spirit. A tremour of alarm ran through her'. Diana, in short, is embarrassed; and as Christopher Ricks comments in discussing the biological significance of blushing and shame, 'embarrassment is primitively connected with defencelessness' (1974: 13), and Diana is aware of both. Can we assume that Dacier's proposal of 'a little masculine assistance in a hand stretched mutely' (xvi, 186) is an innocent proffer? Probably not—and it is the tentative precursor of his apparently respectful but persistent attempts, that begin from this encounter, to breach her physical privacy.

The fragile integrity of this episode is beautifully figured by Meredith in the 'half-open' (xvi, 187) crocus that gives rise to it, the delicacy of the flower serving to provide an objective correlative for Diana's feelings, and, conversely, for Dacier's clumsiness. She has picked the flowers, 'a bunch of buds and blown cups of the pale purple meadow-crocus' (xvi, 182) to be sent to her friend Emma. 'She is the *coeur d'or* of our time,' she tells Dacier, 'the one soul I would sacrifice these flowers to. . . They are sacred' (xvi, 183, 187). And so when Dacier compares the one 'half-open' to 'the famous tiptoe ballet-posture, arms above head and fingers like swallows meeting in air, of an operatic danseuse of the time', Diana will not accept the comparison. It seems to her that Dacier is straining for a quite inappropriate effect, casting a blight of sophistication on her simple tribute to her dear friend. She thinks of it as an act of 'Londonizing' on his part, and as such it is an 'offence to her shy morning pleasure'.

[She felt] wounded, adverse, armed. He seemed somehow to have dealt a mortal blow to the happy girl she had become again. The woman she was protested on behalf of the girl, while the girl in her heart bent lowered sad eyelids to the woman; and which of them was wiser of the truth she could not have said, for she was honestly not aware of the truth, but she knew she was divided in halves, with one half pitying the other, one rebuking: and all because of the incongruous comparison of a wild flower to an opera dancer! Absurd indeed. We human creatures are the silliest on earth, most certainly. (xvi, 187)

The narratorial commentary issues from, and is then, after 'rebuking', subtly superseded by Diana's consciousness in a passage notable for its freedom from Meredithian rhetoric, and all the more effective for that in the sense it gives of complete sympathetic identification of the narrator with the sensibility of his subject.

Diana had blushed when Dacier took her hand to help her over some boulders on the path at Rovio; but the narrator interprets for us the ominous significance of her involuntary response:

The blood is the treacherous element in the story of the nobly civilized, of which secret Diana, a wife and no wife, a prisoner in liberty, a blooming woman imagining herself restored to transcendent maiden ecstasies—the highest youthful poetic—had received some faint intimation

when the blush flamed suddenly in her cheeks and her heart knelled like the towers of a city given over to the devourer. (xvi, 190)

We note again the narrator's subtle intimation to the reader, in 'imagining herself', that Diana's reclamation of her young and innocent spirit is compromised by as yet unfathomable circumstance. That blush has a fatal ambivalence, in being an emblem not only of a pleasure in physical contact that Diana could not suppress, but also of the loss of innocence, and the treachery of womanhood. The metaphor of betrayal is not overdramatic. She feels obscurely, even at this early stage, before she has become fully conscious of how much Dacier attracts her, that he, with his overt and covert male exigencies, is capable of destroying whatever she holds most dear. She cannot at this moment articulate her feeling, but

[s]he had no wish to meet him again. Without telling herself why, she would have shunned the meeting. Disturbers that thwarted her simple happiness in sublime scenery were best avoided. She thought so the more for a fitful blur to the simplicity of her sensations, and a task she sometimes had in restoring and toning them, after that sweet morning time in Rovio.⁶ (xvi, 190)

As when she returns with relief to Copsley after the country houses, and then escapes to an imagined protector from Sir Lukin, Diana instinctively resists overt male acknowledgement of her attractions (as the tactful Tom Redworth no less instinctively realizes). She seems not to want to grow up. But as Lorna Sage puts it in her 'Introduction' to the Virago edition, the world into which the Irish Ball had launched her is 'a cattle market cum war zone cum gladiatorial arena cum hunting field.'

Though society tries to conceal it from her, and she tries to conceal it from herself, she's on parade in the ring, an 'adventuress' vulgarly up for grabs. Perhaps no one since Fanny Burney in *Evelina* (1778) had faced as well as Meredith does what this means: the insulting assumption of her sexual availability. (1980: n.p.)

We have seen how resolute Diana's defences could be towards the purposeful male. But by the time Lord Dannisburgh dies, and Dacier is awaiting Diana's arrival at his uncle's country home for the night-time vigil to which she has committed herself at the old man's request, he feels his acquaintance with her has deepened enough to enable him to speak for her, against his scandalized family, as her 'privileged champion' (xix, 218). The narrator has tended, we realize, to move the relationship unexplicitly into a warmer clime. We are to infer that Diana has not found Dacier's increasing sense of 'privilege' to be irksome. Nonetheless, the narrative voice supplies a meditation of Dacier's (he having 'driven away to another part of the country' [xix, 217] to escape his family) that gives us access to his thoughts about her, thoughts which serve to illuminate his character as well. It is not a pretty sight. In the first place, we realize how little Dacier understands Diana's true nature. On the evidence of a bequest to her, and his knowledge of an 'epicurean uncle [who] had no profound esteem for [Diana's] kind of innocence' (xix, 218), he is prepared to believe, until the thought occurs to him that 'she was capable of friendship' (xix, 219), that Diana may have surrendered her innocence, or even willingly bestowed it: 'how easy it was to be the dupe of a woman so handsome and clever' (xix, 218). And how economically Meredith indicates, in the word 'dupe', Dacier's essential crudity of judgement. Crudity, in fact, runs like a dark thread through the following passage, that encapsulates the nature of Diana's attraction for him. Retrieving from this stream of Dacier's consciousness the reflection (germane to

Dacier's imagining a possible sexual liaison between Diana and his uncle) that a Platonic relationship, unlikely as it was for his uncle, is a possibility for a man like himself, Meredith allows him to reveal just what it is he values in his friendship with Diana, and what he expects to get out of it:

He was not quick to kindle, and had lately seen much of her, had found her a Lady Egeria, helpful in counsel, prompting, inspiriting, reviving as well-waters, and as temperately cool: not one sign of native slipperiness. Nor did she stir the mud in him upon which proud man is built. The shadow of the scandal had checked a few shifty sensations rising now and then of their own accord, and had laid them, with the lady's benign connivance. This was good proof in her favour, seeing that she must have perceived of late the besetting thirst he had for her company; and alone or in the medley equally. To see her, hear, exchange ideas with her; and to talk of new books, try to listen to music at the opera and at concerts, and admire her playing of hostess, were novel pleasures, giving him fresh notions of life, and strengthening rather than disturbing the course of his life's business. (xix, 218-19)

Detectable in these lines is a young man's preoccupation with self, a wish that the lady will continue to contribute to his entertainment, and a conviction that she can be of great practical use to him in his career. It seems important to him that her predilections should be more cerebral than sensual; and Meredith's choice of the name 'Egeria' to characterize Diana is particularly pertinent in this context, inasmuch as the nymph it refers to 'instructed Numa Pompilius, second King of Rome (753-673 BC), in his wise legislation' (Cooper 1993: 86). On the one hand, we are to understand the self-regard involved, considering Diana's mythical antecedents, in the political service Dacier hopes to receive from her. On the other, Meredith contrives, as is his practice in this novel, to subvert his character's expectations with subtle dramatic irony. Some lines from Benjamin Disraeli's novel *Vivian Grey* throw an adventitious light on what Meredith is driving at here:

It is in these moments that we gaze upon the moon. It is in these moments that Nature becomes our Egeria; and, refreshed and renovated by this beautiful communion, we return to the world better enabled to fight over parts in the hot war of passions, to perform the great duties for which man appeared to have been created, to love, to hate, to slander, and to slay. (1926: 117)

That is to be Diana's function—to perform the task enjoined on women by Victorian domestic ideology, that is, to be the willing means for Dacier's refreshment and renovation when he returns, exhausted in body and spirit, from his 'great duties' in the world of men. The lines not only remind us of Dacier's choice of name for Diana, but coincidentally touch upon aspects of Meredith's depiction of her with which we have become familiar—her association with the moon goddess and the goddess's legendary attributes, none of which are congenial to Dacier's project. Whatever his reasons (hidden, of course, from Diana) for admiring the ice maiden, Constance Asper, he wishes Diana to be different. He admires her stately beauty, but to encounter it beside a pool near Rovio is of limited use to him. He wants it in London, as the outward and visible sign of an inward grace and wisdom that will assist him to advance in his parliamentary profession. His Egeria must be a cosmopolitan, not a bucolic, figure, and free of 'native slipperiness'. The phrase is a Meredithian masterstroke, indicating at once Dacier's capacity for entertaining a dual conception of woman, admiring, indeed desiring, the targeted individual while despising, in a virtually pornographic image, the weakness, as he sees it, of 'the sex'. It is important to this authoritative Victorian gentleman that he not allow the 'mud' in him to be stirred in any purposeful way. It would be a most unwelcome sign of a will to independent female power to

arouse ‘shifty sensations’. While he may seem to her to be looking for a wife in her—eventually—what he really wants is a ‘wife but no wife’, a hetaera, in effect, who will do everything for him that he requires of her, both intellectually and physically, but allow him to fall a good way short of total, self-sacrificial devotion, with all the distracting responsibility that that would entail.

The narrative requires an overarching dramatic irony to govern Diana’s relationship with Dacier, one element of which is that she falls deeply in love with a man whom others, including the reader, see to be radically unsuitable for her. There is an image offered by Meredith towards the end of Chapter 19 of Dacier’s underlying grossness of nature, incapable of true harmony with Diana’s, when he fancies the bright moon and its shadow to be a white cat jumping on to a wheel he thinks of as a ‘dead circle’. No more than he can truly understand Diana can he see the moon at this moment in its remote and lofty beauty, but deforms it according to a grotesque and detestable (the epithets are Meredith’s) interpretation of his own. This is the man who, in his musings before joining Diana at the end of her night-watch for Dannisburgh, acknowledges to himself that it was he, not Diana, who had ‘schemed and pressed’ for the meeting on the Nile, ‘not being bound in honour elsewhere’ (as he never fails to remind himself—as if there were some doubt of the matter). This is the man, too, who, ‘despite his acknowledgement of her beauty’, does not consider Mrs Warwick to be ‘quite his ideal of the perfectly beautiful woman’ (xix, 221).

Constance Asper came nearer to it. He had the English taste for red and white, and for cold outlines: he secretly admired a statuesque demeanour with a statue’s eyes. The national approbation of a reserved haughtiness in woman, a tempered disdain in her slightly lifted small upperlip and drooped eyelids, was shared by him; and Constance Asper, if not exactly aristocratic by birth, stood well for that aristocratic insular type, which seems to promise the husband of it a casket of all the trusty virtues, as well as the security of frigidity in the casket. Such was Dacier’s native taste; consequently the attractions of Diana Warwick for him were, he thought, chiefly mental, those of a Lady Egeria. (xix, 222)

These, then, are part of the sexual complexity behind Dacier’s well-bred façade—his preference for a woman who will supply his needs, and his alone, without making undue demands on him, much less betray him with someone else—together with the revelation a little earlier, that ‘he hated marriage, and would by this time have been in the yoke, but for the agreeable deviation of his path to [Diana’s] society’ (xix, 219). We are to understand that in spite of his determined wooing of Diana, begun in the mountains at Rovio, continued in Dannisburgh’s home, outside it, on the walk to the station, at the station itself (where she could hardly dissuade him from going back to London with her), on the beach near Caen, and then back in London, there are limitations to Dacier’s passion and his commitment. It may not seem so, when we recall that in Chapter 25 he urgently convinces Diana to meet him at the station the following evening to catch the train to the Channel, en route for Paris, a flight that would certainly have compromised his career. And it is a sign of Diana’s extraordinary charisma that she can determine even this calculating man to take such a step. But the madness is momentary. When Redworth appears at the door, perhaps ten minutes before she is due to leave, and carries her away to the gravely ill Emma, there is a mutual reassessment of values. Diana realizes that Dacier is of secondary importance compared to her dear friend. And Dacier, left stranded on the train platform,

reflects ruefully on '[h]is novel assimilation to the rat-rabble of amatory intriguers' (xxvi, 289). It is, for him, a unique humiliation in the history of his relationships with women.

This episode brings another element into view of the irony mentioned above, to do with the dynamic at work in the relationship, a strangely contradictory dynamic that undermines Diana's conception of what the relationship is and what it promises. Rendering Dacier's stream of consciousness, Meredith reinforces the reader's previously established sense of Dacier's radical ambivalence towards women, which is based on a conviction of inherent superiority to them. Capable though he is of admiring a woman of Diana's calibre, he is, at bottom, an unreconstructed Victorian sexist. Wounded in his male pride by Diana's failure to join him at the station,

[t]he sole consolation he has is to revile the sex. Women! women! Whom have they not made a fool of! His uncle as much as any—and professing to know them. Him also! the man proud of escaping their wiles. 'For this woman . . . !' he went on saying after he had lost sight of her in her sex's trickeries. The nearest he could get to her was to conceive that the arrant coquette was now laughing at her utter subjugation and befooling of the man popularly supposed invincible. If it were known of him! The idea of his being a puppet fixed for derision was madly distempering. He had only to ask the affirmative of Constance Asper tomorrow! A vision of his determining to do it, somewhat comforted him. (xxvi, 289-90)

The passage neatly encapsulates all Dacier's ugliness, always concealed from Diana, but forming the underwater reef on which her growing passion for him will founder: his ego, his self-righteousness, his contempt for women—and, most revealing of his attitude to Diana, his ready assumption that she is conforming to the type of the woman of 'wiles', that wiles are inherent in the sex, and that she is rejoicing (as any woman of her type would do) at having fooled and humiliated him. The injustice of it all is a foretaste of how Dacier will behave when Diana innocently sells the state secret he has shared with her to the press. His judgement of her now is as harsh as it will be then. 'The woman dragged him down to the level of common men; that was the peculiar injury, and it swept her undistinguished into the stream of women' (xxvi, 290-91). Vulnerable, as always, to her actual striking presence, he is lifted above his self-obsession by a short meeting with Diana, fresh from Emma's operating-table, at Copsley. The impression he has then of her nobility stays with him always. But having failed to 'take the leap' (xxvi, 302) to France with her, he is glad of his escape.

The breach lasts for nearly a year, but the couple meet again at Emma's closing garden party of the season, at which Diana agrees to resume the relationship on condition that the 'madwoman' (xxvii, 318) of eleven months ago is allowed to rest. As Meredith puts it for her in his analysis of her position that opens Chapter 28, '[s]he must never expose her feelings to her lover; she must make her counsel weighty; otherwise she is little his nymph of the pure wells, and what she soon may be, the world will say' (319-20). Meredith, however, warns the reader of the precarious poise in her expression of natural womanly emotion that Diana is demanding of herself. Being neither a Princess Egeria nor a goddess, she

has to play one of those parts which strain the woman's faculties past naturalness. . . . But feelings that are constrained becloud the judgement besides arresting the fine jet of delivery wherewith the mastered lover is taught through the ears to think himself prompted, and submit to be controlled, by a creature super-feminine. (xxviii, 319, 320)

Since Dacier is capable, for the time being, of self-restraint, Diana interprets his conduct as an admirable willingness to conform to the rules she has laid down:

[S]he thanked and venerated this noblest of lovers for his not pressing to the word of love, and so strengthening her to point his mind, freshen his moral energies and inspirit him. His chivalrous acceptance of the conditions of their renewed intimacy was a radiant knightliness to Diana, elevating her with a living image for worship:—he so near once to being the absolute lord of her destinies! (xxviii, 320)

When we read further that her phrases had a ‘visible effect’ on him, that ‘[h]e glistened in repeating them’ (xxviii, 320), we realize just how far Diana has gone in convincing herself both of her value to this man, and of his esteem for her. It is one of Meredith’s minor characters, however, who sees how strained Diana’s project is of pleasing Dacier. Miss Paynham (one of Diana’s protégés), as she is painting Diana’s portrait, is the silent, but exceptionally penetrating, observer of those present, and she detects the deep flaw beneath Diana’s clever chatter. The chatter is intended for Dacier’s entertainment—Diana believes that only by intellectual display can she maintain his interest in her, and ‘in the knowledge that she dazzled, was her sense of safety’ (xxviii, 331). Meredith’s presentation of the interpersonal dynamic at work here is extraordinarily subtle and revealing. Miss Paynham is aware of an artificial note in Diana’s volubility, the more evident to her in that when Diana speaks to Redworth, she looks at him ‘sometimes tenderly’ (xxviii, 330). It is an authenticity of feeling that contrasts with the prevailing brittleness. Dacier himself, the chief object of Diana’s attention, is not, as we know, an unqualified admirer of her. In his fastidious way, he wonders whether her conversational display, ‘stirring’ and ‘cheering’ as it is (xxviii, 331)—and he does keep coming back for more—is more effortful than natural. The insight confirms Miss Paynham’s, and throws light on the inherent instability of a relationship that both parties believe they have successfully accommodated, and will cause to flourish.

In what, exactly, does the instability consist? Meredith throws much light on this question in the concluding pages of this chapter, in which he tracks Dacier’s ruminations on women in general, and Diana in particular. It becomes clear, as we read, that Diana’s great disadvantage in her dealings with Dacier is her misreading of his character, which issues in turn in her delusion as to the nature and value of her influence on him. She is indeed, as Judith Wilt observes, ‘a seriously flawed “reader” of herself’ (1976: 45). The problem for her here, in essence, consists in the mask that Dacier presents to the world. It is impenetrable to her because she loves him, and therefore believes what she wishes to believe about him—of course, a common human failing. It is Diana, in fact, who takes on the burden of responsibility that any viable relationship demands, and accepts the role Dacier expects of her and that she willingly throws herself into: of political inspirer through her ideas, and hostess of evening entertainment at her home, where she presides night after night (much more expensively than she can afford) over a salon of Dacier’s friends. To that degree, her life, she believes, is fulfilling to her. There are, however, three sources of oppression to her feelings that she must struggle with. The most basic is a shortage of money, partly relieved by her selling *The Crossways*. Tom Redworth, in his accustomed and (by Diana, though not by Emma) inadequately acknowledged role of crisis-manager, is the new

owner; and, of course, he hopes one day to bring her home to the place himself. Second, Diana is haunted incessantly by a ghastly image, of running a race with a figure in a shroud. The image embodies the guilt she feels at wanting to be free of the legal power that Warwick still has over her, and knowing that only his death (he is reportedly most unwell at this stage) will give her her freedom. ‘How to live and think, and not to hope: the slave of passion had this problem before her’ (xxix, 344). As Dacier becomes more impatient about the physical restraint she holds him to, ‘[t]he race she ran was with a shrouded figure no more, but with the figure of the shroud; she had to summon paroxysms of a pity hard to feel, images of sickness, helplessness, the vaults, the last human silence—for the stilling of her passionate heart’ (xxix, 346).

