

RSV

Rivista di Studi Vittoriani

41-42

*Volume stampato con il contributo del Dipartimento di Scienze
Filosofiche, Pedagogiche ed Economico-Quantitative dell'Uni-
versità degli Studi "G. d'Annunzio" di Chieti e Pescara.*

Gli articoli proposti per la pubblicazione sono esaminati da due referees coperti da anonimato. Le eventuali revisioni sono obbligatorie ai fini dell'accettazione.

ISSN 1128-2290

[ISBN-978-88-7497-656-0]

© 2016, Gruppo Editoriale Tabula Fati
66100 Chieti - Via Colonna n. 148
Tel. 0871 561806 - 335 6499393
rsv@unich.it

Supplemento al n. 19 di IF (Aut. Trib. Chieti n. 5 del 20/06/2011)
Direttore Responsabile: Carlo Bordoni

Finito di stampare nel mese di Dicembre 2016 dalla Digital Team di Fano (PU)

RSV

Rivista di Studi Vittoriani

Anno XXI

Gennaio-Luglio 2016

Fascicolo 41-42

Direttore:

Francesco Marroni

Comitato di Redazione:

Mariaconcetta Costantini, Renzo D'Agnillo,
Anna Enrichetta Soccio

Comitato Scientifico:

Ian Campbell (University of Edinburgh)
J.A.V. Chapple (University of Hull)
Allan C. Christensen (John Cabot University, Roma)
Pierre Coustillas (Université de Lille)
Cristina Giorcelli (Università di Roma III)
Andrew King (University of Greenwich)
Jacob Korg (University of Washington)
Phillip Mallett (University of St. Andrews)
Franco Marucci (Università di Venezia)
Rosemarie Morgan (Yale University)
Norman Page (University of Nottingham)
Carlo Pagetti (Università di Milano)
David Paroissien (University of Buckingham)
Alan Shelston (University of Manchester)

Segreteria di Redazione:

Francesca D'Alfonso, Tania Zulli

*Con la collaborazione scientifica del C.U.S.V.E.
(Centro Universitario di Studi Vittoriani e Edoardiani - Pescara)*

SOMMARIO

SAGGI

Gloria Lauri-Lucente

“Demon Barbers”, “Scarecrows of Fidelity”, and
“Dialogical Deviances” in Neo-Victorian Film: The
Case of *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* 7

Mariaconcetta Costantini

Crossing Boundaries: Generic Impurity and
Experimentation in Catherine Crowe’s Novels 33

Anna Enrichetta Soccio

George Meredith and the Idea of History 51

CONTRIBUTI

Erin Louttit

The Birth and Rebirth of an Ideal Empire: Reincarnation
and Imperial Service in Kipling’s “Dis Aliter Visum”
and “The Tomb of His Ancestors” 63

Michela Marroni

“I enjoy my *mornings* here immensely”: John Ruskin
and the Tomb of Castelbarco in Verona 81

*Recensioni di Francesca Crisante, Francesca D’Alfonso,
Maria Luigia Di Nisio, Francesco Marroni, Anna Enrichetta
Soccio, Enrico Terrinoni, Tania Zulli.*

Anna Enrichetta Soccio

George Meredith and the Idea of History

Thomas Carlyle: “Man, ye suld write heestory!”
George Meredith: “Novel-writing is my way of
writing history”¹

It is generally agreed that one of the most distinctive aspects of George Meredith’s work in both prose and poetry is his understanding of the female world. For over more than a century, critics have recognized Meredith as “the champion of women”, a sort of “feminist” *ante litteram* whose treatment of fictional women has been one of the most revolutionary and subversive forms of cultural deviance from the Victorian episteme. As a novelist and a man, Meredith felt — perhaps more than any other contemporary fellow writer — the nineteenth-century crisis of orthodoxy and the change in the relationships between the sexes. As early as *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859) and *Modern Love* (1861), Meredith showed an acute awareness of sexual themes: he urged the importance of recognizing equality between the sexes upon his readers if society wanted to move towards social progress and moral advancement. Meredith is even more explicit in his *Essay on Comedy and the Uses of Comic Spirit* (1877) in which he avows that only “where women are on the road to an equal footing with men”² there will be *real* civilization. For this

¹ Quoted in Lionel Stevenson, *The Ordeal of George Meredith*, London, Peter Owen, 1954, p. 74.

