

Women in the Art of George Meredith

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

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In 1877 George Meredith was invited to deliver a lecture at the London Institution. He chose as his topic "The Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit." This lecture has since been published as "An Essay on Comedy." Written only two years before Meredith published The Egoist, his most widely read novel, "An Essay on Comedy" represents Meredith's mature ideas about the art of comedy. In his essay Meredith explains several principles that he considers to be prerequisite to the existence of pure comedy. One of these principles is as interesting for what it reveals about Meredith's sociological values as for its artistic merit. This is Meredith's idea that the social and mental equality of the sexes is necessary to pure comedy. Meredith stresses this principle throughout the essay and it also appears in his novels as a major theme. The intellectual equality of Meredith's heroine to her male counterparts, and her need for freedom within society, are integral to Meredith's comic novel, The Egoist, and also to a novel of a more serious tone, Diana of the Crossways. It is possible to see Meredith's theories about women developing even in his earliest major work, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel. Whether Meredith is concerned with an aesthetic principle or the theme of a novel, his concern with the need for the recognition of women as the mental and social equals of men permeates his later writing.

Meredith begins "An Essay on Comedy" by deploring

the scarcity of good comedy in English literature. The reason for this deficiency, he continues, is the failure of the English to meet the conditions that pure comedy must be based upon. Meredith writes that, "A society of cultivated men and women is required, wherein ideas are current, and the perceptions quick, that [the comic poet] may be supplied with matter and an audience. The semi-barbarism of merely giddy communities, and feverish emotional periods, repel him; and also a state of marked social inequality of the sexes; nor can he whose business is to address the mind be understood where there is not a moderate degree of intellectual activity."¹ The theory is obviously the basic formula for a Meredith novel, but he is able to illustrate his ideas with examples from the comedies of Shakespeare and Molière. Meredith continues his lecture by developing the points on his list of requirements for comedy. He repeats and expands his point on the necessity of equality between the sexes. "Comedy is an exhibition of [women's] battle with men, and that of men with them; and as the two, however divergent, both look on one object, namely, life, the gradual similarity of their impressions must bring them to some resemblance. The comic poet dares to show us men and women coming to this mutual likeness; he is for saying that when they grow together in social life their minds grow liker; just as the philosopher discerns the similarity of boy and girl, until the girl is marched away to the nursery."² Meredith chooses Shakespeare's Benedick and Beatrice, and

Moliere's *Alceste* and *Celimene* as examples of the comedy of opposition between men and women. Finally, Meredith becomes even more fervent in his insistence on equality for women. His essay begins to sound as much like a political tract as an essay on comedy. According to Meredith:

Where the veil is over women's faces, you cannot have society, without which the senses are barbarous and the Comic Spirit is driven to the gutters of grossness to slake its thirst. There has been fun in Bagdad. But there will never be civilization where comedy is not possible; and that comes of some degree of social equality of the sexes. I am not quoting the Arab to exhort and disturb the somnolent East; rather for cultivated women to 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, excited melodrama takes its place, and a sentimental version of them.... But where

women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty-- in 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.³

It is easy to see that Meredith classes the women of his day with the "tolerably independent, but uncultivated," women who help to make the sentimental novels that he despised so successful. In his own novels Meredith attempts to create comedy with women who are cultivated and independent. Meredith knows that women as individuals must work toward their intellectual equality, but he also sees that they cannot attain liberty without the cooperation of society. To illustrate this, Meredith creates heroines like Clara and Diana, who are exceptionally intelligent and who desire freedom, but are thwarted to some extent by the limitations that their society imposes upon women. Meredith says that, "The heroines of comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clear-sighted; they seem so to the sentimentally reared, only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or pilot."⁴

In Meredith's early novel, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, his heroine is closer to the prototype of the

sentimental heroine than to the ideal heroine described in "An Essay on Comedy." In Lucy Feverel, Meredith seems to be glorifying the very qualities that he later degrades. Lucy is humble, self-sacrificing, passive, and only slightly educated. She does no wrong in the novel, and is seemingly a victim of circumstances. It is evident from what Meredith says about Lucy in the novel that he likes her, but through his tone and a subtle exaggeration, Meredith's portrait of this ideal Victorian woman becomes a satire as much as a glorification. Lucy's spirit of self-sacrifice, for example, becomes slightly ridiculous when she never voices a word of complaint although her husband of a few months leaves her and does not return for over a year. In contrast with her calm acceptance of Richard's desertion of her, Lucy becomes inordinately upset when she discovers that she has served Richard's cousin Adrian an egg that is too hard-boiled to suit his taste. Afterward she immerses herself in Dr. Kitchener on Domestic Cookery to the point that Richard has to throw the volume out the window to attract her attention. Lucy, a married woman, is as innocent as the stringent Victorian code of morality could demand. She does not even realize that Lord Mountfalcon is trying to seduce her. The reason that Richard remains away from her is that he feels too sullied from his brief affair with Mrs. Mount to face her complete purity and innocence.