At her lowest she feels that peace can come to her in only two ways—from Warwick’s death, or her own. This agonizing by Diana over the predicament that now besets her—of being trapped between the living man and the dying one, with her freedom dependent on the latter’s disappearance, and her moral and legal obligation to him, while he lives, preventing her from allowing a lover’s full liberties to Dacier—is the occasion for Meredith’s alluding, through Diana’s ruminations, to the suffering that an external, impersonal agency such as the law could cause to the married women of the time. He has focused throughout, in his narrative, on Diana and her relationships, with no intrusive allusions, no forced parallels, to the Caroline Norton story, though, as we have seen, there are figures and incidents in Diana’s struggle with Warwick that take their origin from Caroline’s with George Norton. But now that he has brought Diana to her present crisis he can provide her with a pertinent reflection on the manner in which the patriarchal system impinges on her, to her grave detriment.

No insurgency of words arose in denunciation of the wrong done to her nature. An undefined heavy feeling of wrong there was, just perceptive enough to let her know, without gravely shaming, that one or another must be slain for peace to come; for it is the case in which the world of the Laws overloading her is pitiless to women, deaf past ear-trumpets, past intercession; detesting and reviling them for a feeble human cry, and for one apparent step of revolt piling the pelted stones on them. It will not discriminate shades of hue, it massacres all the shadowed. They are honoured, after a fashion, at a certain elevation. Descending from it, and purely to breathe common air (thus in her mind), they are scourged and outcast. (xxix, 347)

Chapter 32, in which Diana takes the step that brings her friendship with Dacier to a brutal conclusion, is significantly entitled ‘Wherein We Behold a Giddy Turn at the Spectral Crossways’. The ‘crossways’ has been a recurring symbol in this novel, neither complex nor newly-minted, but effective in encapsulating the crucial dilemmas, the ways offered, refused, and taken, by Meredith’s young heroine. In this chapter her situation, as she sees it, has become intolerable. In the first place, she has lost her belief in her ability to write. “‘I have mistaken my vocation,’” thought Diana. “‘I am certainly the flattest proser who ever penned a line’” (xxxii, 369). It is a demoralizing conclusion to have come to, in that she has to write for a living, and her lavish hospitality on Dacier’s behalf has drained her always inconsiderable coffers. Secondly, as far as Dacier is concerned, she feels she has lost her moral standing with him, and thus her self-respect. It has always been important to her to hold herself aloof from him in the physical sense, and his willingness to accede to her wish for his restraint has been a creditable element in his favour. But when he returns to her house moments after exiting from a dinner engagement, breaks important—and secret—political news to her (unspecified in the

novel, but historically speaking Sir Robert Peel's decision to repeal the Corn Laws [1846], a crucial development that led, when published, to his resignation as Prime Minister), and takes physical advantage of her delight on his behalf, she is plunged into a moral crisis. To us, in our permissive environment, her concern seems extreme. It is in keeping, however, with the character Meredith has been presenting to us, of a young woman who has moral integrity, great beauty and intelligence, and a ready wit in company, but who is deeply disadvantaged in her mid-Victorian milieu by marriage to a man she despises and from whom she has long since removed herself. What is more, she cannot afford to discountenance (although she very nearly has done, twice, with her plans to decamp to Europe) the social consequences of a perceived recklessness in her behaviour—for her own peace of mind, if for nothing else. It has not been her custom to respect the world's opinion about her conduct, but the fragility of her self-esteem has now suddenly been exposed; and Dacier's unwarranted liberty (as she sees it) is the proximate cause, as her despairing reflections make clear:

Would Percy have humiliated her so if he had respected her? He took advantage of the sudden loss of her habitual queenly initiative at the wonderful news to debase and stain their intimacy. The lover's behaviour was judged by her sensations: she felt humiliated, plucked violently from the throne where she had long been sitting securely, very proudly. (xxxii, 369-70)

But Diana's extreme distress has a deeper source than mere loss of the dignified self-control she is accustomed to present to her lover. She has also at this moment become aware that there is that within her which has not only failed to deter Dacier's importunacy: she has responded to it. She is a more sexual creature than she has dared hitherto to admit. Not only is she 'a dethroned woman', she is, '[d]eeper within, an unmasked actress'—but, as such (and this is the pathos of her situation), we know, as she does not, that she is immensely vulnerable, in that she finds herself capable of passionate response, and yet, unknown to her, the object of her passion is incapable of reciprocating it in more than a mechanical sense. On the one hand she blames him for her predicament—'Oh, she forgave him! But clearly he took her for the same as other women consenting to receive a privileged visitor.' On the other hand, she knows she is complicit: '[S]ounding herself to the soul, was she so magnificently better? Her face flamed. She hugged her arms at her breast to quiet the beating, and dropped them when she surprised herself embracing the memory' (xxxii, 370).

The term of Dacier's self-regarding service to Diana is to be upon him much sooner than he thinks. To relieve her painful shortage of money (which she feels is detrimental to her work on her novel, *The Man of Two Minds*),⁷ Diana has made the politically ingenuous decision to sell the Cabinet secret he had told her of to Tonans.⁸ Quite how ingenuous her decision is is a question the narrative poses at this point. It can be argued, contrary to Walter F. Wright's contention, that the 'betrayal' of which Dacier accuses her is not altogether 'beyond psychological representation' (1953: 144). Since '[h]er wits were too acute, her nature too direct, to permit of a lengthened confusion' (xxxii, 371), she perceives clearly that she is motivated partly by self-disgust at being vulnerable to Dacier's advances. However, the text suggests that in her eagerness to cancel out the shame of her extravagance on his behalf, and the physical humiliation to which it has ultimately brought her, the question of money is clouding her judgement:

Either it must be money or disgrace. Money would assist her quietly to amend and complete her work. Yes, and this want of money, in a review of the last two years, was the material cause of her recklessness. It was, her revived and uprising pudency declared, the principal, the only cause. Mere want of money. (xxxii, 371)

There is an insistence here on money being the ‘principal’, and then, in a revealing intensification, the ‘only’, cause that speaks of Diana’s uncertainty—and guilt—in giving away Dacier’s secret. It enables her to hide from the ‘pudency’ Dacier has induced in her, which in turn connects with her impulse, that keeps recurring in the novel, to escape from the complex demands of a male world into an inviolable sanctuary, where she can safely regress into untroubled maidenhood, and be ‘the pedestalled woman in her conflict with the natural’ (xxiv, 275) on ‘her summit of feminine isolation’ (xxv, 282), as on the cliffs at Lugano.

But also she wishes to impress Tonans, ‘who had admonished her rather sneeringly for staleness in her information’ (xxxii, 369), with the significance of the news she has to impart. She enjoys the *frisson* of breaching the editorial sanctum, and compelling respect for a startling female intervention in an ambience of oppressively self-absorbed masculinity. ‘Doors opened and shut, hasty feet traversed the corridors, a dull hum in dumbness told of mighty business at work. Diana received the summons to the mighty head of the establishment’ (xxxii, 373-74). Interestingly, Meredith, who does not normally take notice of servants beyond their coming and going (Flitch is an exception), at this point allows Danvers, whose individuality has become apparent in other episodes involving her mistress, a full measure of slighted femininity:

Danvers was left to speculate. She heard the voice of Mr. Tonans: ‘Not more than two!’ This was not a place for compliments. Men passed her, hither and yonder, cursorily noticing the presence of a woman. She lost, very strangely to her, the sense of her sex and became an object—a disregarded object. Things of more importance were about. Her feminine self-esteem was troubled; all idea of attractiveness expired. Here was manifestly a spot where women had dropped from the secondary to the cancelled stage of their extraordinary career in a world either blowing them aloft like soap-bubbles or quietly shelving them as supernumeraries. A gentleman—sweet vision!—shot by to the editor’s door, without even looking cursorily. He knocked. Mr. Tonans appeared and took him by the arm, dictating at a great rate; perceived Danvers, frowned at the female, and requested him to wait in the room, which the gentleman did, not once casting eye upon a woman. At last her mistress returned to her, escorted so far by Mr. Tonans, and he refreshingly bent his back to bow over her hand: so we have the satisfaction of knowing that we are not such poor creatures after all! Suffering in person, Danvers was revived by the little show of homage to her sex. (xxxii, 374)⁹

The servant is humanized by the indications of her attraction towards the hurrying ‘gentleman’, her awareness of herself as a woman capable of attracting a man, and her disappointment that this one showed no sign of acknowledging that. She has to make do with a vicarious pleasure in Tonans’ gallantry to Diana. This woman, Meredith is saying, deserves as much respect, in her own right as woman, as any other, servant or no.

The secret is published, Dacier confronts Diana, brushes aside her abject and tearful contrition (‘You did not name it as a secret. I did not imagine it to be a secret of immense, *immediate* importance’ [xxxiv, 386]), and then summarily terminates his friendship. Meredith is ostensibly fair to him in this moral crisis, reminding us that Dacier is an ‘[h]onourable, courteous, kindly gentleman, highly civilized, an excellent citizen and a patriot’ (xxxv, 392); but the epithets are embedded in a

paragraph of furious internal discourse, allowing us to infer that these qualities are also what Dacier attributes to himself. Ultimately, all that we have learnt, or inferred, of what is dubious in him climaxes in this departure, his subsequent damning reflections on Diana's behaviour, and the extraordinarily rapid transfer of his attentions to Constance Asper. He has played Lovelace to Diana's Clarissa,¹⁰ and lost, and it is all her fault:

The background of ice in Dacier's composition was brought to the front by his righteous contempt of [Diana's] treachery. No explanation of it would have appeased him. She was guilty, and he condemned her. She stood condemned by all the evil likely to ensue from her misdeed. Scarcely had he left her house last night when she was away to betray him!—He shook her from him without a pang. (xxxv, 392)

It is a beautifully economical presentation of Dacier's essential blindness, his fundamental lack of the deepest kind of sympathetic understanding, towards a woman for whom he has conceived a passion, certainly, but an ultimately egoistic, self-serving one. Diana's act of what he sees as betrayal has immediately expunged for him whatever it was that made her appealingly individual, and relegated her to the male egoist's perception of the generality of women. 'He set his mind on the consequences of the act of folly—the trusting a secret to a woman. All were possibly not so bad: none should be trusted' (xxxv, 391). By contrast with Diana's bewildering complexities, Miss Constance Asper, in welcoming him to her home, seems to him 'an image of repose. . . . The calm pure outline of her white features refreshed him as the Alps the Londoner newly alighted at Berne; smoke, wrangle, the wrestling city's wickedness, behind him' (xxxv, 393). What more appropriate than for the man of ice to give himself to a beautiful ice-maiden? In doing so he forsakes the real woman in favour of one of the 'idol wom[e]n of imperishable type, who are never for a twinkle the prey of the blood' (xxxiv, 383); and also the rare company of men who are capable of a truly just estimate of the former. He rejoins those, like Warwick, from whom Diana might have redeemed him, those whom the first chapter derides, in a flurry of Meredithian sarcasm and contempt for the conventional of both genders, as lovers of 'virtuous' women, those who 'ply the distaff at home . . . the women of waxwork . . . of happy marriages . . . of holy nunneries . . . the women lucky in their arts' (i, 8, 9). The title of Chapter 35 sums up the irony of it all: 'Reveals How the True Heroine of Romance Comes Finally to Her Time of Triumph'. The 'true heroine' is a literary stereotype, and the 'triumph'—winning a Victorian egoist as husband—delusory.

A minor but important character, in terms of judging Diana's development towards greater self-knowledge, is the young London law clerk of literary bent, Arthur Rhodes,¹¹ who appeals to Diana's need to refresh herself at the fountain of youthful innocence, a condition always important to her own happiness, and achievable only in simulacrum in her retreats among the lakes and mountains of Northern Italy, and the breezy heights around Copsley. These Edens of the earth and spirit are trespassed on by importunate men—Dacier in Europe, Sir Lukin at Copsley. They subvert her passion for freedom and autonomy when the role of woman in the Victorian patriarchy, indeed simply the role of woman, becomes too onerous for her. Diana always has a sense of herself as being divided in two, girl and woman, and certain places and people allow her to assert her youth instead of having to

respond to male expectations of sexual response. Now, as she recovers, with Emma's devoted assistance, from the shock of Dacier's desertion of her, and her attempt at suicide by starvation (her 'final and most absolute form of sentimental withdrawal from the world', comments Baker [1976b: 78]), she loves the young poet (whom she publicly names 'her Arthur' [xl, 454]), who is little more than a boy, and worships her. But when on a walk with her at Copsley, he addresses her as 'Diana', and asks to take her hand (two significant declarations of feeling in the Victorian game of love), she realizes that her kindly, sisterly indulgence of him has been misinterpreted. It is precisely Arthur's innocence, modesty, and youthful poetic ardour that she values him for—nothing more serious, or demanding. It seems that Meredith intends him to be a kind of male analogue of Diana as she wishes, in her emotionally wounded, post-Dacier state, to be (the chapter is appropriately entitled 'A Woman a Maid Again'). He appeals to her craving for simplicity, her antipathy to anything that smacks of moral deviousness and sophisticated falsity. When he remarks, during a walk on a day of changeable weather, that '[s]uch a day would be considered melancholy by London people', Diana 'thanked him in her heart, as a benefactor who had revealed to her things of the deepest. The simplest were her food' (xxxix, 432). Meredith surely intends to put us in mind of the suitor whose 'Londonizing' metaphor, in the green and water-haunted bowers of the Salvatore heights, was so jarring to Diana's idealistic, escapist search for psychological and emotional—and sexual—repose, a 'refuge from the besiegings of the blood' (xxii, 255). Diana is indulging a tendency towards 'sentimental regression' (Baker 1976b: 69) that delays her progress towards that 'complete unfolding of the creature' (Cline 1970: 2. 910) Meredith perceived as the condition for spiritual fulfilment.¹²

Emma's long hoped-for resolution to Diana's vicissitudes are not far in the offing. It has been necessary for this heroine to make serious blunders in her affective life in order to arrive at a clearer view of what, in relation to men, is in her best interests. As with other nineteenth-century heroines (Jane Austen's Marianne Dashwood, for example, and George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke), only a sentimental education entailing a high degree of emotional suffering can induce the young woman to accept a more rational view of what is possible, and advisable, for her in being both subject and object of desire. The word 'rational' constitutes a link, as it happens, to the figure of Tom Redworth, who is destined to be the beneficiary of Diana's retreat from romantic ideals. Ever since the great Irish Ball that begins the narrative, when he 'endeavoured to render practicable an opening in her mind to reason' (iii, 35) about the profession of arms, it has been, and will continue to be until he is able to claim Diana for his own, his function to protect her from what threatens to be the at least disadvantageous, at worst disastrous, consequences of her behaviour. He stands, in the narrative, for the reality principle, as does Emma; and for this very reason, although always greatly esteemed by Diana for his obviously sterling qualities, there is a disjunction between them, emotionally speaking, until such time as she is able to decide, with a little help from her friends, that Redworth's good sense is a more desirable, and reliable, lodestar than her unbridled sensibility. Unable to decide whether she loves him, she embraces 'the dignity of being reasonable—under Emma's guidance' (xlili, 486). It remains to convince Redworth that he is indeed loved as he deserves, even though it should have

happened much sooner—and to convince Diana that if she is to sacrifice her precious freedom to anyone, it had better be to him. He is wise, will not oppress her, he can teach her much, by her own confession, about the natural world she loves, as well as the commercial world he works in.¹³ It is true that Meredith is committing his heroine to marriage,¹⁴ a state we have seen her vehemently to forswear. And as the tide of events seems to carry her inexorably towards a resolution that involves Redworth, she continues to hesitate,

cherishing her new freedom, dreading the menacer; feeling, that though she held the citadel, she was daily less sure of its foundations, and that her hope of some last romance in life was going; for in him shone not a glimpse. He appeared to Diana as a fatal power, attracting her without sympathy, benevolently overcoming: one of those good men, strong men, who subdue and do not kindle. The enthrallment revolted a nature capable of accepting subjection only by burning. (xl, 453)

That last metaphor is a tellingly ambiguous allusion to Diana's rebellious nature, wholly incapable of a Hindu widow's degree of self-sacrifice for the male, but ready to commit herself to the symbolic flames of mutuality if given overwhelming reasons of the heart; and if there were no further developments for her in the way of reassurance, we might well agree with Jan B. Gordon that

[i]t is a sad but, one suspects, wise ending to a tale of liberation. *Diana of the Crossways* concludes at precisely that point where so many nineteenth-century novels began: the orphan, exhausted from the chase, is incarcerated within some prison that poses as an example of domesticity. And surely, that is the scandal that completes all the gossip. (1971: 263)

But that would be to concede, as some present-day feminists no doubt would, the decisive validity of Diana's pessimism at this point, and to discount the effect on her state of mind of Emma's further persuasion, and her own persistent reflection. Emma's attitude to Diana's scruples and hesitations is like that of another highly intelligent woman in literature, Shakespeare's Rosalind:

But mistress, know yourself. Down on your knees,
And thank heaven, fasting, for a good man's love . . . (*As You Like It*, III. v. 57-58)

And Diana does respond, to the point when, just as she is about to step into the carriage that will take her to her wedding, Emma is aware that

her Tony's mind had resumed its old clear high-aiming activity; therefore that her nature was working sanely, and that she accepted her happiness, and bore love for a dower to her husband. No blushing confession of the woman's love for the man would have told her so much as the return to mental harmony with the laws of life shown in her darling's pellucid little sentence. (xliii, 492)

The sentence has a moment before been recalled from the time of Diana's severe post-Dacier decline. It is: '*There is nothing the body suffers that the soul may not profit by*' (xliii, 492)—a lesson Emma has learnt most arduously over the years, and that she whispered to her beloved Diana during her illness. Diana's repetition of it now marks her reconciliation to the course that Emma has been urging on her.