² George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of Comic Spirit*, London, Constable, 1927, p. 60.

reason, Meredith has been regarded as a liberal and a progressive intellectual whose view of contemporary society went well beyond contemporary reality. By denouncing the distorted perception that men had of women, a perception that was also reinforced by writers and poets through literary conventions, women were denied any real alternative. Although Meredith proved to be unconventional enough to displease critics and readers as well, his persistent construction of female characters as the reverse of the Victorian ideal of femininity was to become the most characteristic aspect of his view of the world.

There is no doubt that characters such as Clara Middleton, Diana of the Crossways, Rhoda Fleming, Renée De Croisnel, Emilia Belloni, Nesta Radnor, Aminta Farrell, and Carinthia Jane, among others, are some of the most memorable figures Meredith had ever created in narrative terms. This was well perceived by Virginia Woolf who grasped the full meaning of Meredith's intellectual action. She praised him for the "inevitability" that his work would raise in the future, pushing generations of readers to "dispute" and "discuss"³ his eccentric themes, his obscure style and difficult technique.

Such an attitude was actually part of Meredith's *Weltanschauung* whose essence was, in many ways, non-Victorian. In an early essay, J. B. Priestley wrote that "the first thing to be noted about [Meredith's] attitude is the curious way in which it seems to escape the age in which he lived. Meredith, we may say, is *in* but not *of* the nineteenth century. He looks backward and forward"⁴. What Priestley meant is that Meredith anticipated many an issue besieging the twentieth-century aesthetic sensibility as well as the social and political debates of the years to come. As to the form of the novel, for example, Meredith discussed the unsuitability of Victorian literary conventions in their representation of reality during the last decades of the nineteenth century. He rejected realism while proposing an "obscure" narrative style mainly based on a Teutonic grammar and syntax, a peculiar verbosity, a lexicon deriving from ancient Greek and Roman, and the obsessive use

³ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader. Second Series*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1986 [1932], pp. 226-236.

⁴ J. B. Priestley, *George Meredith*, London, Macmillan, 1926, p. 62, emphasis in the text.

of the metaphor to convey not only themes and ideas but also the many voices and perceptions of his narrators and characters⁵. The difficulty in reading such a text — a difficulty which is also of an ontological nature — is even more evident when indirect speech is used, a technique that sometimes may be close to interior monologue, with the result that Meredith's imaginative universe may seem a chaos of words, voices and points of view.

In a letter to George Pierce Baker dated 22nd June 1887, Meredith wrote: "As to style, thought is tough, and dealing with thought produces toughness"⁶. He proved to be immensely aware that the novel could find a way of renovation only through renegotiating reality with language, even though such a renegotiation resulted in a sense of estrangement on the part of his readership. Donald D. Stone has interestingly discussed Meredith's *dialogic imagination* in the light of Bakhtin's studies on Dostoevsky and Rabelais. Stone writes that "among nineteenth-century novelists [...] George Meredith best validates Bakhtin's principles"⁷, thus demonstrating that the polyphonic structure that lies underneath Meredith's work is based on the same impulse which some years later will inform James Joyce's work⁸. By establishing a comparison between Meredith and twentieth-century writers, Stone recognizes that Meredith's attitude towards new narrative forms and language renovation constitutes a departure from the Victorian canon in the direction of early Modernism.

Unsurprisingly then, Meredith's mind reveals to be progressive and liberal also in his political and historical reflection; yet surprisingly, he is enlightened to such an extent that he ended up by theorizing, in a way, what political action will accomplish one century later, such as the European Union. His view of Europe and European matters was as insightful as it was unusual for a Victorian writer. Moreover, Meredith's interest in contemporary matters is well-known. He had an intimate familiarity and a profound affection for the Continent.