The other characters of the novel see Lucy as a completely helpless heroine. She is rarely mentioned without being referred to as "poor little thing" or "little woman." Much of the blame for Lucy and Richard's tragedy must be placed on their youth and inexperience, but Lucy's failure to be Richard's equal also has its share in causing the disaster. "It is not pleasing for a young husband, fancying his bride the peerless flower of Creation, to learn that he must humour a little woman in her. It was revolting to Richard."⁵ It seems to be partly Richard's boredom with Lucy that makes Mrs. Mount with her "manlike" honesty so fascinating.

Although Lucy is the heroine of The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, it is possible to see in the more minor character of Lady Blandish an early version of Meredith's later heroines. Lady Blandish refers to herself as romantic and sentimental throughout the novel, but she is revealed to be the character with the most common sense. Sir Austin, with his System, is trying to eliminate the human element from life and to make life a science. Thus, Lady Blandish's doubts about the system, blamed on her romanticism, are due to her understanding of human nature, and she emerges as more of a realist than Sir Austin. Like Diana later, Lady Blandish chafes under the restrictions of society. She tells Sir Austin that she will never remarry, because it is only as a widow that

she can enjoy Sir Austin's company without her character being questioned. Lady Blandish has no taste for the popular ideal of woman. She inquires of Sir Austin about a new acquaintance, "Is there a characteristic in Mrs. Grandison? Or is she only good? If so, how tired you must be!"⁶ At the end of the novel Lady Blandish finds that she no longer loves Sir Austin because she has lost her respect for him. She now sees Sir Austin as an egoist who was capable of sacrificing his son to his System. Lady Blandish is a link between Meredith's Lucy, who is strong despite her ignorance, and Meredith's later heroines, who become stronger as they lose their ignorance and become the mental and spiritual equals of men. Clara Middleton, of The Egoist, is one of these later heroines.

Clara, like Lady Blandish, is confronted with a man to whom she first responds with blind admiration. As she comes to know him, however, she realizes that he is an egoist, incapable of seeing her or anyone else as an individual person, and only sees others as he wishes them to relate to himself. Clara finds that Sir Willoughby expects her to be a mere extension of himself, perfectly in harmony with him, to complete his self-image. Although she has already engaged herself to marry Willoughby, Clara knows that she cannot submit to him outwardly while managing him indirectly, as an older woman friend suggests that she do. This would be contrary to Clara's nature.

Meredith endows her character with intelligence and she has been educated beyond the usual level for a girl by her scholarly father. She has also been raised by her father in an atmosphere of social freedom. Clara's lack of a mother helps to explain her relative independence to that of her contemporaries. Even before Clara has become conscious of the extent of Willoughby's possessiveness, she begins to long for a trip to the Alps. Her desire for the mountains recurs throughout the novel and is the symbol of her need for freedom. The distant and unattainable quality of the mountains represents to Clara the difficulty that she will have in attaining her freedom. Clara feels the strong hold that society and its conventions have on her. She does not see herself as a rebel and she is horrified at the thought of becoming a social outcast, but she is driven to consider the course of dishonorable flight when Willoughby refuses to release her from the engagement. Clara's independence has its limits and she feels incapable of acting on her own. She casts about for supporters, trying to make someone understand her position. She even finds herself sizing up Willoughby's friends as possible alternatives to Willoughby, tempted by the example of Willoughby's former fiancée, who ran away with another man.

Clara considers such desperate measures only when it is revealed to her what marriage to Willoughby will be like. Her first clue comes with Willoughby's insistence

that they must isolate themselves from the world. Willoughby argues that, "Two that love must have their sustenance in isolation." Clara answers, "No, they will be eating themselves up." "The purer the beauty, the more it will be out of the world," is Willoughby's final word.⁷ Willoughby explains that his dream of domestic happiness is to imagine Clara waiting for him at home as he rides back from the hunt, sharing his every thought with her by a kind of telepathic communication arising from the perfect harmony of their minds. Clara can only wonder at this, "I am to be always at home?"⁸ Clara knows that she does not have the devotion to live as Willoughby wishes. "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 honor 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.'"⁹ Clara realizes that the degree of harmony that Willoughby is talking about means subordination for her, since her thoughts are to be identical to his. Clara sees her future self in the persons of Willoughby's maiden aunts. "Clara wondered whether inclination or Sir Willoughby had disciplined their individuality out of them and made them his shadows, his echoes."¹⁰ Clara determines that, " 'My mind is my own, married or not!'