Emma is 'constantly on the dark decline of the unilluminated verge, between the two worlds'; and, some time later, as she '[lies] along her sofa, facing her South-western window' (xliii, 492), the day, too, is drawing to an end, as is the year. But this is the evening of her Tony's return from honeymoon, and the novel's last lines are given to an affirmation of this female friendship's continuance in spite of marriage, and of the granting of Emma's heartfelt wish.

Emma gazed into the depths of the waves of crimson, where brilliancy of colour came out of central heaven preternaturally near on earth, till one shade less brilliant seemed an ebbing away to boundless remoteness. Angelical and mortal mixed, making the glory overhead a sign of the close union of our human conditions with the ethereal and psychically divined. . . . Emma's exaltation in fervour had not subsided when she held her beloved in her arms under the dusk of the withdrawing redness. They sat embraced, with hands locked, in the unlighted room, and Tony spoke of the splendid sky. 'You watched it knowing I was on my way to you?'

'Praying, dear.'

'For me?'

'That I might live long enough to be a godmother.'

There was no reply: there was an involuntary little twitch of Tony's fingers. (xliii, 493-94)

In Meredith, no image is ever accidental. The 'withdrawing redness' signals, at this moment, Emma's emotional ascendancy over the husband, loved and respected though he may be. Penny Boumelha comments that

the final episode, with the two women embracing and planning what seems almost a joint motherhood, constitutes one last, ironic evasion of the 'Nuptial chapter'. "'Banality, thy name is marriage'", as Diana puts it, and even the eventual union with Redworth is no wholehearted capitulation to romance. (1991: 205-06)

Nonetheless, the couple's interaction in this final chapter (as they walk close together in, driven together by, a high wind—the southwester, as we may assume this to be, was Meredith's favourite natural event—with Diana learning to surrender her cherished status as the 'Goddess of the silver bow and crescent' [xliii, 481], and accept the solitude of the 'right good unimpulsive gentleman' [xliii, 481-82] who loves her), is Redworth's long-deserved triumph, when the 'red' of his name becomes as valid, and accepted, as the 'worth'. In vain does Diana cling to the remnants of widowed dignity and detachment:

[S]he was proceeding to speak composedly of her preference for cottages, while untying her bonnet-strings . . . when really a big storm-wave caught her from shore and whirled her to mid-sea, out of every sensibility but the swimming one of her loss of self in the man. . . . She was up at his heart, fast-locked, undergoing a change greater than the sea works; her thoughts one blush, her brain a fire-fount. This was not like being seated on a throne. (xliii, 483)

This is certainly a surrender to male desire, but no longer, surely, an enforced and humiliating abdication of lifelong principle. The surrender may be helpless, but it is wholehearted, and the desire unmistakably mutual. It is, for this man and this woman, the end of their foiled, circuitous journey towards each other, and a 'final, irradiated, elusive commitment to Reality that true marriage always represents for Meredith' (Wilt 1976: 58).

Diana is both like and unlike Clara Middleton, who represents a transitional stage in Meredith's heroines between male-appeasing conformism and outright rebellion against convention (which is qualified, in any case, by her marriage to Vernon Whitford). Diana has Clara's passion for freedom and independence, but in Diana's case this seems due to her Irish inheritance (in fact Meredith compares her to her country of birth: after the court case brought by her husband was over, 'the Englishman and Irishwoman resumed a certain resemblance to the yoked Islands' [i, 8]), and a condition of her upbringing by an enlightened father with 'a vein of Spanish blood' (ii, 30) that has given her her duskiness. Unlike Clara, who has great difficulty in coming to terms with her rebellious

impulses—in reconciling them with her dutiful upbringing, her responsibility to her father, and her sense of honour in having plighted herself to Sir Willoughby—Diana is drawn as spirited and outspoken from the start, with no personal ties to respect except to her old friend Emma, Lady Dunstane. She is clearly intended as a more substantial, and more risk-taking, character than Clara, one who takes the initiative, for good or ill, in changing her unpleasant circumstances, rather than remaining trapped in them, as Clara does, until her failed attempt to escape from Patterne by train. Diana does not spend the whole novel on a single stage, playing victim to an egoist whose pathological narcissism borders on caricature; in other words, she is not set up as a believable human being in opposition to a comedic monster. Her world is more naturalistic than Clara's, the egoists she contends with are credibly of this world, the supporting cast has no tincture of farce (as Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson's trio does, or the two Patterne aunts, or Fritch the coachman), and she herself is more seriously flawed than Clara; but unlike Clara, she relates her fierce desire for independence to the social predicament of her fellow creatures. Clara is destined, we feel, for wise domesticity; she is not, as Diana is with Emma, a reader of 'books of all sorts, political, philosophical, economical, romantic,' a social idealist, with a clear view as to '[w]hy things were not *done*, the things being confessedly to do' (iv, 46). All in all, Diana is Meredith's most comprehensive attempt to present the consciousness of a female, and feminist, protagonist—romantically beautiful, but also intelligent; courageous, too, in resisting her enemies, and asserting her freedom; but complex, impulsive, confused; in Meredith's words, 'the flecked heroine of Reality: not always the same; not impeccable; not an ignorant-innocent, nor a guileless: good under good leading; devoted to the death in a grave crisis; often wrestling with her terrestrial nature nobly; and a growing soul' (xxxv, 399)—not, in short, a conventional 'heroine': as Lorna Sage notes, she is too 'difficult and defeatable' (1980: n.p.). In Sage's view, she has aspects of Mary Ellen Nicolls, and Meredith's characterization is yet another attempt to expiate, as *Modern Love* and *The Egoist* had been, his 'meanesses, absurdities and cruelties' (1980: n.p.) towards that poor woman.

But in the end, Diana is much more than a projection of Meredithian guilt. If an enlightened, socially committed, politically energetic young woman of her early (pre-mid-century) vintage can be called 'new' (decades, of course, before the term became current), she may surely be considered one of the finest examples in English fiction of the type, reminiscent, in her fierce views of male inadequacy, of a fictional contemporary, Charlotte Brontë's Shirley Keeldar. The words that Ainslie Meares wrote of Diana's historical 'new' counterpart apply equally well to her: 'Above all she is striving for equality of opportunity with man to enjoy full life, and she seeks the right to make decisions for herself, the right to determine her own destiny' (1974: 11; quoted in Heilmann 2000: 1).

CHAPTER FIVE

The 1890s—and Beyond

Meredith, Schreiner, and the Advent of the ‘New Woman’

Meredith had had to wait a very long time for anything like popularity, but the publication of *Diana of the Crossways*, ‘his first popular best seller’ (Manos 2001: 7), sparked off a revival of interest in his earlier work, and in July 1885 Chapman and Hall advertised their intention to publish a uniform edition. A contemporary American critic, William Crary Brownell, attempted to account for his appeal in his *Victorian Prose Masters* (1901):

A considerable part of Mr. Meredith’s vogue is probably due to his treatment of women, which is very special, and for that reason, no doubt, has especially won the suffrages of ‘the sex’, as he is fond of calling it.¹ The approbateness of ‘the sex’ at its present stage of evolution is perhaps manifested quite as much with reference to evaluation and appreciation as a sex as it is individually. It can hardly escape observers of such phenomena that it is as a sex that, currently, women particularly appreciate being treated as individuals. The more marked such treatment is, the more justice they feel is done to the sex. Mr. Meredith’s treatment of them is in this respect very marked—so much so, in fact, that he obliterates very often the broad distinction usually made between the young girl and the married woman. Diana, for example, leaves—in some respects—a maidenly, and some of his maidens produce a matronly, impression. With his women readers he has accordingly been, perhaps, particularly successful. He makes it unmistakably clear that women are psychologically worthwhile, complex, intricate, and multifarious in mind as well as complicated in nature. He makes a point of this, and underscores it in a way that produces a certain effect of novelty by the stress he lays on it. The justice so fully rendered is given the fillip of seeming tardy justice, and therefore an element of Mr. Meredith’s originality among writers of fiction. This is a good deal, but I think it is witness of a still greater originality in him that he goes still further. He lays even greater stress upon the fact that the being thus intricately interesting and worthy of scrutiny from the constitution of her individual personality is also that most interesting of all personalities, a feminine one. He adds the requisite touch of chivalry. He is, after all, a true *aficionado* of ‘the sex’. (Quoted in Hammerton 1971: 234-35)

It seems worth quoting Brownell at some length for the sake of his sound general appreciation, without benefit of distance in time from his subject, of Meredith’s empathy with women. He is illuminating, too, on particular insights Meredith has given us in his novels and letters, and those in biographical accounts by friends such as Janet Ross and Lady Butcher. Brownell’s use of Diana as an example of the impact on contemporary readers of Meredith’s portrayal of a female character is well judged in terms of the convincing complexity with which Meredith endows her. She was seen by sympathetic contemporary readers as a woman struggling against male oppression, who was prepared, in spite of the malicious calumnies of society, to take her fate in her hands, and deal with the patriarchy on her own terms. In this she is like Clara Middleton, but different in being readier to take risks in choosing independence. When she leaves Warwick, she has no other man at hand, as Clara does, ready and eager to take care of her—or rather she has, in the faithful Redworth, but she is not ready for him. Her courage and enterprise, her social concern, her determination to make her own way as a writer, her staunch companionship with a woman like Emma Dunstane, and the vital assistance she gives Emma at a time of crisis, were all characteristics that would appeal to women struggling for

their own emancipation. In short, Diana could be seen as an example of the type that was to become known as the 'New Woman', though not as radical and wilful as a precursor from two years before. Olive Schreiner's Lyndall, in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), spurned marriage as Diana, in the end, did not, and had an illegitimate child to boot. This extraordinary novel, written at the outer edge, geographical and intellectual, of feminist consciousness, squarely confronted the existential difficulties of a young, single woman, brought up in a rural wilderness, but with a strongly independent mind and temper. It was Schreiner's self-portrait of someone exceptionally receptive to intimations from afar of women's struggle to free themselves from patriarchal oppression, and written with 'a truculence, a sense of grievance, and a tendency to regard women as the superiors of men which was a definite departure from the more restrained and moderate claims of older feminists like Emily Davies and Millicent Fawcett' (Jordan 1983: 19). She submitted her manuscript to Chapman and Hall in April 1882, and on 1 June she was introduced to Meredith, who was reader for the firm. B.W. Matz, 'a clerk in the office at the time', noted that she came more than once, and as we saw in the previous chapter, Meredith, '[a]s was his custom with beginners, took unusual pains' to give her his assistance, which she 'readily and graciously' accepted (Stevenson 1954: 247). After another two months Schreiner resubmitted the novel, and it was accepted on 10 August. She later vehemently denied that she had revised her manuscript at Meredith's suggestion, but Stevenson suggests that this may have been an egomaniacal 'suppression of unpalatable facts' (1954: 247). At any rate, 'Meredith must have recognized the novel's psychological depth, revealing a kind of bisexuality in all the characters. Its biblical pastoral vision of the evolution of the new woman on the ancient African desert is akin to his own vision of Diana's mythological namesake haunting the woodland glades, more hunted than huntress' (Marcus 1976: 179).

In an article on 'The Book of the Month: The Novel of the Modern Woman' in the *Review of Reviews* 10 (1894), W. T. Stead nominated Olive Schreiner as "'The Modern Woman par excellence, the founder and high priestess of the school'" (Ledger 1997: 71). More intensely than Meredith's *Diana*, and certainly more than Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Bostonians* (1886), whose heroines were denied their dreams of nobleness and freedom by the author's ambivalence, at the very least, towards feminism, *The Story of an African Farm* foreshadowed a body of fiction written in the 1890s that was not only written by women, but was also positively responsive to the intensifying feminist zeitgeist, particularly in the field of gender relations. Furthermore, in its hybrid quality, disrupting the formalist narrative aesthetic with its divagations into allegory and extended political discussion, Schreiner's novel was itself a revolt against accepted novelistic practice, just as its content dealt with the feminist disruptiveness of its protagonist. Whether men liked it or not, and most of them did not,² women were emerging from the position of being merely an adjunct to men, a historical 'other', or 'collectivity generated by [male] discursive operations' (Crosby 1991: 3). They were becoming a social entity with which men could no longer avoid coming to terms in specific, concrete ways that, more than ever, required expression in the laws of the land. Change was in the air, in that respect as in others. It was not simply the obvious fact of the century's imminent

completion that occupied people's minds, nor that in 1890 Queen Victoria was in her seventy-first year, and must have been assumed to have few years left to reign. In this time of Victorian and Imperial apotheosis, soon to be celebrated (if she lived much longer) by the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, people were becoming aware of what Jacques Barzun has called 'a rush of new ideas and behaviour', extending indeed into the first decade of the twentieth century (2001: 615). The advent of the New Woman³ as a recognized category of nonconformist female, while new only as a rhetorical—and journalistic—figure,⁴ not as an entity, can be seen as one element in the general social and political restlessness of the time, the 'sexual anarchy' of which George Gissing wrote (quoted in Showalter 1991: 3), when, in Karl Miller's words, '[m]en became women. Women became men. Gender and country were put in doubt. The single life was found to harbour two sexes and two nations' (1987: 209).

'New' implies that before this final decade of the century women were different, unreconstructed, old-fashioned; but the division was not, of course, a sudden one. As Barbara Caine reminds us (1992: 248), there were fundamental differences amongst feminists on policies and purposes, on what should be done to realize them, and indeed on the very nature of femininity itself, that had appeared in the movement well before the end of the century. Then there were the women, still in a majority, whose main concern, as social creatures, was to conform to accepted norms and conditions in their daily lives, and not to flout the patriarchal order. Some of them, like Sarah Stickney Ellis and Sarah Lewis, had made it their business to codify the rules with persuasive cogency, a task in which they had significant male support—from Ruskin and Patmore, for example, as we have noted.

The New Woman's Critics

Not surprisingly, the male, and hostile female, stereotype of the New Woman was a powerful invitation to ridicule, as in the pages of *Punch*, with its 'Advice to Girl Graduates':

Dress well, sweet Maid, and let who will be clever.
Don't study all day long
Or else you'll find,
When other girls get married,
You'll sing a different song. (Quoted in Beddoe 1993: 29)

'[T]he large du Maurier woman in the tailored suit out-walking, out-punting, and out-cycling the much more diminutive man became a recurrent theme' in *Punch*. In fact 'between 18th August 1894 and 27th July 1895, there are only three issues without at least one New Woman joke in them' (Jordan 1983: 19, 21). Hardy alluded ironically to a variant of the type in his 1912 'Postscript' to his Preface for *Jude the Obscure*, when he wrote of

the slight, pale 'bachelor' girl—the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing, mainly in cities as yet, who does not recognize the necessity for most of her sex to follow marriage as a profession, and boast themselves as superior people because they are licensed to be loved on the premises. (Gibson 1985: xxx)

But of all those who raised their voices against rebellious young females, Eliza Lynn Linton (1822-98) was one of the most incisive. Her early writings in the 1840s and 1850s revealed her as ‘an ardent supporter of women’s rights and even free love, and [she] . . . received particular notoriety with her shocking 1851 novel *Realities*’ (Anderson 1999: 117). As she approached middle age, however, she became increasingly conservative and ambivalent about women’s rights, as she showed in her novel *The Rebel of the Family* (1880). By the time she published *The One Too Many* (1894) and *In Haste and at Leisure* (1895) she had become ‘stridently antifeminist’ (Anderson 1999: 117). According to Heldsinger et al., from the time of her first, alarming, but successful interview with the oath-mongering John Douglas Cook, Editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, Linton was determined ‘to please dominating males . . . play by the rules of the world, [and] defend readily the male-oriented code of social orthodoxy’ (1989: 1. 106). She eloquently maintained this defence for the next forty years, most notoriously in her essays ‘The Girl of the Period’ in the *Saturday Review* of 14 March 1868, and ‘Modern Man-haters’ in the same journal on 29 April 1871. Merle Mowbray Bevington, in her monograph on the *Saturday Review*, has called ‘The Girl of the Period’ ‘[p]erhaps the most sensational middle article that the *Saturday Review* ever published’ (1941: 110). As a pamphlet it sold in tens of thousands, and it became a perennial staple of conversation amongst what are today known as ‘the chattering classes’. Here, for example, is Linton’s attack on the ‘G.O.P.’’s vitiated taste:

The Girl of the Period is a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face, as the first articles of her personal religion—a creature whose sole idea of life is fun; whose sole aim is unbounded luxury; and whose dress is the chief object of such thought and intellect as she possesses. Her main endeavour is to outvie her neighbours in the extravagance of fashion. No matter if, in the time of crinolines, she sacrifices decency; in the time of trains, cleanliness; in the time of tied-back skirts, modesty; no matter either, if she makes herself a nuisance and inconvenience to everyone she meets—the Girl of the Period has done away with such moral muffishness as consideration for others, or regard for counsel and rebuke. . . . If a sensible fashion lifts the gown out of the mud, she raises hers midway to her knee. If the absurd structure of wire and buckram, once called a bonnet, is modified to something that shall protect the wearer’s face without putting out the eyes of her companion, she cuts hers down to four straws and a rosebud, or a tag of lace and a bunch of glass beads. If there is a reaction against an excess of Rowland’s Macassar, and hair shiny and sticky with grease is thought less nice than if left clean and healthily crisp, she dries and frizzes and sticks hers out on end like certain savages in Africa, or lets it wander down her back like Madge Wildfire’s, and thinks herself all the more beautiful the nearer she approaches in look to a negro or a maniac. (Quoted in Heldsinger et al. 1989: 1. 109)

In spite of her traditional dogmas on the place of women in society, Linton could be remarkably contradictory:

As ‘Mrs Linton’ she proclaims the sanctity of marriage, yet lives apart from her husband. She is one of the first women admitted to the British Museum and writes learned articles and fiction, yet she opposes higher formal education for women. She claims to be the first woman to receive a regular salary as a reporter, yet she insists that the proper sphere of most women is the home. (Heldsinger et al. 1989: 1.104)

Her mordant (and casually racist) vivacity is not lavished merely on appearances. What she is really afraid of is the ‘G.O.P.’’s apparent determination to assimilate herself ‘to a class of women whom we must not call by their proper—or improper—name.’ Better to be one of ‘the queens of St John’s Wood in their unblushing honesty rather than their imitators and make-believes in Bayswater and Belgravia.’