⁵ Susan Payne, *Difficult Discourse. George Meredith's Experimental Fiction*, Pisa, Edizioni ETS, 1996, p. 16 ff.

⁶ C. L. Cline, *The Letters of George Meredith*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1970, vol. I, p. 876.

⁷ Donald D. Stone, "Meredith and Bakhtin: Polyphony and Bildung", *Studies in English Literature*, 28, 4 (Autumn 1988), p. 694.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 707.

After spending some years in Germany as a young student, he travelled a lot through France, Switzerland and Italy as a journalist and tourist. Not only could he testify to the difficult situations of the Italian Risorgimento, but he also followed the process leading to the making of the German empire. The 1870s saw the end of the Franco-Prussian war and the rise of two united powers, Italy and Germany. The European political framework was changing fast under the pressure of new economic and social interests which were embodied by the movements and the parties that had taken part in the processes of unification of those countries. And such changes are fully dramatized in Meredith's novels.

1880 was the year in which *The Tragic Comedians* was published. The novel, marginalized by some critical responses for its lack of an original plot, its focus on only a few events and the ambiguity stemming from the fusion of "tragedy" and "comedy" — a case in point is Siegfried Sassoon who defined it as "an assault on the nervous system"⁹ — is particularly stimulating for an investigation of Meredith's idea of history. First of all, the plot revolves around two characters, Clotilde von Rudiger, the heiress of an influential aristocratic German family, and Sigismund Alvan, ideologist and political leader. The story narrated is modeled on that of the Countess von Racowitza and Ferdinand Lassalle, the founder of the Socialist movement in Germany. It fictionalizes their relationship and draws on the Countess's memoirs which were published in Germany in 1879. The novel's subtitle, "A Study in a Well-known Story", immediately conveys the author's intention to analyze real events and give their portrayal the cast of a documentary report. Meredith was aware of handling delicate material, which is to say, history as opposed to pure fiction. In a letter to Hardman (7 February 1881), he wrote: "I have a book for you — not to be reviewed; only to be read at your entire leisure. I fear that you will not care for it. But it is history, and a curious chapter of human life". Strictly speaking, it is from recent *history* that Meredith appropriates characters, events and settings to create his own *story* which come together like tiles in an elaborate mosaic. Thus the narrative voice introduces the couple:

⁹ Siegfried Sassoon, *Meredith*, London, Constable, 1948, p. 156.

The pair of tragic comedians of whom there will be question pass under this word as under their banner and motto. Their acts are incredible [...] *Yet they do belong to history, they breathed the stouter air that fiction's*, the last chapter of them is written in red blood, and the man pouring out the last chapter was of a mighty nature *not unheroical*, a man of active grappling *modern brain which wrestles with facts*, to keep the world alive, and can create them, to set it spinning¹⁰.

Although Meredith seems eager to justify his choice of the narrative form which combines “tragedy” and “comedy”, “romance” and “historical record” in a view that encompasses his complex idea of life as comedy and comedy as life, the passage just quoted insists on *history* as the only source of his work. It is interesting that, notwithstanding the use of words such as “incredible”, “fiction”, “unheroical”, the narrator strives to render the historical dimension of the plot which is imbued with real “facts” but is read through the lenses of traditional literary genres regarded “as emblems, as possible but limited ways of looking at this world”¹¹.

Characteristically enough, meditation upon historical matters and characters is regarded as an activity pertaining primarily to women. Time and again, the narrator’s point of view is replaced by Clotilde’s perspective that reflects on Alvan’s political principles. In chapter III, she is excited about the opportunity to meet Alvan whom she first describes in his physical appearance and then in his conversation with the people around him:

His theme was Action; the political advantages of *Action*; and he illustrated his view with historical examples, to the credit of the French, the temporary discredit of the German and English races, who tend to compromise instead. Of the English he spoke as of a power extinct, a people “gone to fat”, who have gained their end in a hoard of gold and shut the door upon bandit ideas. *Action means life to the soul as to the body. Compromise is virtual death.*

¹⁰ George Meredith, *The Tragic Comedians*, London, Constable, 1911, p. 1, emphasis added.