It was the point in dispute."¹¹

If Clara is Meredith's ideal woman, then Sir Willoughby Patterne represents all of the unfair attitudes toward women that Meredith sees as prevalent in his society. Willoughby's name, Patterne, suggests that Meredith finds him to be the rule, not the exception for most Englishmen. One fault that Meredith sees in society is the lack of recognition of woman's intellect. Willoughby obviously feels that Clara has no need of any intellectual stimulation beyond his presence, and he also belittles her intelligence in general. Willoughby feels that he must manipulate Clara through her emotions, as she has no reason to appeal to. When Clara disagrees with him, he takes it as a sign of her inferior intelligence. "He left her, convinced that he must do and say more to reach down to her female intelligence."¹² Willoughby advises Clara, "Whenever the little brain is in doubt, perplexed, undecided which course to adopt, she will come to me, will she not?"¹³ Willoughby also represents the typical Victorian male in his ideas about feminine sexuality. Victorian society, wrote John Stuart Mill, assumes that women are by nature cold and that good women are always constant.¹⁴ Of Willoughby Meredith writes, "His notion of women was the primitive black and white: there are good women, bad women; and he possessed a good one."¹⁵ When Clara experiences a sense of revulsion when Willoughby kisses her, and fails to respond, it does not occur to Willoughby that it might

be because she does not love him. Instead, "Sir Willoughby was enraptured with her. Even so purely, coldly, statue-like, Dian-like, would he have prescribed his bride's reception of his caress. The suffusion of crimson coming over her subsequently, showing her divinely feminine in reflective bashfulness, agreed with his highest definitions of female character."¹⁶ Willoughby, like his society, refuses to acknowledge Clara's need for freedom.

Clara, with her longing for the Alps, is Meredith's symbol of woman striving for higher attainments, and freedom of mind and spirit. Willoughby represents society, which, it seems to Meredith, is determined to isolate women from the world. Clara cannot escape the demands that Willoughby puts upon her without becoming an outcast from society. Clara is saved from dishonor through her own efforts and lucky circumstances, but Meredith is careful to show that Willoughby, like society, has not revised his values at all. Six years later Meredith published Diana of the Crossways, and in this novel the heroine is not so fortunate as to be able to be true to herself and still escape the condemnation of society.

Diana, of Diana of the Crossways, is simply a Clara who discovers her mistakes too late to escape the consequences. Diana, like Clara, is one of Meredith's ideal women. She is beautiful and charming, yet intelligent and independent. Diana has also been educated by her father and raised

without a mother. She is accustomed to moving freely among her father's friends as an intellectual equal. Diana is less idealized than Clara had been, however. She makes two serious mistakes in the novel, her marriage and her betrayal of a political secret, and Meredith does not excuse her entirely. Instead she is represented as flawed by her extreme impulsiveness and pride. Her lack of good judgment and her tendency to act impulsively were to be expected of women, according to Meredith, because men had always made their decisions for them, not expecting or allowing them to develop judgment. Unlike Clara, Diana has no money and her father is dead. These factors contribute to her decision to marry, since she feels that she can no longer be dependent on her best friend, whose husband has tried to seduce her. At this time Diana sees no alternative except marriage, but later, when she is separated from her husband, she is again without an income and this time she is forced to rely entirely upon herself. Diana manages to make a living by writing, and she becomes very conscious of the scarcity of occupations available to women. By making her own living, Meredith allows Diana to gain some independence, but unable to get a divorce, she remains tied to her husband until he dies late in the novel. Diana suffers, but she grows and learns from her mistakes. Meredith modelled Diana on a real woman and her life, and he intends her to be realistic and yet able to gain the

reader's sympathy. "Poor Diana was 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. but not one whose purity was carved in marble for the assurance to an Englishman that his possession of the changeless thing defies time and his fellows, is the pillar of his home and universally enviable."¹⁷