All men [Linton concludes] whose opinion is worth having prefer the simple and genuine girl of the past, with her tender little ways and pretty bashful modesties, to this loud and rampant modernization, with her false red hair and painted skin, talking slang as glibly as a man, and by preference leading the conversation to doubtful subjects. She thinks she is *piquante* and exciting when she thus makes herself the bad copy of a worse original; and she will not see that though men laugh with her they do not respect her, though they flirt with her they do not marry her; she will not believe that she is not the kind of thing they want, and that she is acting against nature and her own interests when she disregards their advice and offends their taste. We do not understand how she makes out her account, viewing her life from any side; but all we can do is to wait patiently until the national madness has passed, and our women have come back again to the old English ideal, once the most beautiful, the most modest, the most essentially womanly in the world. (Quoted in Heldsinger et al. 1989: 1. 109, 111, 112)

This mid-Victorian anxiety about signs of degeneracy in young womanhood developed, over the next forty years, as was noted above, into a settled hostility to feminism on Linton's part, typified by a comment she made in 1894 to Mrs Alex Tweedie during a 'chat' with the latter that was published in the periodical *Temple Bar*: '[W]e shall go down,' she said, 'in the ranks of nations if women ever come to rule us' (Tweedie 1894: 360). It was her weakness as a polemicist to indulge a gift for extreme rhetoric when she was quite capable of a more balanced view, as in her support for the women's vote, or in her *Saturday Review* essay of 1868 on 'Modern Mothers', in which she warns of the maternal negligence that empowers the sadistic nurse, 'capable of sly pinches and secret raids, as well as of more open oppression.' With the child abandoned beyond 'the protection of the glorified creature just gone to her grand dinner in a cloud of lace and a blaze of jewels . . . the first lesson taught the youthful Christian in short frocks or knickerbockers is not to carry tales down stairs, and by no means to let mamma know what nurse desires should be kept secret' (1868: 269).

Linton, then, added her considerable voice to the ideological discourses on the New Woman that conformed to the view of the 'particular class (male and bourgeois) [that] held power at the *fin de siècle*' (Ledger 1997: 9), though the three articles she published in the *Nineteenth Century* in the 1890s did not succeed, as 'The Girl of the Period' had succeeded, in establishing a damning generic title (in this case 'the Wild Women') as a slogan in the public consciousness.

Other attacks on the New Woman 'included claims that she was a threat to the human race, was probably an infanticidal mother and at the very least sexually abnormal' (Ledger 1997: 10). She was far, in other words, from being a suitable marriage prospect. For that prolific writer in several genres, Margaret Oliphant, the New Women constituted an 'Anti-Marriage League' represented in fiction by the heroines of their novels. The New Woman, she said, wanted 'free love': 'Faithfulness is bondage in her eyes. She is to be free to change her own companion if she discovers another more fit to be loved. And if one, also another no doubt, and another' (1896: 146). Walter Besant fulminated against the new 'candour' in English fiction: '[T]he preservation of the family is at the very foundation of our social system. As for the freedom of love which you want to treat in your books, it strikes directly at the family. If there is no fidelity in marriage, the family drops to pieces . . . we will have none of your literature of free and adulterous love' (1890: 7-8).⁵

All in all, the virulence of the criticism the New Woman aroused was a measure of the threat she was perceived by social and moral conservatives to be to the established order. They sensed that her

advent had an unstoppable momentum, and this increased their fear. She seemed inescapably to constitute a 'complex historical phenomenon' (Heilmann 2000: 2), with profound cultural, as well as political, consequences. Gail Cunningham has a colourful paragraph on the bizarre complexities of the time:

It was a period in which everything could be challenged, a time of enthusiastic extremism and gleeful revolt, of posturing dandyism, absinthe-sipping and bourgeoisie-shocking, when reputations could be made by an exquisitely expressed preference for green, or yellow, or purple over more conventionally approved colours. But it was also a period of deeply serious inquiry, of impassioned debate over central questions of moral and social behaviour which created acute anxiety in those who felt themselves to be witnessing the breakdown of the rules traditionally thought to hold society together. The froth and ferment which gave rise to the naughty nineties image were symptoms of a deeper malaise, reflected in the most popular pejoratives of the time—'morbid', 'decadent', 'degenerate', 'neurotic'. It was widely believed that society was sick, probably with an infection spread from Europe through the new translations of Ibsen and Zola. And Woman, always held to be delicate, had succumbed more severely than most. 'Life has taken on a strange unloveliness,' wrote Mrs Roy Devereux in 1895, 'and the least beautiful thing therein is the New Woman.' (1978: 1)

New Women, New Writers

A passage from Alys Pearsall Smith's article 'A Reply from the Daughters, II', in an 1894 issue of the *Nineteenth Century*,⁶ reveals the depth of anguished feeling in those young women who were determined to revolt against 'the ideal of femininity imposed upon them by their elders' (Ardis 1990: 18):

The suffering endured by many a young woman has never yet been told. Possessing no money in her own right, and obliged to beg, too often from an unwilling father, for all she gets, a girl of character, as she grows into maturity and lives on as a woman in her father's house, suffers from a sense of bitter humiliation that no one who has not experienced it can understand. . . . The revolt of the daughter is not . . . a revolt against merely surface conventionalities . . . but it is a revolt against a bondage that enslaves her whole life. In the past she has belonged to other people, now she demands to belong to herself. . . . She asks simply and only for freedom to make out of her own life the highest that can be made, and to develop her own individuality as seems to her the wisest and the best. She claims only the ordinary human rights of a human being, and humbly begs that no one will hinder her. (1894: 446, 450)

Clara Middleton's paternal situation, and Diana Warwick's, are not identical with Pearsall Smith's, but on this evidence the novelist who imagined those two rebellious women intuited, with extraordinary empathy, how far the passion in their cry for freedom from an oppressive patriarchy would reflect the feelings of their real-life sisters. Although, as Showalter points out, the feminist writers' 'anger with society and their need for self-justification often led them away from realism into over-simplification, emotionalism, and fantasy', they evidently felt that a departure from the realist aesthetic was an artistic compromise worth making for the sake of an honest and passionate expression of their 'profound sense of injustice' (1999: 29). Sarah Grand's character Evadne Frayling, in *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), concisely posits a general feminist attitude: 'I see that the world is not a bit the better for centuries of self-sacrifice on the woman's part and therefore I think it is time we tried a more effectual plan. And I propose now to sacrifice the man instead of the woman' (1992: 80).

Sarah Grand

The novelist, essayist and activist Sarah Grand,⁷ best known for her novels *Ideala: A Study from Life* (1888), *The Heavenly Twins* (1892), and *The Beth Book* (1897), was unambiguous in her support for marriage, as long as it was, for one thing, contracted with integrity on the part of all concerned, without deception to the disadvantage of the bride. *Ideala's* heroine asks: “‘If I signed a contract, and found out afterwards that those who induced me to become a party to it had kept me in ignorance of the most important clause in it, would you call that a moral contract?’” (quoted in Caird 1897: 117). Marriage, in Grand’s view, was necessary for compensating for male inadequacies. In her *North American Review* article, ‘The New Aspect of the Woman Question’ (1894), she claimed that it was the woman’s task to offer ‘a strong hand to the child man’, but ‘with infinite tenderness and pity’, to assist him in achieving a level of competence of which he would be otherwise incapable. Mindful of the increasing alarm, after the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1886, about the spread of syphilis, she strongly disapproved of the ‘cow women’ who meekly put up with the Victorian husband’s infidelity. Marriage, she said, was not a threat to true womanliness, ‘and the sacred duties of wife and mother will be all the more honourably performed when women have a reasonable hope of being wives and mothers of men’ (1894b: 273, 274-75).

Syphilis, in fact, plays a crucial role in *The Heavenly Twins* in that Edith Beale, the most innocent of the novel’s three heroines, marries a childhood friend, Sir Mosley Menteith, because that is what her traditional parents expect of her; but he suffers from hereditary syphilis, and is a notorious womanizer to boot. Within a year, she gives birth to a syphilitic child, and not long afterwards goes insane and dies herself. What with Angelica Hamilton-Wells’s transvestism (with a suggestion of homosexuality in a male friend’s unwitting acceptance of her as a young man), and Evadne Frayling’s attempted suicide, the novel was certainly sensational, and Grand was attacked for immorality. But for New Woman novelists like Allen, Grand and ‘Iota’ (Kathleen Mannington Caffyn), the ‘pure woman’ was someone different from the Victorian ideal, and more akin to Hardy’s Tess. They believed that

purity could derive only from knowledge, and possibly experience of the world’s blighting miseries, and if a few feverish joys could be picked up along the way, so much the better. Theirs was the purity of truth, personal integrity and freedom, and inevitably brought them into head-on collision with social convention. (Cunningham 1978: 51)

Apart from what some critics have seen as her aesthetic shortcomings—or, as John Kucich puts it, ‘the calculated discontinuities of her aesthetic logic’ (1999: 196)—(she believed that a novel ‘should be like life itself—an unfolding, and not a regular structure’ [1894a: vi]),⁸ Grand’s evident lack of radical feminist partisanship has contributed to her later neglect by those who look for it. For Patricia Stubbs, *The Woman Who Did* and *The Heavenly Twins* have little more than their historical value in challenging Victorian convention: she judges that Grand and Allen are ‘reticent or coy when they have to deal with sexual encounters, and are more fundamentally conservative than either Hardy or Moore.’

In so far as they understood feminism, they were feminists; yet we only have to place their work beside Olive Schreiner’s *African Farm* and it immediately pales into mechanical gestures of support

or enthusiasm for a cause she not only felt passionately, but which she also understood and which inspired in her a remarkable novel. (1981:120)

Mona Caird

Of all the New Woman novelists publishing at the turn of the century, and they were many (Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls estimate that there were more than a hundred novels published in this period on, or by, New Women [Ardis 2004: 70]), Mona Caird was one of the most forthright, not least in her opposition to conventional ideas of marriage and the fetishizing of premarital virginity. In her article 'Marriage' in John Chapman's *Westminster Review* (August 1888), she attacked the institution for being simply a post-Reformation development, dating from the age of Luther ('a thick-skinned, coarse-fibred monk'), 'when commerce, competition, the great bourgeois class, and that remarkable thing called "Respectability" also began to arise.' It was something women had got used to putting up with, as dogs their chains; and as for virginity, it 'has attained its present mysterious authority and rank through man's monopolizing jealousy, through the fact that he desired "to have and to hold" one woman as his exclusive property.' The essential tie between a man and a woman comprised 'love and trust and friendship', and 'whenever these cease the tie becomes false and iniquitous, and no one ought to have the power to enforce it'. For Caird, in short, marriage was a 'vexatious failure', and 'the man who marries finds that his liberty has gone, and the woman exchanges one set of restrictions for another' (1888: 186, 188, 191, 193, 197). These were incendiary comments, in fact in the context of the time the whole article was an outrageous provocation, generating some 27 000 letters for a dedicated column in response to the *Daily Telegraph's* question 'Is Marriage a Failure?' As Margaret Gullette writes in her 'Afterword' to the 1989 edition of Caird's best novel, *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), "'Mrs Caird" (for it appeared she was married herself) . . . was for a while probably the best-known and certainly the most decried feminist in England' (494).

Hadria Fullerton, Caird's heroine in *The Daughters of Danaus*, is, like her creator, magnificently assertive. Lecturing her siblings about Emerson, early in the novel, she rejects his 'shocking' injustice, his 'beaming optimism' in writing about the power of the human soul to actualize events according to our will. It is simply 'a worship of success disguised under lofty terms. . . . [T]he conditions of a girl's life of our own class are pleasant enough; but they are stifling, absolutely stifling; and not all the Emersons in the world will convince me to the contrary. Emerson never was a girl!' (11-12, 14). Gullette compares her to the 'pathetic' Maggie Tulliver, who can respond to her brother's cruelty only by sobbing.

From the moment that Hadria objects to Emerson, we know that Caird has passed beyond the silent women, and also the soft-voiced, graceful, careful-spoken or innately sweet heroines favored even by many feminist novelists, like . . . Grand's Evadne in *The Heavenly Twins*. Their function, of course, was to make the New Woman assimilable. (1989: 504)

Hadria does get married, as a way to escape her over-dependent mother without hurting her too much, but finds herself longing to advance the musical career that marriage and children are inhibiting, and abandons her responsibilities to live an artist's life in Paris. Sheer guilt, however, eventually drives her back home, where motherhood, wifehood and filial piety combine to drain her of her will to live

without self-fulfilment. But she does live: Caird refuses the option of killing her heroine. The ending is grim but not tragic, as New Woman novels were apt to be. Caird's intention is to expose 'the endless distractions of ordinary domestic life and the wearing down of a strong woman's will and constitution by family demands. In her hands this is a heroic subject' (Gullette 1989: 503).

George Egerton

George Egerton, who wrote plays and novels, but is best known for her short stories in *Keynotes* (1893) and the more bitter *Discords* (1894),⁹ presents an interesting contrast to Grand and Caird in being a writer of feminist reputation who consistently rejected feminism; and yet she no less consistently explored the nature of the female and her sexual desire,¹⁰ and the claims to respect and autonomy, work, marriage and maternity to which progressive women, in a male world whose power was 'indiscriminate, incessant, and injurious' (Showalter 1999: 189), felt themselves to be irreducibly entitled. Her knowledge of Scandinavian literature, in particular the work of Knut Hamsun (whose novel *Hunger* she translated), assisted her in the sensitive exploration of female states of mind in childhood and adulthood, as in 'A Psychological Moment at Three Periods'.

In the opening story of *Keynotes*, 'A Cross Line', the narrator positions the unnamed heroine between a well-meaning but conventional husband who does not understand her, and a passing, attractive stranger who promises the empathy and excitement missing in her married life, but whom in the end she renounces for the sake of her pregnancy. It is an assertion, not a sacrifice, of her freedom of action. The fundamental problem, in her view, is 'the denseness of man, his chivalrous conservative devotion to the female idea he has created [which] blinds him, perhaps happily, to the problems of her complex nature.'

Ay, she mutters musingly, the wisest of them can only say we are enigmas . . . and well it is that the workings of our hearts are closed to them, that we are cunning enough or *great* enough to seem to be what they would have us, rather than be what we are. But few of them have had the insight to find out the key to our seeming contradictions. . . . They have all overlooked the eternal wildness, the untamed primitive savage temperament that lurks in the mildest, best woman. Deep in through ages of convention this primeval trait burns, an untameable quantity that may be concealed but is never eradicated by culture—the keynote of woman's witchcraft¹¹ and woman's strength. (1983: 21-22)

This was provocative enough in the conservative culture Egerton was rebelling against. She even ventured to suggest, in her novel *The Wheel of God* (1898), that her heroine had lesbian proclivities. The substance of her writing was as unstable as her own life, with its elopement, an unmarried 'partnership', and two marriages. On the one hand, she contemptuously rejected male domination, male sexual irresponsibility, and male selfishness. '[M]an,' she proclaimed in the story 'Virgin Soil', in *Discords*, 'demands from a wife as a right, what he must sue from a mistress as a favour; until marriage becomes for many women a legal prostitution, a nightly degradation, a hateful yoke under which they age, mere bearers of children conceived in a sense of duty, not love' (1983: 155). In 'The Regeneration of Two', the long story that concluded *Discords*, she wrote:

Fathering is a light thing to the man, as light as the plucking of a flower by the wayside; he enjoys its colour, its perfume, then flings it aside, and goes his way and forgets it. . . . Man hasn't kept the race going, the burden of the centuries has lain on the women. He has fought, and drunk, and rioted, lusted, and satisfied himself, whilst she has rocked the cradle and ruled the world, borne the sacred burden of her motherhood, carried in trust the future of the races. And, if she has sometimes failed in it?—well, she was lonely, and there was no one to point her a way. The only sign-post man ever raised for her was: 'Please me, that is the road to my heart; curb the voice of your body, dwarf your soul, stifle your genius and the workings of your individual temperament, ay, regulate your conscience in accordance with mine and my church, be good, and I will feed you and clothe you in return for your services; what more can a woman desire?' And if sometimes the untamed spirit looked out of a woman's eyes, and she spurned his offer, he took care to cry: 'She is a traitor to the sex I have moulded in my hands for centuries!' (1983: 206, 207-08).

On the other hand, the heroine of this story is drawn out of her self-indulgent, anti-communal, recalcitrant young widowhood (she resists, as Egerton did, strenuously feminist activity such as 'suffrage, social reformation, politics, all sorts of fatiguing things', is thankful to have buried a husband, and strongly objects to the 'animal in [men] when they are in love' [1983: 166, 168]) through her meeting with a vagrant, poverty-stricken poet during her walk along the shore of the fjord at Christiania. He is asleep when she comes across him, but he is deeply attractive in, she senses, a more than physical way, and in a rush of feeling that foreshadows the eventual 'regenerative' outcome of the story, she finds 'her depression is melting away, she only feels a ridiculous kind of buoyant reaction against it, a sense of rest after disturbance, the quiet after a rain gust' (1983: 176). As with Meredith, or Hardy, 'nature is the site of and a metaphor for the emergence of . . . desire' (Heilmann 2000: 103); and it is this encounter that eventually restores both heroine and poet to a self-completeness, encompassing the erotic, that can be realized only in their partnership. Unlike feminism's 'Advanced Woman', Egerton's women were far from being desexualized, and to that extent she was prey, in 'her celebration of the "eternal feminine" principal', to accusations of reinforcing male stereotypes, of 'replicat[ing] rather than challeng[ing] patriarchal thinking about women' (Heilmann 2000: 45). But in 'The Regeneration of Two' she widens her focus to entertain the possibility of a 'New Man', who would accept, and generously reward, the demand for equality, for full emotional reciprocation, of the 'New Woman' in a free sexual union. All in all, it was writers like her, and Grand, Caird, Iota, Emma Brooke, Ménie Muriel Dowie, and Olive Schreiner before them, who 'were determined to expand the permissible topics in fiction' (Vicinus 1983: viii), and opened the way to unprecedentedly frank treatment of gender relations and female sexuality in novels of the 1890s and later.