¹¹ Gillian Beer, *Meredith: A Change of Masks. A Study in the Novels*, London, The Athlone Press, 1970, p. 16.

*it is the pact between cowardice and comfort under the title of expediency. So do we gather dead matter about us. So are we gradually self-stifled, corrupt. The war with evil in every form must be incessant; we cannot have peace. Let then our joy be in war: in uncompromising Action, which need not be the less a sagacious conduct of the war... Action energizes men's brains, generates grander capacities, provokes greatness of soul between enemies, and is the guarantee of positive conquest for the benefit of our species. To doubt that, is to doubt of good being to be had for the seeking. He drew pictures of the healthy Rome when turbulent, the doomed quiescent. Rome struggling grasped the world. Rome stagnant invited Goth and Vandal*¹².

This example that occurs so early in the novel depicts the hero through Clotilde's perception. Not only is she using Alvan's words in a sort of internal dialogism, but she also comments on his idea of action and its advantages on the plane of political debate. By using a vividly aphoristic style, the narrator/Clotilde speaks in the first plural person to make us understand that she shares Alvan's view on the necessity of action for the progress of society, for which she herself provides historical examples ("Rome struggling grasped the world. Rome stagnant invited Goth and Vandal"). Such a narrative strategy shows the characters who live, as in a Dostoevsky's novel, "in active dialogue with history" and embody "a historical *idea* which contends with the ideas of his fictive compatriots"¹³.

Moreover, the passage at hand introduces the reference to brain and cerebral activity which will be constantly associated with women throughout the novel as well as in Meredith's overall work. Suffice it to remember here that as early as in *Modern Love* the husband's plea was "More brain, O Lord, more brain!". In fact, quite interestingly, Alvan recognizes that a man is great only if he has got something feminine, and especially if that something is brain:

She has a great brain. How much I owe that woman for instruction! You meet now and then men who have the

¹² Meredith, *The Tragic Comedians*, cit., p. 18, emphasis added.

¹³ Stone, *op. cit.*, p. 697, emphasis in the text.

woman in them without being womanized; they are the pick of men. And the choicest women are those who yield not a feather of their womanliness for some amount of manlike strength. And she is one; man's brain, woman's heart. I thought her unique till I heard of you¹⁴.

In other words, only men who are able to show the feminine side of their personality can be successful. However, Alvan's fall and death will be due largely to the *tragic* discrepancy between his principles and practices as he praises women's mental quickness and vividness on the one hand but, on the other hand, he regards women as "object[s] to be chased, the politician's relaxation, taken like the sportsman's business, with keen relish both for the pursuit and the prey, and a view of the termination of his pastime"¹⁵.

Alvan's failure is seen in the context of a larger reflection on the human mind. Blindness, egoism and opportunism cause tragedy in the novel as well as in history. Meredith's novel becomes almost a warning to politicians and statesman against the maladies of power.

2. Meredith's interests in the political affairs of the Continent are clearly expressed in his Italian novels, written after his first trip to the Belpaese in 1861, the same year as the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy. On that occasion, he arrived in Italy from his beloved Switzerland in July, and, after crossing the Alps, he visited Verona, Como, Venice, Milan where he could observe directly patriots and ordinary people alike in their attempt to revolt against the Austrian rule. As an English intellectual, Meredith had already been conversant with the Risorgimento ideals with which the British public had become familiar thanks to the political activities of many Italian leading figures, who had found a home in Britain as political refugees. Giuseppe Mazzini, Antonio Gallega, Gabriele Rossetti were some of the most eminent exiles who had exposed the British to the Italian political situation as early as 1820s since the first Carbonari uprisings for the independence and the unity of the nation.