Opposing the heroine in Diana of the Crossways, as in The Egoist, is society. The chief metaphor of the novel is that of a defenceless creature pursued by hounds. A friend warns Diana that, "The world, my dear Mrs. Warwick, is a blundering machine upon its own affairs, but a cruel sleuth-hound to rouse in pursuit."¹⁸ Diana, of course, does not manage to do much that the world does not find fault with. Miserable in her marriage, Diana attempts to make life more bearable through her friendship with Lord Dannisburgh, a politician who is twice as old as she. Society finds this disgraceful since, "The British Lucretia was very properly not legally at home to the masculine world of that day. She plied her distaff in pure seclusion, meditating on her absent lord; or else a fair proportion of the masculine world, which had not yet, has not yet, 'doubled Cape Turk,' approved her condemnation to the sack."¹⁹ Diana ignores this fact and receives her male friend in her home in her husband's absence and allows herself

to be seen with him in public. Diana's husband takes the opportunity that the scandal presents and sues Diana for divorce on the grounds of adultery. Diana had not been ignorant of the dangers. "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 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 compacently suppose her accessible. Wretched at home, a woman ought bury herself in her wretchedness, else she may be assured that not the cleverest, wariest guard will cover her character."²⁰ Diana is acquitted in court, but her reputation is damaged anyway. As a separated wife Diana has no rights, not even the right to sue for divorce. Rejected by a portion of society for her indiscretion, Diana lives on the fringes of society. She further endangers herself by falling in love with another man while still legally married. At one point the lovers decide to run away together, but Diana is prevented by outside circumstances from destroying the remnants of her reputation. When Diana makes her second mistake and betrays a secret her lover had entrusted her with, he rejects Diana in favor of a girl whom Meredith describes

as a perfect heroine of Romance, in contrast to Diana, the heroine of Reality. This rejection occurs with such speed as to suggest that Diana's lover, although fascinated by her, has been uneasy all along with a woman who did not conform to the standards of worth that his society recognizes. Diana is left to recover from her loss, and she eventually learns to live with the world and is happily remarried.

As in The Egoist, Meredith criticizes the attitudes of Victorian society toward the intelligence of women, and the double sexual standards of the time. Diana's intelligence arouses distrust in many of the other characters, and one representative of the upper middle class reflects that, "Women with brains, moreover, are all heartless: they have no pity for distress, no horror of catastrophes, no joy in the happiness of the deserving. Brains in men advance a household to station; but brains in women divide it and are the wrecking of society."²¹ On the topics of morality and women's sexuality in Victorian society, a friend of Diana's comments, "The English notion of women seems to be that we are born white sheep or black; circumstances have nothing to do with our colour. They dread to grant distinctions, and to judge discerningly is beyond them. Whether the fiction, that their homes are purer than elsewhere, helps to establish the fact, I do not know: there is a class that does live honestly; and at any rate it springs from a liking for purity, but

I am sure that their method of impressing it on women has the dangers of things artificial."²²

Lionel Stevenson writes that with the publishing of Diana of the Crossways George Meredith became the chosen novelist of the "emancipated" woman.²³ Certainly this novel puts emphasis on the issues of the equality of women to men, such as legal and political equality, that the earlier novels did not; but there is a theme of the equal worth of men and women running through all of Meredith's works to some extent. Meredith may not have always acted the part of a feminist in his personal life, but he had a strong intellectual belief in feminism as is shown in his novels and "An Essay on Comedy". Meredith's narrator in The Egoist says of women:

The capaciously strong in soul among women will ultimately detect an infinite grossness in the demand for purity, infinite, spotless bloom. Earlier or later they see they have been victims of the singular Egoist, have worn a mask of ignorance to be named innocent, have turned themselves into market produce for his delight, and have really abandoned the commodity in ministering to the lust for it, suffered themselves to be dragged ages back in playing upon the fleshly innocence of happy accident to gratify his jealous greed of possession,

when it should have been their task to set the soul above the fairest fortune, and the gift of strength in women beyond ornamental whiteness."²⁴

The truest definition of feminism--the value of the soul and the strength in woman beyond all else--seems to have been understood and advocated admirably by Meredith throughout his art.

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Notes

¹ George Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1956), p. 3.

² "An Essay on Comedy," p. 15.

³ "An Essay on Comedy," pp. 31-32.

⁴ "An Essay on Comedy," p. 15.

⁵ George Meredith, The Ordeal of Richard Feverel (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 417.

⁶ The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, p. 237.

⁷ George Meredith, The Egoist (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 54.

⁸ The Egoist, p. 53.

⁹ The Egoist, p. 40.

¹⁰ The Egoist, p. 63.

¹¹ The Egoist, p. 63.

¹² The Egoist, p. 56.

¹³ The Egoist, p. 88.

14 John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women (New York: Dutton, 1965), pp. 282-283.

15 The Egoist, p. 90.

16 The Egoist, p. 50.

17 George Meredith, Diana of the Crossways (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), p. 399.

18 Diana of the Crossways, p. 349.

19 Diana of the Crossways, p. 234.

20 Diana of the Crossways, p. 116.

21 Diana of the Crossways, p. 406.

22 Diana of the Crossways, p. 158.

23 Lionel Stevenson, The Ordeal of George Meredith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 261.

24 The Egoist, p. 92.