Grant Allen

Novelists, however, who wrote within the context of the New Woman debate differed sharply on gender issues. A controversial male of the species, Grant Allen (1848-99), in his notoriously ambivalent novel *The Woman Who Did* (1895),¹² advocated free union of the sexes against what he depicted as the slavery of marriage. His heroine, Herminia Barton, daughter of the Dean of Dunwich,

and educated at Girton, throws over her inherited and acquired social advantages to bear a child out of wedlock.

‘[T]he marriage itself [she says] is still an assertion of man’s supremacy over woman. It ties her to him for life; it ignores her individuality; it compels her to promise what no human heart can be sure of performing; for you can contract to do or not to do, easily enough: but contract to feel or not to feel—what transparent absurdity! It is full of all evils, and I decline to consider it. If I love a man at all, I must love him on terms of perfect freedom. (1995: 43)

In her more progressive role, Herminia is speaking for all women, in life or fiction, who treasure an ideal of love, but fear its destruction within the dread confines of an unhappy marriage. She echoes the anguish, in particular, of Clara Middleton and, even more, of Diana Warwick. In a late Victorian world where ‘perfect freedom’ was hard to come by, it was not often possible for women to be more than “‘prisoners” of feeling and of private life’ (Stubbs 1979: x). ‘The moral agency of a Victorian “lady”,’ comments Ardis, ‘is predicated on the denial of her sexual appetite. In contrast, Allen’s Herminia Barton asserts her agency through her active pursuit of sexual satisfaction’ (1990: 14).

Allen believed that childbearing was women’s main duty in life, and as the novel continues his heroine becomes increasingly like the women her creator is supposed to be attacking. Her lover, who is ‘steeped in Italy’, she sees as the man who can teach her about it. Indeed, ‘most men are teachers to the women who depend upon them. This sense of support and restfulness and clinging was fresh and delightful to her. It is a woman’s ancestral part to look up to the man; she is happiest in doing it, and must long remain so; and Herminia was not sorry to find herself in this so much a woman’ (1995: 77).

Allen was criticized, notably by Millicent Garrett Fawcett in the *Contemporary Review* (1895), for being very far from feminist; in fact she saw him as an enemy of the women’s movement: he ‘purports to write in the interests of women, but there will be very few women who do not see that his little book belongs very much more to the unregenerate man than to women at all’ (quoted in Wintle 1995: 1). As a mainstream, middle-class reformer, more interested in constitutional, civic and economic rights than sexual liberation, she objected to the blazoning of ‘free love’ as a feminist tenet. ‘[I]t is as an enemy [of the women’s movement] that [Grant Allen] endeavours to link together the claim of women to citizenship and social and industrial independence with attacks upon marriage and the family’ (1895: 630). The editor of the 1995 edition of *The Woman Who Did* concludes that Herminia

is an embodiment of her narrator’s monolithically simple view of fixed gender types. . . . *The Woman Who Did* may have stirred up debate, may have prompted thought about the institution of marriage, may even have been in some ways a brave and well-meant book, but it is not only one of the most notorious of the New Woman novels, but also one of the most conservative. (Wintle 1995: 18)

New Women, Older Novelists

Thomas Hardy

The effect on women of the men who play significant roles in their lives is of course the theme of novels written by men other than Grant Allen in the closing years of the century, though Meredith is the only undoubted feminist amongst them. Hardy’s *Tess*, alas, was one of those ‘innately sweet

heroines' whom Mona Caird repudiated. She falls foul of Angel Clare's inability to take his revolt against inherited expectations a crucial step further, and accept Tess in her essential innocence, as she is in reality, instead of allowing the puritan idealist in him to condemn her. Hardy believed the existing marriage laws to be "the gratuitous cause of at least half the misery of the community" . . . the product of "a barbaric age" of "gross superstition" (Stubbs 1981: 60). Jude Fawley clearly understands his predicament with Arabella Donn: 'Their lives were ruined, he thought; ruined by the fundamental error of their matrimonial union: that of having based a permanent contract on a temporary feeling which had no necessary connection with affinities that alone render a life-long comradeship tolerable' (Hardy 1985: 60-61). The words were increasingly applicable to Hardy's own marriage to Emma Gifford: he wrote from personal experience of the damage caused by the fatal attraction of romantic love, unmediated by mature reflection on the true nature of the parties involved. Responding to sexual attraction in Arabella, Jude does not understand how louche and scheming she is. Responding to a different kind of fascination in Sue Bridehead, intellectual as much as physical, he does not understand how miserable her fear of sex will make him, or her inability to come to terms with an adulterous relationship. Sue, in fact, is so complex in her contradictions, and poor Jude so bewildered in his entrapment between the two women, that we might argue that gender relations founder on the sheer difficulty of understanding not only other people, but ourselves.

George Moore

George Moore, who disliked Hardy's work, and chafed at the limitations that conventional morality sought to impose on artists and writers (he had been influenced, inter alia, by Zola's naturalism, with which he had become familiar as an artist in Paris),¹³ wanted, he wrote in *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888), 'an art that should explain all things and embrace modern life in its entirety, in its endless ramifications, be, as it were, a new creed in a new civilization' (quoted in Skilton 1999: x). He published novels which, in the 1880s, were shocking in their frankness: *A Modern Lover* (1883, and no less shocking, apparently, when republished as *Louis Seymour and Some Women* in 1917), *A Mummer's Wife* (1884), and *A Drama in Muslin* (1886). Like Meredith's *Richard Feverel*, these early works were deemed to be 'quite unfit for the prudish middle-class patrons of Mudie's circulating library' (Skilton 1999: ix). By the time Moore came to write *Esther Waters* (1894, his best-known work), his interest in Zola had receded. Even so, the novel was powerfully realistic in its depiction of the trials of a sexually exploited, illiterate servant-girl. As in Hardy and Gissing, it gave a voice to a member of the female underclass, whose adventure is no less heroic than any in which her social superiors might engage: it is 'a mother's fight for the life of her child against all the forces that civilisation arrays against the lowly and the illegitimate' (Moore 1999: 172).

George Gissing

Reflecting his own experience, marital unhappiness is ubiquitous in George Gissing's fiction, as is a marked tendency to condemn women as the cause of it, through their failure to use intelligence to come to a proper understanding of what is important in life. In a letter to his sister Ellen, written in 1882, he lamented the 'pigheadedness, ignorance and incapacity of women,' the result of a highly defective education (Stubbs 1981: 149). He cherished an ideal of domestic peace and stability, but was inconsistent in his portrayals of women who might have contributed to it. Alma, in *The Whirlpool* (1897), wants to be independent and educated, but her husband, suspicious and fearful of instability in a woman's nature, maintains a control that eventually drives her to suicide. In *The Odd Women* (1893), Gissing, as befits one of Meredith's disciples, is in favour of higher education for women, but in *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894) he is against it. Surprisingly, at this tail-end of the century, the woman he really admires is the domestic angel, as he describes her in *The Whirlpool*:

Mrs Morton had the beauty of perfect health, of health mental and physical. To describe her face as homely was to pay it the highest compliment, for its smile was the true light of home, that never failed. . . . She rose early; she slept early; and her day was full of manifold activity. Four children she had borne . . . and it seemed to her no merit that in these little ones she saw the end and reason of her being. Into her pure and healthy mind had never entered a thought in conflict with motherhood. Her breasts were the fountain of life; her babies clung to them and grew large of limb. From her they learnt to speak; from her they learnt the names of trees and flowers and all things beautiful around them; learnt, too, less by precept than from fair example, the sweetness and sincerity wherewith such mothers, and such alone, can endow their offspring. . . . By method and good-will she found time for everything, ruling her house and ordering her life so admirably that to those who saw her only in hours of leisure she seemed to be at leisure always. She would have felt it an impossible thing to abandon her children to the care of servants; reluctantly she left them even for an hour or two when other claims which could not be neglected called her forth. (1984: 324)

The passage is fundamentally a child's vision of an ideal mother, expressed in adult terms. Seared, it seems, by his experience of working-class poverty and squalor, Gissing takes refuge in the Ruskinian ideal of the nurturing woman—paradoxically, in that he is 'basically misogynist' (Tindall 1984: n.p.). *The Odd Women*, in contrast, was a powerful contribution to the pro-feminist debate, even if Gissing did confine his attention to the middle class. The narrow and impoverished life of Virginia and Alice Madden constitutes, with their younger sister Monica's desperately unhappy marriage to a weak but controlling husband, a critique of the ideal of docile female domesticity as exalted by such conservatives as the journalist W. R. Greg (who feared, inter alia, depletion of the marriage market if women were encouraged to take up independent work), John Ruskin and Eliza Lynn Linton. The feminist charge in the novel is carried by the fiercely independent Rhoda Nunn, whose name reflects the passionate commitment she brings to her feminist mission. She 'carries the weight of making her life politically and morally representative' (Showalter 1993: xxiii)—unlike Everard Barfoot (her candidate, at first, for a 'free union' instead of a conventional marriage), who is too unstable a character, too mired in the patriarchal urge to dominate women, to share Rhoda's goals. He escapes from their engagement into the complaisant embraces of Agnes Brissenden (as Meredith's Percy

Dacier rebounds from the complexities of Diana to the statuesque and deferential Constance Asper), thus confirming Rhoda's view of men's incorrigible infidelity.

George Meredith

Meredith's last three novels (the last if we exclude the posthumously published, and unfinished, *Celt and Saxon* [1910]) were by no means deliberate manifestoes for the New Woman, but they continue the development of heroines whose behaviour contradicts, as does Clara Middleton's, and especially Diana Warwick's, the expectations of their time and class. Meredith in the 1890s no longer finds it necessary to conform to orthodox ideas of marital fidelity. Kelvin comments that the death of his son Arthur at the beginning of the decade

heightened Meredith's ready inclination to confront, in his art, the consequences of a bad marriage. In the works of this decade, the marriage situation becomes, for the first time, a combined inferno and purgatory, in which the soul does not simply burn for the sake of burning but is reduced to its essence and begins, slowly and painfully, to emerge into knowledge of freedom. (1961: 170)

Nesta Radnor, in *One of Our Conquerors* (1891),¹⁴ is a cherished and loving daughter; but she carries (without knowing it) the stigma of illegitimacy. Her parents have never been able to marry in the twenty years they have been together, and have no choice but to adopt the morally corrosive position of waiting for Victor's wife, Mrs Burman (resentful at being deserted, much older than he is, and ailing) to die. This she takes the whole novel to do, thus depriving Nataly, who also dies in the end, of her longed-for peace of mind, gravely compromised, as well, by enforced departures from two country homes (the conventional neighbours, scandalized by gossip suspected by Victor to have been spread by Mrs Burman, had thoroughly disapproved of her ménage). Indeed Victor himself dies only a year after Nataly, his collapse and sudden mental instability ('the wreck of a splendid intelligence' [xlii, 510]) underlining the irony of the novel's title. 'Dudley beheld this Mr Victor Radnor successful up all the main steps, persuasive, popular, brightest of the elect of Fortune, felled to the ground within an hour, he and all his house' (xlii, 509). Victor's vulnerability¹⁵ is foreshadowed by Meredith in the first few lines of Chapter I, when he describes him 'crossing London Bridge at noon on a gusty April day,' and then being

almost magically detached from his conflict with the gale by some sly strip of slipperiness, abounding in that conduit of the markets, which had more or less adroitly performed the trick upon preceding passengers, and now laid this one flat amid the shuffle of feet, peaceful for the moment as the uncomplaining who have gone to Sabrina beneath the tides. (i, 1)

As we would expect with Meredith, the allusion with which the passage ends is more than merely playful (Bartlett 1962: 37-38). Sabrina's 'glassy, cool, translucent wave' is the River Severn's, of which she was the tutelary deity, and as Margaret Harris has noted, 'since the name of the unfortunate gentleman has not yet been given, the reader cannot register the appropriateness of mentioning Sabrina in connection with Victor Montgomery Radnor—Montgomery being the Welsh county where the Severn rises, and Radnor a county adjacent' (1973: 274).¹⁶ But this is only the simplest of the associations her name suggests. Sabrina was a mortal girl, the offspring, as Nesta is, of an illicit

liaison, and ‘thrown into the river by her vengeful stepmother’ (Ferguson et al 1996: 375), Gwendolen, her father Locrine’s former queen, whose resentment connects her with Mrs Burman. The ‘meaningful reverberations’ extend further than we have space for here, but they indicate Meredith’s difficult gift for prodigal allusiveness (Harris 1973: 274).

This inconspicuous incident, for which Victor is little the worse for wear except that his ‘superfine dashing-white waistcoat’ is now besmirched by the ‘smutty knuckles’ of the ruffian who helps him up (i, 2), is an emblem of this prosperous and ambitious merchant’s true circumstances. It also sounds the key atmospheric note in a novel that has more of London in it than any other by Meredith.¹⁷ Rich, influential, used to having his own way, Victor is nonetheless in the process of being compelled, like all his class, to come to terms with new historical forces that are being unleashed by his country’s evolution towards democracy. His being pitched headlong into the path of a hurrying London crowd, and helped to his feet by a member of it, epitomizes his ultimate dependence on the people, which he himself acknowledges in his wish to stand for Parliament. The ‘punctilio’ of which his helper accuses him (Victor had exclaimed against the man on seeing his own blotted waistcoat) reoccurs to Victor from time to time through the novel, as being an unjustly wounding thrust at his ability to conciliate ‘the mob . . . that enormous beast’ which was ‘comprehensible only when it applauded him’ (i, 3). (‘He always sees himself in relation to an audience, apparently needing the self-definition and sense of superiority he derives from such a placing’ [Harris 1973: 275]). He associates the incident with the memory of a slight pain at the back of his head as a result of his fall, and these leitmotifs remind both him and the reader, as the slave’s whisper did the triumphing Roman general, that he is only mortal. The precipitation to the pavement is comically undignified, but portends much more in the way of tragedy than would seem possible in a piece of orange peel.

Victor and Nataly love each other, but in leaving his wife to live with her young companion, Natalia Dreighton, Victor dooms the latter to unhappiness in suffering the social stigma of being his mistress, and both of them to guilt at wishing his wife dead so that they can marry. After all, he had married, at twenty-one, the forty-year-old widow for her money, the basis of his own fortune. He is another of Meredith’s misguided egoists—a benign one, to be sure, but revelling in his power to influence people’s lives through force of will, purportedly for their own good, but in Nataly’s case to her ultimate detriment. His desire to impress her and his friends with the trappings of prosperity, such as Lakelands, his country mansion (the material correlative of his constantly frustrated attempt to define his master ‘idea’, his vision, of life, which entails, amongst much else, national dominance, both mercantile and imperialist, and his personal sway over family, friends and associates), is more important to him than listening to her real needs. For one thing, Nataly would rather live in a cottage: Victor’s love, in decent seclusion, is more important to her than any grandiose material compensation for her unmarried state. She is, in fact, as much a victim of his selfishness and ambition as Mrs Burman is. The ‘Conqueror’ has reduced her, in her unwillingness to criticize him, to a sense of being his ‘accomplice, not his mate’ (Beer 1971: 271).

She could have turned to him, to show him she was in harmony with the holy night and loving world, but for the fear founded on a knowledge of the man he was; it held her frozen to the

semblance of a tombstone lady beside her lord, in the aisle where horror kindles pitchy blackness with its legions at one movement. Verily it was the ghost of Mrs Burman come to the bed, between them. (xx, 225)

As Beer comments, these lines recall, amongst other images, this grim couplet from Sonnet I of *Modern Love*:

Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between; (Bartlett 1978: 1. 117)

On the topic of ‘alienation in the midst of love . . . [Meredith] can sound tragic depths’ (Beer 1971: 272).

Nesta, however, although she loves her father, does not allow him to make her a victim. She, the illegitimate child, is the moral centre of the novel, affirming the worth of her parents through her love for them, but refusing the social status offered her, in spite of her birth-stigma, by Dudley Sowerby, the heir to an earldom, even though her parents hope it will expunge the shame. Nataly agonizes over the quandary of reconciling Nesta’s innocence with the evident unavoidability of her one day knowing her true position vis-à-vis her parents. Victor is breezily conventional in wanting to keep her ‘pure’, in fact disconcertingly Lintonesque in wanting to preserve ‘the adorable pretty ignorance’, the ‘beautiful . . . shining simplicity of our dear young English girls!’ (xiv, 148). Nesta’s youthful generosity and redemptive impulses are apparent in her kindness to one of Meredith’s outsider women, Mrs Martlett, about whose exact transgressions Meredith is vague (‘good taste’ was important to him in these matters); but Nesta’s encouragement helps to give Mrs Martlett the confidence to legitimize her relationship with the man whose name she has already adopted. Her history (which remains obscure to us) also goes some way to educate her young friend in life’s darker side; the friendship is, for Nesta, a deliberately chosen maturing experience. With her comely appearance and her determination to make decisions for herself, Nesta seems (as, we have noticed, do Meredith’s other young heroines) to embody facets of her narrator’s ideal of young womanhood—a free spirit, courage, intelligence and femininity, attributes he also gave (but her sufferings occlude them) to Nataly.