¹⁴ Meredith, *The Tragic Comedians*, cit., p. 61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Meredith's first trip, however, was to change his personal interest in the country: from the picturesque landscape and the beauties of Italian art to political and social matters. As Lionel Stevenson writes: "[Meredith's] interest in public affairs became more serious, his observation of social nuances more incisive; and his wit gained a fresh assurance based on a wider perspective"¹⁶. Neither did landscape nor architecture capture Meredith's attention, but rather images of pain and death. It was certainly after his encounter with some Italian patriots and the "sophisticated international aristocracy"¹⁷ in the Italian historical towns that Meredith resumed writing his novel *Emilia in England* which was to be published in 1864, and later re-titled *Sandra Belloni* (1886). Its sequel, *Vittoria*, was published in 1866. Initially entitled *Emilia in Italy* to convey the sense of a continuation of the story, *Vittoria* has a huge cast with some of the characters taken from *Emilia in England*, and a more complicated plot entirely set in Italy, against the dramatic historical background of the late 1840s. Emilia, now Vittoria, plays a key role in the story, being amongst the Lombard activists for the Italian independence. Not only is Emilia's relationship with Count Carlo Ammiani, a young Italian nobleman involved with Mazzini and the national cause, the starting point for Meredith's discussion of political matters, but it is also her responsible choice to give the signal for the revolt by singing an aria at the end of the allegorical opera *Camilla* which is a crucial to portrayal of Italy's development towards freedom. As Ioan Williams suggests, "Italy's struggle for freedom was immensely important for Meredith"¹⁸. He considered the events of the Italian Risorgimento as the inevitable evolution of mankind towards a higher nature. In this sense, the future of Italy was seen as the equivalent of the future of humanity itself while Mazzini, the champion of Italian unity, embodied the idea of Italianity¹⁹.

¹⁶ Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Ioan Williams, "Emilia in England and Italy", in *Meredith Now. Some Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Fletcher, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971, p. 155.

¹⁹ On Meredith's and Italy see Anna Enrichetta Soccio, "A Victorian on the Continent: George Meredith's Response to Italy", *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies*, 13-14, 2004, pp. 189-196.

Referred to as “the Chief” throughout the novel, Mazzini is hardly a character but he dominates the plot with his influence and prestige that are constantly evoked by the Italian patriots who take part in the uprisings against the Austrians. Mazzini, who possessed the mythic qualities of Carlyle’s hero²⁰, advocated ideals of liberty, unity, independence that opened up new horizons to all those who believed in the progress of humanity, thus combining the Romantic image of the hero with the more recent ideas of Darwinism. At the end of the novel, we discover that Mazzini’s individual history coincides with the history of a country and the social forces around him. In the whole story, however, it is always a woman (Emilia alias Vittoria alias Camilla) that functions as a filter to the narration. It is her point of view that orientates political position and narrative perspective. Yet, apart any consideration on specific events and characters, history emerges as the embodiment of an idea of growth toward self-understanding which passes largely through women’s consciousness.

3. In a letter dated 27 February 1871, Meredith wrote: “I am European and Cosmopolitan — for humanity!”²¹. The choice of the word “European” is highly significant for our discourse on Meredith and history. A forerunner in literature, Meredith had also a unique insight into the complexities of the European political affairs. In this sense, *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* are perhaps more suggestive than the rest of Meredith’s work. The novel, published in 1894, the *annus mirabilis* of the New Woman fiction, narrates the story of Matey Weyburn and Aminta Farrell who first meet as schoolchildren and then again after a long time, Matey being Lord Ormont’s secretary and Aminta being Lord Ormont’s young wife. The plot revolves around Aminta’s process towards self-awareness, that is to say, towards the construction of an alternative to her wrong marriage with Ormont. In the end, Aminta, who has always been in love with Matey, elopes with him to Switzerland where they establish

²⁰ On Meredith, Mazzini and Carlyle see Marie Banfield, “Meredith, Mazzini and the *Risorgimento*: The Italian Novels”, *Rivista di Studi Vittoriani*, 9, 21 (Gennaio 2006), pp. 57-74.

²¹ William Maxse Meredith, *Letters of George Meredith: 1884-1881*, Madison, C. Scribener’s Son, 1913, Vol. I, p. 223.

a school for boys and girls, whose didactic methodology subverts the principles of traditional education. Here, in the new Swiss school, Matey and Aminta become the pioneers of a child-centered educational method based on the development of natural and spontaneous inclinations, in the wake of Rousseau and Pestalozzi. They also promote what Jack Lindsay has called “a kind of Utopian world in miniature”²². In such a world, plunged into the Swiss Alps — the Alpine images are all associated with the elevations of the mind, with the ability to see oneself and one’s society clearly, and thus with the ability to develop consciousness²³ — Matey and Aminta subvert the current theories of education by strongly supporting the principle of racial, religious, cultural and sexual equality:

“Catholics and Protestants are both welcome to us, according to our scheme. And Germans, French, English, Americans, Italians, if they will come; Spaniards and Portuguese, and Scandinavians, Russians as well. And Jews; Mahommedans too, if only they will come! The more mixed, the more it hits our object”;

[...] the secretary proposed the education and collocation of boys and girls in one group, never separated, declaring it the only way for them to learn to know and to respect one another. They were to learn together, play together, have matches together, as a scheme for stopping the mischief between them²⁴.

Meredith pushes further such a model of education and proposes an ambitious project which, on a social and political plane, anticipates the idea of the institution of a European union that will materialize only in the second half of the twentieth century:

“If at my school we have all nationalities — French boys and German, Italian, Russian, Spaniard — without distinction of race and religion and station, and with English intermixing — English games, English sense of

²² Jack Lindsay, *George Meredith: His Life and Work*, London, The Bodley Head, 1956, p. 316.

²³ See Donald R. Swanson, *Three Conquerors. Character and Method in the Mature Works of George Meredith*, The Hague and Paris, Mouton, 1969.

honour and conception of gentleman — *we shall help to nationalize Europe*. Emile Grenat, Adolf Fleischer, and an Italian, Vincentino Chiuse, are prepared to start with me: and they are men of attainments; they will throw up their positions; they will do me the honour to trust to my leadership. It's not scaling Alps or commanding armies, true"²⁵.

“*We shall help to nationalize Europe*” is the most suggestive intuition of Meredith's thought. In a period when all the European countries are engaged in the reinforcement of their colonial control in Africa and Asia, Meredith's intuition prefigures the modern advancement in the political and economic system of Europe, regarded as the possible way of development in the relationships amongst different countries. Still more prophetically, Matey is charged with the futuristic task of bridging the divide between the Old Continent and the New Continent: “He works for Europe and America — all civilized people — to be one country”²⁶.

In such a project, women play an active part. As an evolution of the figure of the Victorian governess to whom the education of so many children of aristocratic and bourgeois families was entrusted, Aminta is indispensable to Matey's educational project. Thanks to her courageous actions which include her decision to live a non-conventional and non-legalized marriage, Aminta represents a female challenge to her time. She is the “new woman” for a “new man”, the one who understands that the traditional union between man and woman is not the way women can achieve self-affirmation. In other words, she is aware that, as the narrator of *One of Our Conquerors* claims, “marriage alter[s] the view”²⁷. And yet in the Alps with Matey, her view is not altered at all.

As we have seen, Meredith is, in a more than one sense, a prophet. Although very different in their structure, content and their temporal dimension, the novels here discussed, *The*

²⁴ George Meredith, *Lord Ormont and His Aminta*, London, Constable, 1916, p. 71 and p. 131.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155, emphasis added.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

²⁷ George Meredith, *One of Our Conquerors*, London, Constable, 1906, p. 265.

Anna Enrichetta Soccio

Tragic Comedians, Emilia in England, Vittoria and *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* are all imbued with a sense of history that is filtered, spoken or forged by female sensibility. The emphasis on women's points of view aims at inviting the reader to understand history and the whole world in terms which are "other" than Victorian. And this is, of course, *prophetically* modern.