‘Man cannot live on squibs and Catherine wheels alone,’ complained an anonymous contributor to the *Saturday Review* about Meredith’s prose style (Williams 1971: 384). In fact the novel he was reviewing, *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* (1894), is not without a certain knottedness of expression from time to time, but it avoids the insistent, wilful obscurity of *One of Our Conquerors* (‘the most difficult novel in English to read,’ remarks Margaret Harris, ‘given that *Finnegans Wake* remains an inevitable exception’ [1975: 3]).¹⁸ There is not even a rebarbative prologue to delay one’s enjoyment.¹⁹ It is as if Meredith wanted clarity for the reader on the overwhelming question in these last novels (and also in *The Egoist*)—or rather, questions, for they occur in various ways according to the women’s circumstances; but they come together in the form which is most pressing: how is a woman’s desire for freedom—freedom in the mind and spirit, if not completely in the body—to be reconciled with the gravitational force of human relationship? How to avoid the mistake of entrapment with a man it is impossible to love in the degree necessary for a happy marriage? Aminta Farrell is trapped in a

marriage to a soldier much older than she, deluded at first by the romance of association with a handsome and distinguished man of action (of the type Meredith, who almost wholly eschewed any sort of public life, deeply admired). But although she has no material wants, she is physically and emotionally neglected, and walled away, unacknowledged as a wife, from society. She is even more in prison than Clara Middleton, having the actual legal tie to Lord Ormont to surmount. Meredith here goes further, morally speaking, than he has before in allowing his heroine to break away in spite of that. She and her rescuer, Matthew Weyburn, whom she has known since her schooldays, escape from London, first to Harwich, whence they sail to Felixstowe. The long swim they undertake there is more than a holiday indulgence. The unfamiliar element they are revelling in is transformative, lustral, revealing of possibilities. ‘Was [her friend Matey] unaware that they were boy and girl again?—she washed pure of the intervening years, new born, by blessing of the sea; worthy of him here!—that is, a swimmer worthy of him, his comrade in salt water’ (xxvii, 292). It is here, in her role as ‘sea-nymph’, as Matey calls her (xxvii, 289), rather than mortal woman, claimed by another, that she feels she can encounter Matthew on equal terms, that she has

cast away sex with the push from earth, as few men will believe that women, beautiful women, ever wish to do. . . . But Aminta forgave him for bringing earth so close to her when there was yet a space of salt water between her and shore; and she smiled at times, that he might not think she was looking grave. (xxvii, 293)

The liberation the sea stands for, for both of them, from the past is also, as they are both aware, a defiance of powerful social convention. Back on shore, Aminta tells Matthew she has written to Lord Ormont to tell him she has left him. She echoes Clara Middleton’s cry, and Diana Warwick’s, in saying ‘If only to pluck flowers in fields and know their names, I must be free!’ (xxviii, 298). The escape to Switzerland, and the realization of Matthew’s ideal of establishing his own school there, was an aspect of the lovers’ freedom especially offensive to conservative critics. A reviewer in *Boston’s Literary World* (8 September 1895) considered the author’s genius to be more evident than in any other of his novels, but declared that ‘[i]n setting [the young couple] up as instructors of youth Mr. Meredith will rightly call down the disapproval of all right-minded people on his head . . . all these socialistic dreams of free love must do harm to society’ (Williams 1971: 410). Gail Cunningham compares *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* with *The Egoist* as presenting heroes who embody ‘traditional ideals of the masculine,’ and heroines who learn to appreciate the virtues of men who live (like Meredith) without power, wealth and social grandeur. ‘The difference is that *The Egoist* stays just within the bounds of received morality, while *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* determinedly tramples them down’ (1978: 126, 127).

The Amazing Marriage was published in 1895, but begun in 1879 (a letter to Robert Louis Stevenson on 16 April informs him that Meredith is ‘about one quarter through’ (Cline 1970: 2. 569), and extensively revised in the intervening years. Meredith’s narrative techniques are not this dissertation’s primary concern, but it is relevant to note that in this novel his experimental impulse is unflagging, inasmuch as he has devised two narrators: the garrulous Dame Gossip, whose instincts and encouragement are for romance, and therefore for the reckless Lord Fleetwood; and the Modern

Novelist, who stands for philosophical dissection and judgement of erring humanity, the ‘surgical probing of human nature in antiseptically distanced prose’ (Wilt 1975: 212-13). Add the philosopher Gower Woodseer as a character whose side is taken by the Modern Novelist, and the dimensions of truth about the human condition that Meredith wishes to explore are considered from a tripartite perspective—or, indeed, quadripartite, if we allow for the Meredithian voice.

The Amazing Marriage is Meredith’s concluding exploration in fiction of the abuse of women by egoistic men, temperamentally and ideologically unfitted to have women in their power; and he uses the aristocracy, as he has so often done, as the most effective means of bringing patriarchal abuse into focus, together with the need for women, especially the young and vulnerable, to deal with the male sex, and in particular the question of marriage, rationally and intelligently. Judith Wilt calls the novel ‘Meredith’s picture of the destructiveness of false romance’ (1975: 212). It is indeed amazing that the Earl of Fleetwood and Carinthia Jane Kirby become engaged only hours after they have first met; but it is this improbability that generates the narrative complexities that follow: the impetuosity of both has consequences for both that play out according to their natures as revealed in the early chapters.

Lord Fleetwood, on holiday in Europe, meets Carinthia (who has grown up, with her brother Chillon John Kirby, in the eastern Austrian Alps, on the borders of Styria) near Baden, where she has paused on her way to England (Chillon has gone on ahead) after the death of her parents. Like other Meredithian heroines (Clara and Diana, for example) she seems to breathe the very spirit of her natural surroundings. Gower Woodseer (drawn after Meredith’s friend and fellow-naturalist, Robert Louis Stevenson), whom she and her brother have met on their journey, sees her as more rock than rose, a ‘beautiful Gorgon, a haggard Venus . . . an emanation of the mountain solitude . . . beautiful because she is purely of Nature’ (viii, 79, 81). ‘Power of heart was her conjuring magician,’ comments the narrator (xi, 120); it had been cultivated in her by her old expatriate father, and it steadies her as she ventures on her sometimes dangerous country rambles. One of these proves fateful to her:

She climbed to the rock-slabs above. This was too easily done. The poor bit of effort excited her frame to desire a spice of danger, her walk was towering in the physical contempt of a mountain girl for petty lowland obstructions. . . .

Some distance on, round the bend of the path, she was tempted to adventure by a projected forked head of a sturdy blunted and twisted little rock-fostered forest tree pushing horizontally for growth about thirty feet above the lower ground. She looked on it, and took a step down to the stem soon after. (xi, 120, 121)

It is at this point, ‘while colour, expression, and her proud stature marked her from her sex’ (xi, 120), that Fleetwood comes across her, unobserved. As he reflects, he accurately delineates her, except that it seems to him she is of the German nobility:

But, if a young woman out alone in the woods was hardly to be counted among the well-born, she held rank above them. Her face and bearing might really be taken to symbolize the forest life. She was as individual a representative as the Tragic and Comic masks, and should be got to stand between them for sign of the naturally straight-growing untrained, a noble daughter of the woods. (xi, 121)

As her Alpine name (which associates her with the physical and spiritual renewal Meredith always derived from the mountains) suggests, this heroine, more than any other we have considered in these

pages, embodies qualities that, as we know, Meredith most wished a woman to have—courage, resolution, critical intelligence, common sense, and femininity. In his damaged emotional state (having followed her to Europe, he is jealous of Henrietta Fakenham's apparent preference for Chillon), Fleetwood finds that a 'single glimpse' of Carinthia has 'raised him out of his grovelling perturbations, cooled and strengthened him, more than diverting the course of the poison Henrietta infused, and to which it disgraced him to be so subject' (xi, 122). Although it seems odd to her brother that an English nobleman should be 'raving about Nature' (vi, 62), the idea of his doing so associates him in Carinthia's mind with the attractive young wanderer, Woodseer. Woodseer, indeed, serves as the catalyst for Fleetwood's interest in Carinthia, and vice-versa. As the narrator comments, someone less dreamy and romantically poetic than Woodseer would have understood the lustful eagerness and impetuosity of Fleetwood, realized that '[h]ere was one bitten by the serpent of love, and athirst for an image of the sex to serve for the cooling herb, as youth will be' (viii, 80), and perhaps offered sage and bracing advice as to a wiser approach to the young woman. During the ball at the Schloss Fleetwood proposes to Carinthia as a way of punishing Henrietta, who has hurt him; and he is accepted by the orphaned girl, who is charmed by his manner, wants to relieve her brother of the burden of supporting her (so that he can marry Henrietta), and would like to dispense with the guardianship of her parsimonious maternal uncle. But this is the danger she faces:

[Fleetwood] took love unmanfully; the passion struck at his weakness; in wrath at the humiliation, if only to revenge himself for that, he could be fiendish; he knew it, and loathed the desired fair creature who caused and exposed to him these cracks in his nature, whence there came a brimstone stench of the infernal pits. (xi, 122)

Like Meredith's other male egoists (including the narrator in *Modern Love*), in crucial respects Fleetwood lacks true insight and maturity, and the deep concern for others that would restrain him from inflicting injury. He is certainly too immature and egoistic to be a fit husband, a truth he seems partly to apprehend in immediately repenting of his engagement—'his latest mad freak,' as he caricatures it to himself, 'of the proposal of his hand and title to the strange girl in a quadrille at a foreign castle' (xiii, 136). Not that he understands, at this stage, his own radical inadequacies, except that 'he chafed at subjection unless he had the particular spell constantly renewed' (ix, 93). Carinthia, on the other hand, who has willingly accepted a proposal from 'the greatest prize of the matrimonial market of all Europe and America' (xiii, 136), holds the reluctant Fleetwood to his word; and since it is with him a matter of family and personal pride to keep his word ('[i]t is the comic element in his nature, and from it the tragedy oozes' [Moffatt 2004: 363]), the amazing marriage of a wild mountain girl, a complete stranger to the rich, sophisticated Fleetwood and the caprices that govern him, comes about.

This poor girl, who has 'a hunger to admire,' is only too willing to abandon herself to love of her husband, and feels that 'she was his comrade whatever chanced' (xiv, 150), is doomed to be grievously let down. Her essential, unwitting mistake is that she has married a man with a profound contempt for women in so far as the attachment to them entails the performance of duties, and the acceptance of responsibilities, which he lacks the moral resources to acknowledge. The commentary

that Meredith provides for Fleetwood, as he sits beside Carinthia, driving her away from the wedding for which he has kept her waiting for two months, is a definitive expression in Meredith's fiction of the male egoist's bitter disappointment at having his self-serving ideal unanswered by the choice he has made.

To see her now, this girl, insisting to share his name, for a slip of his tongue . . . had that face much as a leaden winter landscape pretends to be the country radiant in colour. She belonged to the order of the variable animals—a woman indeed!—womanish enough in that. There are men who love women—the idea of woman. Woman is their shepherdess of sheep. He loved freedom, loathed the subjection of a partnership; could undergo it only in adoration of an ineffable splendour. He had stepped to the altar fancying she might keep to her part of the contract by appearing the miracle that subdued him. Seen by light of day, this bitter object beside him was a witch without her spells; that is, the skeleton of the seductive, ghastliest among horrors and ironies. . . . She was beside him, bearing his name, for the perpetual pouring of an acid on the wound that vile Henrietta—poisoned honey of a girl!—had dealt.

He glanced down at his possession:—heaven and the yawning pit were the contrast! Poisoned honey is after all honey while you eat it. Here was nothing but a rocky bowl of emptiness. (xv, 151-52)

These are surely the sentiments of an egoist/idealist of pathological intensity, and worse than Sir Willoughby Patterne in that Fleetwood is not struggling, in this passage, with the sense of being rejected by a woman he admires, and he is not ridiculous in dramatizing his disillusionment. There is an undercurrent of loathing here, of the woman who has somehow contrived to trap him by failing to be what he wishes her to be; and also of self-loathing in having fallen for the trap. The emotion in the passage points towards tragedy rather than comedy, towards issues more serious than the posturing Sir Willoughby can possibly convince us of. Fortunately, Carinthia has the strength of mind and character to survive the vicissitudes through which Fleetwood forces her. These include the brutal prize fight to which he takes her on her wedding-morning, and which is an emblem of his own male callousness; and a single visit, apparently via the window, to her bed on the night of the wedding, a visit that results in a son and heir.²⁰ As Henrietta presciently reflects, Carinthia is 'a woman of feeling, one whom her husband, if he came to know it and the depth of it, the rich sound of it, would mourn in sackcloth to have lost' (xlvii, 507). By the time Fleetwood comes to realize that Carinthia has qualities well worth a man's love, and that the one night he spent with her was infinitely more meaningful, both in itself and in its possibilities, than the rape he intended, the hope and patience that had sustained her passion through his unpardonable neglect have dwindled into an irremediable detachment. The love that had been available to him, if only he had been mature enough to accept it, is now reserved for her child and her brother, and she joins her brother in Spain to fight for the rebels. Fleetwood's union with her is 'a reality achieved and then destroyed, literally blasted, by those habits of mind, sentimentalism and egoism, with which man wars against reality' (Wilt 1975: 252). For Fleetwood, the novel traces a difficult progress towards self-discovery and a saner view of life as he learns to understand Carinthia's reality as an autonomous woman, rather than a problematic extension of himself and his hopes for his dynasty. But his painfully achieved insights are unbearable in the gilded world he has known, and drive him into monastic seclusion—whether as Brother Russett in a mountain monastery he has once

visited, or as a humble member of a self-organized community in the Welsh mountains, the narrator does not make clear.

Meredith and Some Later Novelists

In glancing forward, by way of conclusion, to Meredith's relation to some of his modernist successors, we may notice, as Richard C. Stevenson does with great cogency, his influence on, for example, James Joyce, an influence testified to by his brother Stanislaus, who found it 'predominant in the first draft of *A Portrait of the Artist*' (1916):

There is no mention of Meredith's wit or humour, or of those passionate glowing passages of a poet writing prose, which are Meredith's most characteristic contribution to the novel. Yet I know that my brother liked them and imitated them in various places—for example, at the end of the fourth chapter of *A Portrait*. In Trieste, when making a pupil a present of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, he accompanied the gift with a letter advancing many reservations as to the author's merits, but he would not have chosen that book if he had not liked it. (1969: 205; quoted in Stevenson 2004: 191-92)

D. H. Lawrence shares with Meredith a lyrical response to the natural world, and an urge to escape into that world from the 'sick hurry' and mechanical oppressiveness of contemporary civilization. He also shares, notes Stevenson, 'a recoil from what they both saw as an unbalanced and excessive faith in rationality' (2004: 195), a rationality embodied, for example, in Lawrence's Hermione Roddice in *Women in Love* (1921), to Rupert Birkin's dismay—and reacted against by the extraordinary Carinthia Kirby in *The Amazing Marriage*, a prime example of a Meredithian character's readiness to explore dimensions of the self, undertake adventures of the psyche, in a Romantic spirit that Lawrence would have approved.

If space allowed, we could trace Meredith's influence on E. M. Forster's early work, an influence Forster notoriously repudiated in his Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1927. But since this dissertation is concerned with Meredith in his relations with women, and his fictional presentation of women in their relation to men, it is fitting that we end with some remarks about Virginia Woolf, who, like Forster, said destructive things of Meredith, but amply compensated with perceptive praise. One of the manifestations of her respect for him might be said to be her creation of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which exorcised her father, Leslie Stephen's, ghost for her, as it did her mother's. In a diary entry on what would have been her father's ninety-sixth birthday, she expresses relief that he had not lived to celebrate it: 'His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books—inconceivable' (1954: 135; quoted in di Battista 1980: 163). She could not have resisted his patriarchal weight on her, could not have freed herself for imaginative creation. Mr Ramsay's pathos, his sense of life's tragedy, that gives so elegiac a tone to the novel, is, of course, Woolf's, derived from her father's death, and also, we might surmise, the awareness of the loss of herself that she would have suffered under his continuing domination. But its genesis is endlessly complex, and includes her profound response to Cowper's 'The Castaway', and to the nature

and symbolism of the sea as she had observed it at St Ives, a response she bestows on Mr Ramsay to convey her/his sense of human desolation:

It was his fate, his peculiarity, whether he wished it or not, to come out thus on a spit of land which the sea is slowly eating away, and there to stand, like a desolate sea-bird, alone. It was his power, his gift, suddenly to shed all superfluities, to shrink and diminish so that he looked barer and felt sparer, even physically, yet lost none of his intensity of mind, and so to stand on his little ledge facing the dark of human ignorance, how we know nothing and the sea eats away the ground we stand on—that was his fate, his gift. (1991: 50)

It is an Arnoldian vision, but also—and this is what connects it, ultimately, with Meredithian comedy—it is deeply egoistic. And Meredith had attributed pathos to his own *Egoist*, who ‘surely inspires pity.’

He who would desire to clothe himself at everybody’s expense, and is of that desire condemned to strip himself stark naked, he, if pathos ever had a form, might be taken for the actual person. Only he is not allowed to rush at you, roll you over and squeeze your body for the briny drops. There is the innovation. (‘Prelude’, 5)

It is the extravagance of the egoism, and its incongruity in a sunny garden by the sea where other people, especially the forward-looking, life-embracing young, are too busy to indulge themselves in an overwhelming sense of tragedy, that saves *To the Lighthouse* for comedy. And in writing the novel, Virginia Woolf affirms her belief, which was Meredith’s, in the crucial importance for a woman of avoiding being rolled over, and squeezed for the briny drops of an exacted, debilitating sympathy for the patriarch. As Maria di Battista comments, she was ‘the daughter victimized by a tyrannical, forbidding, if charming old man,’ but at forty-four she finds it in herself to ‘[move] from her original conception of a novel rooted in the ambivalent memories of childhood, through the dark passages of elegy, to her masterwork on the Victorian family romance’ (1980: 186). Woolf had undertaken ‘the modernist translation’ of realist fiction ‘into new formal, thematic, and psychological realms’ (Stevenson 2004: 202)—an enterprise for which George Meredith had been an indispensable forerunner.

NOTES

Introduction

1. J. M. Coetzee's latest book, *Diary of a Bad Year*, has a narrator, JC, who reaffirms the power of realism in fiction, despite the catchphrases of Barthes and Foucault concerning the death of the author, whose doubtful authority, they claim, is based on a 'bagful of rhetorical tricks' (Coetzee 2007: 149). JC says:

I never gave up reading Tolstoy, nor could I ever persuade myself that his effect on me was just a consequence of his rhetorical skill. I read him with an uneasy, even shamefaced absorption, just as (I now believe) the formalist critics who held sway in the twentieth century continued in their spare time to read the masters of realism with guilty fascination (Barthes' own anti-theoretical theory of the pleasure of reading was, I suspect, put together to explain and justify the obscure pleasure that Zola gave him). Now that the dust has settled, the mystery of Tolstoy's authority, and of the authority of other great authors, remains untouched. (150)

Chapter One: The Feminist Context

1. The final chapter of this dissertation will indicate the inadequacy of 'shrivelled prudes' as a description of the best women novelists of the *fin-de-siècle*.

2. A fuller list of canonical male writers who were 'technically most innovative and aesthetically sound producers of New Woman subjectivities' (Heilmann 2000: 6) would include Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), and Oscar Wilde (1856-1900). A lesser figure, but a passionate believer in women's freedom, was the 'mystical socialist', Edward Carpenter (1844-1929).

3. Strictly speaking, it is anachronistic to use the term 'feminist' for an anti-patriarchal activist before the late nineteenth century, at least in England. It was only on 27 April 1895 that it appeared in print for the first time, in *The Athenaeum*, and it took another three years to appear in the *Westminster Review*. For the sake of convenience, however, this dissertation will use it in its familiar modern sense.

4. Samuel Johnson noted in the *Adventurer* (11 December 1753) that 'the revolution of the years has now produced a generation of Amazons of the pen, who . . . have set masculine tyranny at defiance' (quoted in Benstock et al. 2002: 31).

5. He was supported in this by the *Westminster Review* in 1829, in the 1830s by the *Monthly Repository* and the *Metropolitan Magazine*, and in the original draft of the Chartists' 1838 charter.

6. 'It was re-issued,' notes Kate Millett, 'in 1871 with an additional preface perfumed with Ruskin's middle-aged infatuation with Rose La Touche' (1980: 123).

7. Provided for them in 1817, after the death the previous year of their father, Thomas, at the Cape of Good Hope, where, for the sake of his health, he had accepted a posting as Colonial Secretary.

8. After spending the winter of 1856-57 in Algiers, Barbara announced her engagement to a French physician, Eugène Bodichon, eighteen years her senior, and married him in London on 2 July 1857. Thereafter she spent half the year with him in Algiers.

9. The vote for women was still being strenuously opposed by W. E. Gladstone as late as 1892. In a letter to Samuel Smith on 11 April, he wrote of his concern for the effect of the vote on 'the precinct of the family, and . . . the relations of domestic life', and added: 'The fear I have is, lest we should invite [the woman] unwittingly to trespass on the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation of her own nature, which are the present sources of its power.' He therefore 'earnestly' hoped 'that the House of Commons will decline to give a second reading to the Woman's Suffrage Bill' (Hollis 1979: 320, 321).

10. Smith's was *Brief Summary in Plain Language of the Most Important Laws of England Concerning Women*, and Parkes's was *Remarks on the Education of Girls, with Reference to the Social, Legal and Industrial Position of Women Today*.

11. '[*The Subjection of Women*] was written at my daughter's suggestion that there might . . . be in existence a written exposition of my opinion on that great question, as full and conclusive as I could make it. The intention was to keep this among other unpublished papers, improving it from time to time if I was able, and to publish it at the time when it should seem likely to be most useful. As ultimately published it was enriched with some important ideas of my daughter's, and passages of her writing. But in what was of my own composition, all that is most striking and profound belongs to my wife; coming from the fund of thought which had been made common to us both, by our innumerable conversations and discussions on a topic which filled so large a place in our minds' (Mill 1989: 197-98). Jane Rendall notes that 'subsequent historians have doubted' whether Harriet deserved her husband's high opinion of her intellect (1985: 285).

12. A phrase from a letter Meredith wrote in January 1905 to Hugh W. Strong, quoted in part below.

13. The Marquis de Condorcet (1745-94), *philosophe* and revolutionary, contended (in publications such as *Lettres d'un bourgeois de New Haven à un citoyen de Virginie* [1787], and *Essai sur la constitution et des fonctions des assemblées provinciales* [1788]), that women were no less entitled to social and political rights than men. It was poor education and deprived environments that had held them back, not any inherent disability. Like men, they were capable, with education, of rational,

enlightened judgement that would fit them for the vote or for holding public office. In fact it was a mark of a civilized society to allow women full participation in the proper ordering of that society.

14. 'Rose' refers to Rose Jocelyn, the heroine of Meredith's early novel *Evan Harrington* (discussed in Chapter 2), who was modelled on the young Janet Duff Gordon.

Chapter Two: Experiments in Egoism

1. 'Over a long writing career of some sixteen novels and romances, Meredith never left off being experimental. His works always seemed to be testing something, be it an idea, a new departure in form, or an obscure psychological state' (Henckel 1980: 239).

2. 'The Pilgrim's Scrip' is a convenient device enabling Meredith to infiltrate philosophical reflection into the narrative. He was always determined to make his readers think, and he was particularly concerned to head them off, in fiction and poetry, as in life, from 'sentimentalism' ('rose-pink'), and exaggerated realism ('dirty drab'), which, without 'truth to nature', together with Philosophy, 'is really to bid a pumpkin caper. As much as legs are wanted for the dance, Philosophy is required to make our human nature credible and acceptable' (i, 15, 19). What better opportunity than a novel about the education of his young hero to enforce his favourite precepts? In this sense, Meredith is himself Sir Austin Feverel.

3. This aphorism, with 'It is probable' replacing 'I expect', appears on p. 43 of Meredith's Maroon Notebook, where it is deleted. Gillian Beer notes that Meredith used the Maroon Notebook to compose his own 'Pilgrim's Scrip', including 'some of the material in the novel, but continuing to assign sayings to "Sir A. Fev." after the book was published' (1970: 19).

4. In a letter to Samuel Lucas (the editor of *Once a Week*) on 7 July 1859, Meredith wrote: 'The moral is that no System of the sort succeeds with human nature, unless the originator has conceived it purely independent of personal passion. That was Sir Austin's way of wreaking his revenge' (Cline 1970: 1. 40).

5. A letter from Catherine Horne to her husband, Richard Hengist Horne (whom Meredith regarded as his literary mentor), dated 18 November 1852, throws light on the factual situation behind *Modern Love* only about three years into Meredith's marriage. She had just spent three weeks with the Merediths:

'Everything' is a great deal worse than last year. She is much more dictatorial and less affectionate, and he instead of bearing it as he used to is very often very ill-tempered. . . . At times he is as much in love and as infatuated as ever; and nearly all our walks were spoilt by her spoilt-beauty airs—not wanting to walk and yet being angry if we went on without her, etc., etc. . . . I want you to . . . explain to me if you can, how it is that he still cares one grain about her. I should, had she been my

wife, have thrown her into the river, for one of the things she says to him, without waiting for any more.

There follows a vivid description of a domestic drama the day before Catherine left. She was downstairs reading a book when

I presently heard the two above disputing; and after about half an hour of this, one evidently accusing the other, there came a series of dreadful screams. I rushed upstairs and met Mr M. at the door, very pale—he begged me to go in, and went down stairs. Mrs M. was sitting in a chair, with her hair all down, crying and screaming and calling out ‘Take him away, take him away!’ As soon as he shut the door she rushed to it and bolted it and then ran to open the window, which you know is directly over the river. I never having seen anyone in such a devilish passion before thought she was actually mad and wanted to throw herself in the river, so I prevented her opening it and made her sit down. Presently G. came up again and tried to speak to her and take her hand (fool!) but she said ‘no George, never again, you’ve gone too far this time, I’ll never speak to you again.’ I left the room then rejoicing at the ‘never again’ and hoping she really meant it. (Shaheen 1997: 26, 27)

6. Cline’s footnote: ‘Adrian, the Wise Youth of *Richard Feverel*, asked Sir Austin (in a letter): “Has it never struck you that Woman is nearer the vegetable than Man?” (First edn. ii. 115)’ (1970: 1. n4. 125).

7. It is part of Meredith’s strength (and difficulty) as a novelist—indeed, as a proto-modernist—that he prefers internal drama to external narrative, the complex dynamics of a character’s mind to the crowd-pleasing antics of mere plotting. Writing to the Rev. George Bainton on 14 September 1887, he said ‘I do not make a plot. If my characters, as I have them at heart before I begin on them, were boxed in a plot, they would soon lose the lines of their features’ (Cline 1970: 2. 888). We cannot go into the details of the controversy that has flourished over this claim, but it ranges from Priestley’s ‘Jamesian impatience’ with Meredith’s ‘narrative waywardness’ (Moses 1983: 9)—‘Few men who have put their names to a series of intelligent novels have shown less concern for the art of narration’ (1926: 145)—to Forster’s accolade, which pronounced Meredith ‘the finest contriver that English fiction has ever produced, and any lecture on plot must do homage to him’ (1962: 97-98). A more recent critic, David Howard, finds Meredith’s habit of evading dramatic, revelatory scenes and character—his ‘peripheralism’, as he calls it—for fear of their populist appeal a continual irritation. He ‘accumulates plot almost maniacally’, but because he seems to care little either for a coherent story or the reader’s grasp of it, ‘first nothing happens and then everything happens at once, but usually somewhere else’ (1971: 132). Like Hardy, Meredith thought himself more poet than novelist, an artist who ‘shows’ more than one who ‘tells’; but perhaps this conviction tended to compromise his art, as it did not do with Hardy’s.

8. Henkle, for example, after remarking that Meredith’s novels ‘are elaborately wrought, baroque designs of reality that parody and confound the mainstream English novel’s means of presenting life’, calls *Richard Feverel* ‘a *Bildungsroman manqué*’ (1980: 239).

9. According to the *SOD*, Paphos is ‘a Cypriot city formerly sacred to Aphrodite or Venus’, and ‘Paphian’ has had, since the late sixteenth century, the literary meaning of ‘prostitute’. It has also had, since the early seventeenth century, the transferred meaning ‘of or pertaining to (esp. illicit) sexual love’ (1993: 2089).

10. Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca is perhaps a descendant.

11. A foretaste of the inadequacy of science in forming Sir Willoughby Patterne’s outlook on life.

12. ‘The nature of the skeleton in his closet, and the fact that he half-closed the door to it and later pretended he hadn’t, are suggestive details about Meredith. He was a snob ashamed of his humble Welsh origins, but he took pride in them, on the side—pride in being a Celt more witty and passionate than Englishmen, being George Meredith, the grandson of Mel. He lied about his grandfather in life, but told the truth in literature; it was like him to do such a thing, like him to use for fiction, no matter what cost, the preposterous and ironic, therefore irresistible, revealing fact. The tailor as heroic patriarch is, like the best things in Meredith, a little bit too good, but true’ (Brownstein 1982: 182).

13. ‘[Shrapnel’s] name,’ Beer continues, ‘expresses the uncontrollable scattering and fragmenting by whose means Carlyle’s ideas spread abroad, and hints also at the dangerously fragmentary nature of the ideas themselves’ (1989: 82).

14. ‘He said soberly that he saw more certain indications of the reality of progress among women than any at present shown by men. And he was professedly temperate. He was but for opening avenues to the means of livelihood for them, and leaving it to their strength to conquer the position they might wish to win. His belief that they would do so was the revolutionary sign’ (xxviii, 301-02).

Chapter Three: *The Egoist*

1. The phrase comes from Norman Kelvin’s *A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), where he suggests that ‘what Meredith really meant by “common sense” was critical intelligence’ (103). It has been taken up by Richard C. Stevenson in *The Experimental Impulse in George Meredith’s Fiction* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), 21.

2. Critics vary in their respect for Meredith’s self-invented deity. Rachel M. Brownstein, for example, irreverently personifies her (it is ‘her’ here, but the gender is unstable) as

an apotheosis of the English lady: she is graceful and accomplished, aloof from the world in the high style of the upper classes, impeccable. She is a made-up, semiclassical deity, a Diana with impish children, a virgin mother nurturing with disdain, female yet sexless. The goddess of fortuitously

fastidious grandsons of tailors is the corrective to God the funless father. It is her pleasure and her special pride to distinguish high bright spirits in the mass; she is never fooled by the mere garments of greatness, or, for that matter, the deceptive plain broadcloth of tailors' descendants. Her realm is the lofty, snowy Alps: at the end of . . . *The Egoist* she appears there and looks down at the world, compressing her lips as she gracefully and generously abstains from further mockery of men. (1982: 183)

3. We recall Willoughby's outrage at Mrs Mountstuart's suggestion that he could have married an aristocratic widow. Not only does he emphatically utter the word 'I', he 'straighten[s] his whole figure to the erectness of the letter. . .' (iii, 19).

4. Ironically, though, Willoughby 'ever after . . . spoke of America respectfully and pensively, with a tail tucked in, as it were' (iv, 29). The plain speaking of Americans, which now and then amounted, in Willoughby's view, to 'insolence' (iv, 29), had apparently had a chastening effect on him in penetrating his lofty composure. Vernon, being altogether more open to democratic influence, had had to be torn away.

5. Neil Roberts quotes the passage in Chapter 3 which vividly evokes Laetitia's worship of Willoughby in terms of Oriental practice, and includes the sentence 'it is worth while for here and there a woman to be burnt, so long as women's general adoration of an ideal young man shall be preserved' (iii, 22). He comments that Meredith is exploiting 'Victorian prejudice about oriental religion,' thus participating 'in a polemic running throughout Meredith's work, in which he damns contemporary sexual attitudes by matching them with the supposed customs of the East. . . . The later hint at suttee also belongs to this polemic' (1997: 153). Willoughby's intention is clearly to use a factitious anxiety on Clara's behalf to manipulate her into swearing eternal fidelity.

6. He is drawn after the father of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), the critic, philosopher, biographer and journalist, former tutor at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and, until 1875, when he renounced his orders, an Anglican clergyman. He was the founding editor (1885-91) of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. A keen walker and mountaineer, Stephen became a great friend of Meredith's, who, until lameness prevented him, used to join his group of rambles, called 'The Tramps', on their weekly excursions around Surrey.

7. Curtis prints the version 'composed on June 15, 1806, or shortly thereafter' (255). He continues: 'printer's copy transcribed around January-March 29, 1806, or perhaps around March but before March 24, 1807' (255). The first alternative is an obvious error for 'January-March 29, 1807'.

8. Daniel R. Schwartz, in the *Victorian Newsletter*, disagreed: '[T]he nexus between romantic legend and dramatic action is not an elaborate ornament but the foundation of the novel's most important pattern of figurative language—a pattern that becomes an intrinsic part of the novel's dramatic and verbal action and a rich source of comic irony' (1968: 26). It might be argued that in saying this

Schwarz has not added to what we know, and that the structural function of the porcelain figure, and the irony to which it gives rise, do not necessarily invalidate Mayo's lack of enthusiasm for it. But he takes further Willoughby's ultra-patriarchal obsession with fixity and dominance in calling Patterne Hall a 'porcelain factory' (26)—everyone in it must receive his stamp; and he (Schwartz) draws attention to the recurrence of words like 'pattern', 'design' and 'model' in conversation or narrative, Willoughby's description of his 'effulgence' being 'tarnished', his ideal being 'shocked to fragments', and one of the aunts describing him as 'shattered' (27). One notable irony Schwartz cites involves Laetitia, so long relied on by Willoughby as the image of constancy; but in the end, '[t]he one whom the expert of moral sculpture conceives to be a completed statue of constancy turns on her creator and stamps a pattern of devoted constancy on him' (28). The article is a convincing rebuttal of Mayo for those who disagree that Meredith did his porcelain figure to death.

9. One of its great pleasures is Meredith's wonderfully deft handling of the comedy in minor characters—the Dickensianly lugubrious Fitch; the brisk little Dr Corney, with his 'Celtic intelligence' (xxvi, 319) (so we know Meredith approves of him); the would-be suitor and subsidiary egoist Horace De Craye, so strategically cautious in his conviction that Clara will become available to him, but outmanoeuvred by Willoughby; Lady Culmer, as devoted to her sofa as Jane Austen's Lady Bertram, who is "unerring when I set to speculating on my back," and is "brighter on a dull winter afternoon, on the sofa, beside my tea-service, than at any other season" (xlv, 562); Lady Busshe, endlessly inquisitive about high society, and a fine study in near-hysteria in canvassing for information; and finally the majestic Mrs Mountstuart Jenkinson, surely one of the great *grandes dames* of English literature, fit to set beside Wilde's Lady Bracknell.

Chapter Four: *Diana of the Crossways*

1. In refracting Diana through the diarists' pages in dialogic fashion, Meredith is exposing her, in considerable detail, both as to her outward, physical and social, nature, and what can be understood by the diarists, from the conduct they observe (or hear about), of her psychological makeup. Since it is obvious that the diarists are not only intensely curious about this extraordinary woman, and penetrating in their observations, but also view her from a variety of standpoints, the effect is to present us with a multifaceted substratum of knowledge and opinion about her, connecting at one point or another with the history of Caroline Norton, on which to build our own observations and conclusions as we proceed with the text. Perhaps there is a narratological advantage for Meredith in doing this. By providing us, for example, with information in his first few pages about Diana's marital crisis, particularly as to her husband's behaviour towards her and certain incidents in court, Meredith can relegate the husband and his legal proceedings to the background of his narrative, where they lurk as an ever-present, threatening shadow. He can concentrate wholly on Diana and her vicissitudes, played out in terms of her relationships with her most significant friends, her more problematic social

connections, and her periods of solitude, at home and abroad, which enable her to think and write. Everything she does, and everything that happens to her, after her marriage is the result of her catastrophic mistake in contracting it—as, indeed, one can say about Caroline.

The pages on the art of the novel, at first sight a gratuitous intrusion into a work of fiction, find creative representation, according to Gillian Beer, in the interplay of Diana's books with her own life. 'Even more, Meredith uses the relationship between her life and her novels to show the variable consciousness within even an articulate and honest person. Objectively, she understands; in her own conduct, she is blind' (1970: 142). Convoluted as it is, the first chapter gives us a preliminary survey of Diana and her interlocutors against which to measure the much amplified treatment of her provided in the rest of the novel. It is Meredith's initial attempt, on the reader's behalf, to pluck out the heart of her mystery.

2. More than four decades after *Diana of the Crossways*, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf, ruminating on relationships between women, and between men and women, wrote of 'the extremely complex force of femininity', the force that Meredith explores in his pages on Diana and Emma, and that preoccupied him all his life, in his world and in his fiction. He would surely have concurred in such a judgement as the following:

[W]omen have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men. And one must conclude that it would be a thousand pities if it were hindered or wasted, for it was won by centuries of the most drastic discipline, and there is nothing to take its place. (1998: 114)

The pent-up potential of the woman in a patriarchal world, and the necessity for its release, is exactly what Meredith intuited in his heroines, and allowed increasing expression for, as he progressed from, say, Jenny Denham in *Beauchamp's Career* to Carinthia Jane Kirby in *The Amazing Marriage*.

3. This is 'an extraordinary insight of Meredith's,' notes Judith Wilt,

one important in the examination of many of his young people: Cornelia Pole and Purcell Barrett, Clara Middleton, Neville Beauchamp, Fleetwood and Carinthia Kirby, all try to hold experience at bay long enough to free the imagination for explorations into ideal self-conceptions as lovers and martyrs. (1976: 45)

4. This is perhaps the place to note that Meredith's 'visions of Nature' have been severely criticized by E. M. Forster as amounting to a deficiency in his moral outlook: 'they do not endure like Hardy's, there is too much Surrey about them, they are fluffy and lush. He could no more write the opening chapter of *The Return of the Native* than Box Hill could visit Salisbury Plain. What is really tragic and enduring in the scenery of England was hidden from him, and so is what is really tragic in life' (1962: 97). Meredith was no doubt too taken with the beauty of the English countryside he knew to be receptive to anything 'tragic' it suggested. Tragedy, of course, takes place in his fiction—there is, for example, Lucy Desborough's death at the end of *Richard Feverel*, and Nevil Beauchamp's drowning at

the end of *Beauchamp's Career*—but perhaps Forster agreed with other critics that these events were too arbitrary to be artistically convincing. Even Diana was evidently fortunate to survive.

5. Meredith's view on the universality of egoism is recalled in Robert Louis Stevenson's essay 'Books Which Have Influenced Me', in which he comments on *The Egoist*:

It is yourself that is hunted down; these are your faults that are dragged into the day and numbered, with lingering relish, with cruel cunning and precision. A young friend of Mr Meredith's (as I have the story) came to him in an agony. 'This is too bad of you,' he cried. 'Willoughby is me!' 'No, my dear fellow,' said the author; 'he is all of us.' I have read *The Egoist* five or six times myself, and I mean to read it again; for I am like the young friend of the anecdote—I think Willoughby an unmanly but a very serviceable exposure of myself. (Quoted in Stevenson 1954: 245)

6. On the Rovio episode, Robert S. Baker comments that

[i]n the myth of Actaeon, the male interloper, having intruded into the chaste sanctuary of the goddess and perceived her naked while bathing, is transformed into a stag and killed by his own hounds. Percy's role as a kind of sentimentalist Actaeon is identical. Having seen Diana and responded in a complexly ambiguous way, he will be hounded by his own darkly sentimental perception (the sexual impulses of his 'dog-world') into the arms of Constance Asper, a woman whom Meredith carefully fashions to correspond with Dacier's prurient inclinations.' (1976b: 73-74)

7. Janet Horowitz Murray usefully comments on the function of Diana's novels in the text. *The Man of Two Minds*

seems to be modelled on [Diana's] misperception of Redworth but in fact ironically parallels her affair with Dacier insofar as it presents a man wishing to remake his fiancée after his own ideal of womanhood. The novels Diana writes are sketched out enough so that we see their appropriateness to her mind and to her stage of life—her situation, her pressures, her misperceptions of herself and her friends. (1987: 167-68).

8. The episode is based on 'the legend that Mrs Norton had betrayed the Cabinet secret [acquired through her friendship with the young politician Sidney Herbert] to Delane, editor of *The Times*' (Stevenson 1954: 258). Meredith had believed the legend, says Stevenson, but after representations by her family, he withdrew the imputation in a note to subsequent editions.

9. Curiously, Penny Boumelha mistakes the closeted Diana as the victim of all the busy male negligence that had preceded the 'homage' (1991: 200).

10. We recall that with the dismissal of Warwick's case against her, Diana 'escape[d] the meshes of the terrific net of the marital law brutally whirled to capture her' (xiv, 161) by sailing with her friends the Esquarts on a voyage to the Mediterranean, and the yacht is called *Clarissa*. Three powerful metaphors contrast her suffering and her liberation: 'once out of the public flames' she is 'borne by a whiter than swan's wing on the sapphire Mediterranean' (xv, 162, 164). As with Clara Middleton, that whiteness refers us to the pure, reinvigorating air of the snowy Alps towards which Diana is eventually heading; and also, as with Aminta Farrell, to the literal and symbolic cleansing effected by the sea..

11. '[A] sketch of [Meredith's] own youthful self,' says Stevenson (1954: 255); but a young man destined not to win the brilliant young object of his infatuation, as Meredith won 'the fascinating, aloof literary widow' (Murray 1987: 132), Mary Ellen Nicolls.

12. Meredith was writing, on 16 March 1888, to an American correspondent, Mrs J.B. Gilman, who in that year wrote the introduction to a collection of excerpts from his writings entitled *The Pilgrim's Scrip*, a work he discountenanced: 'A gathering of "all plums", if such they be, is not digestible', being out of context. The letter ends:

I have written always with the perception that there is no life but of the spirit; that the concrete is really the shadowy; yet that the way to spiritual life lies in the complete unfolding of the creature, not in the nipping of his passions. An outrage to Nature helps to extinguish his light. To the flourishing of the spirit, then, through the healthy exercise of the senses. These are simple truisms. But of such are the borderways of the path of wisdom. (Cline 1970: 2. 910)

13. Donald David Stone takes a much less favourable view of Redworth (as he does of the novel as a whole); it is also a simplistic one, in an account of Meredith's work that at times seems superficial:

[T]he patient Tom Redworth had grown richer and worthier, like a hero in a comic strip, and Diana is won over to him after watching him play cricket with a group of boys. Presented as the practical Saxon mate for the Celtic heroine, Redworth decides that Diana 'would complete him.' Their eventual marriage seems more the result of symbolic algebra than of human affection. (1972: 149)

14. '[H]is way,' remarks Stone, 'of symbolically affirming the perpetuity of the compromising Victorian world' (1972: 149).

Chapter Five: The 1890s—and Beyond

1. Brownell's use of quotation marks seems to indicate that 'the sex' for 'women collectively' was even then an archaism, at least in American usage. The phrase dates from the late sixteenth century, and Meredith used it to the end, as in *One of Our Conquerors* (1891): 'She said, smiling: I never felt my sin until this blow came! Therefore the blow was proved divine. Ought it not to be welcomed?—and she appearing no better than one of those, the leprous of the sex!' (xxxviii, 450).

2. 'The belief that women were less capable of rational and original thought than men was too firmly rooted in a male-dominated society to submit to easy destruction not only in the 1890s but long afterwards. Whether the issue was education, politics, employment or other aspects of the struggle for equality, the assertion that the inferiority of women stemmed from ineradicable physiological causes was widely accepted and used to justify their continued legal and social handicaps' (Rubinstein 1986: 3).

3. The earliest use of the phrase 'New Woman' in its formal, capitalized sense is generally considered to have been evoked by Sarah Grand's article 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question', in *The North American Review*, Number 158 of March 1894, which contrasted the traditional woman (in

particular what she called “‘the cow-woman’” and “‘the scum-woman’”), whom men could tolerate, with “‘the new woman [who] is a little above him’”. Her attack was addressed to what, on the analogy of ‘the Shrieking Sisterhood’, she called ‘the Bawling Brotherhood.’

[It] consists of two sorts of men. First of all is he who is satisfied with the cow-kind of woman as being most convenient; it is the threat of any strike amongst his domestic cattle for more consideration that irritates him into loud and angry protests. The other sort of Bawling Brother is he who is under the influence of the scum of our sex, who knows nothing better than women of that class in and out of society, preys upon them or ruins himself for them, takes his whole tone from them, and judges us all by them. Both the cow-woman and the scum-woman are well within the range of the comprehension of the Bawling Brotherhood, but the new woman is a little above him, and he never even thought of looking up to where she has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy. (1894b: 270-71)

It was this woman ‘who would have to hold out her hand to man and to educate him out of moral infancy’ (Rubinstein 1986: 16). In the May issue of the same journal Grand was even more aggressive, and drew even more attention; but it was her first piece which evoked a hostile response from the popular novelist ‘Ouida’ (Maria Louise Ramé, who liked to be known as ‘de la Ramée’) in her article ‘The New Woman’, also published in May. And the capitalizing of the phrase, repeated often by Ouida, had significant literary and social consequences. According to Ann Ardis, ‘[a]fter Ouida’s essay appeared . . . the New Woman novel, not real New Women, became the center of controversy’, which was ‘undoubtedly motivated by the publication of two of the three most (in)famous accounts of New Women in 1893 (George Egerton’s *Keynotes* [not a novel but a collection of short stories] and Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins*) . . .’. This ‘shift in focus’ was ‘a means of denying the New Woman’s reality’ (1990: 12). The two works are briefly considered in this chapter.

4. Within a fortnight in late May 1894 the term was first used in the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Chronicle*, the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Punch*. *Punch* was particularly taken with it, and six years later was wondering whether it still had currency.

5. Curiously enough, cycling, which, apart from a partiality to wearing bloomers, smoking cigarettes in public, and chatting about ‘free love’ and the works of Ibsen and Shaw, was noted disapprovingly as a favourite pursuit of the New Woman, was recognized both then and later as a major contributor to women’s liberation. It freed the riders from uncomfortable clothing and the necessity for a chaperon, giving them complete independence in pursuit of their own pleasure rather than a man’s, but without necessarily making them unsociable. As one of the women said, bicycles represented ‘a new dawn, a dawn of emancipation’ (Rubinstein 1986: 217).

6. Smith’s article was a response to ‘The Revolt of the Daughters’ in the *Nineteenth Century* of January 1894 (the first in a series of four articles which included ‘Mothers and Daughters’, and ‘A Reply from the Daughters’; Smith’s was the last) by Blanche Alethea Crackenthorpe, in which she advocated professional training for middle- and upper-class young women who otherwise had nothing

to occupy them except marriage (of which she strongly approved), and sometimes not even that. Responses from young women who chafed at the *longueurs* and restrictions of the parental home included one from Lady Kathleen Cuffe, daughter of the Earl and Countess of Desart, who yearned for music halls and her own latchkey, and looked forward to ‘the day when a chaperon will be as little known as a great auk or other creature of a past era’ (quoted in Rubinstein 1986: 14).

7. She was born Frances Elizabeth Bellenden Clarke, in County Down, Ireland, and at sixteen married an army surgeon, David Chambers McFall, who was more than twice her age. It was in the time of the infamous Contagious Diseases Acts, and distressingly for Sarah, who strongly disapproved of the institution, her husband was appointed, on their return from five years in India, to a position in a Lock hospital, where prostitutes, or women suspected of being so, were forcibly examined after being picked up at random from the streets. Furthermore, McFall himself, to Sarah’s horror, turned out to be promiscuous, a condition whose mortal dangers became a theme of her novels. ‘[B]efore *The Heavenly Twins* was published (at first anonymously) and because that provided her with an income . . . she left her husband and son, after twenty years of marriage, moved to London and changed her name from Frances McFall to Madame Sarah Grand’ (Heilmann 2003: 19).

8. Kucich believes that the psychological contradictions that so fascinated Grand (self-contradiction was in fact ‘the psychological state most interesting to her’), ‘particularly those generated by women’s social dilemmas, had aesthetic consequences that cry out to be put in relation to modernist formal innovations’ (1999: 196, 197).

9. Other collections were *Symphonies* (1897) and *Fantasias* (1898). Showalter believes that ‘[t]he best women’s writing of the 1890s is in the short story rather than in the novel’ (1999: xxxi).

10. ‘In her own day Egerton’s work was frequently read as autobiographical and certainly she had plenty of lived experience of the sorts of “impropriety” for which her writing was criticized’ (McCullough 1999: 205)—notably in Norway, where she lived with a violent, drunken bigamist (1887-89).

11. ‘Throughout her work the highest compliment Egerton could give a woman was to declare her a witch, in the sense of being bewitching—someone who knew her sexual attractiveness and was willing to use it’ (Vicinus 1983: x).

12. It evoked two novels that same year in direct, puritanical opposition to his: *The Woman Who Wouldn’t*, by Lucas Cleeve (Adelina G. I. Kingscote), and *The Woman Who Didn’t*, by Victoria Cross.

13. 'Naturalism moved away from the liberal and the moral novel, the novel of independent consciousness; it acknowledged genetic drives, the power of heredity, economic determinism, the force of sexual instinct, the *bête humaine*, the animal in man. It perceived the age of the mass, the machine, the crowded and inhuman city; it looked at the ghettos, the age of commodities, rising department stores, the industrial conditions of workers, the visible aspects and processes of the modern itself. It claimed scientific rationality rather than religious or moral wisdom; it was the art of the direct, the frank, the free, the contemporary—the modern tone itself.' (Bradbury 2001: 22)

14. As Mary Sturge Gretton says, although this is one of Meredith's greatest novels, it 'is the most exasperating; its author's mania for metaphor riots in it' (1926: 1930). He admitted it was 'a trying piece of work' (Cline 1970: 3. 1573), and his 'most indigestible production' (Priestley 1926: 44); but as always, he was determined to make his readers think about his world-view, in spite of his unpopularity. 'Concerning style,' he wrote, 'thought is tough, and dealing with thought produces toughness' (Cline 1970: 1. 876). His vision of society was not like Henry James's, but the writers were similar in that in the last decade of the century they had 'ceased to expect a wide acclaim'; and like James, Meredith 'was frankly trying his hand; "difficulty" alone interested him now', in his attempt not only to impose 'a stricter form on fiction', but to '[make] sense [of and wrest] a meaning from modern life' (Dupee 1956: 161; quoted in Kelvin 1961: 168). See note 18 for further comment on Meredith's prose.

15. Writing to an unidentified correspondent on 9 August 1891 (or later), Mariette Meredith said: 'My father asks me to . . . say that One of Our Conquerors is a man of rapid circulation, a prompt assimilation, a benevolent nature and a loose morality. Such men are sure to conquer and come to nought' (Cline 1970: 2. 1039).

16. Montgomeryshire and Radnorshire now form, with most of Brecknockshire and a small part of Denbighshire, the county of Powys.

17. The lines describing the Rev. Barmby's approach to the Radnor house after Nataly's death are redolent of the dreariness of a London street at dawn in Tennyson's *In Memoriam A. H. H.*: 'Light now, as of a strong memory of day along the street, assisted him to forget himself at the sight of the inanimate houses of this London, all revealed in a quietness not less immobile than tombstones of an unending cemetery, with its last ghost laid' (xlii, 507). But this is only one of many evocations in the novel of London's atmospheric range, the extraordinary 'life' that Samuel Johnson celebrated, as did Virginia Woolf. Meredith is aware of London's dark side, but his workers streaming over London Bridge are not, as with T. S. Eliot, 'undone' by death.

18. The anonymous reviewer in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (20 July 1894) called the style ‘tortured’: ‘From beginning to end the book is a tirade’ (Williams 1971: 395). More recently, critics have accepted the style as the price to be paid for extreme subtlety of insight into human nature. Margaret Harris, who has made a special study of the prose, argues that.

[a]buse of Meredith’s style which is not simply directed to its polysyllabic obscurities frequently proceeds from an implicit assumption that Meredith aimed at but failed to achieve the intensity and effect of James or Joyce. . . . Meredith is concerned to figure forth the inner life of his characters in a style which has its own logic and justification. (Harris 1973: 283)

The prose is intended not only to reflect, but embody, the situation described. To take only one example, Meredith ironically warns the reader of ‘some dithyrambic inebriety of narration (quiverings of the reverent pen)’ (iii, 18) in which he has in fact indulged from the beginning of the chapter where Victor Norton and Simeon Fenellan meet for a drink in the City. In another comment, written for the introduction to her edition of *One of Our Conquerors*, Harris says that Meredith’s prose does, ‘to some extent’, suffer from ‘verbal intoxication’ (or, as Beer puts it, ‘[a]t times it inadvertently oversteps [the] limits’ of language [1971: 266]).

But Meredith was engaged . . . in testing what language can do to express the inexpressible, to portray mental processes, even those not usually articulated, and to explain their relation to observable action. Like James in his late works, Meredith displaced the ordinary language of the novel by a mandarin mode, a highly wrought prose which attempts to represent a whole range of sensibilities and not merely a variety of actions. (Harris 1975: 7)

‘His late novels,’ writes Gillian Beer, ‘often seem cryptic, self-absorbed, baulking our efforts as readers. But on re-reading the crabbedness obtrudes itself far less, the intelligence, the poignant consciousness of human complexity comes fully home.’ The style of *One of Our Conquerors* would have been distressing to Trollope, who ‘complained that he had had to read many sentences in *Daniel Deronda* three times.’ On the other hand, ‘in James’s wary, impatient admiration of [Meredith] we can sense the artist’s unwilling acknowledgement of a predecessor’. As with *The Wings of a Dove*, for example, the demands on the reader are as exacting as the skill and sheer intelligence embodied in the language. In our response to this novel, which ‘is self-consciously *about* language and the limits of language . . . [w]e have to make the book, not simply listen to it’ (1971: 265, 265-66, 266). As in late James, there is ‘a frolicsome, slightly distancing air about much of the prose’ (Hewitt 1988: 22) in Meredith, but that ‘slightly’ is an understatement for at least two of Meredith’s last three novels (*Lord Ormont and His Aminta* makes more concessions to the reader). Douglas Hewitt’s judgement on James is equally applicable to Meredith: ‘It is hardly too much to say that the effect of the prose is intimidatory; it forbids us to challenge James’s statements on pain of being convicted of obtuseness’ (1988: 23).

19. ‘Meredith told Lionel Johnson that he always wrote his first chapters last’ (Stevenson 1954: 293).

20. Lionel Stevenson mentions (1954: 321) one critic’s comment that the advent of the child is so unexplained that the novel should be titled *The Amazing Baby*. And the *Pall Mall Gazette*’s

anonymous reviewer on 23 December 1895 thought it 'a deeply interesting case of spontaneous generation' (Williams 1971: 442). Both comments point to Meredith's inveterate habit as a novelist of obscuring one or other significant event so that when it is revealed the reader will respond with the characters.

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