

# Finding a Form for Modern Love: The Marriage of Form and Content in George Meredith's *Modern Love*

NATASHA MOORE

There are few aspects of George Meredith's 1862 sonnet sequence *Modern Love* that have not proved problematic in criticism of the poem, from the time of its publication to the present day. Across the century and a half of its reception history, critics have consistently disagreed on such fundamentals as what actually happens in the poem (is the wife in fact unfaithful? what is it that prompts her suicide?) and how many personae are relating the story (whether husband and narrator; or husband-and-narrator, a single consciousness shifting between first- and third-person narration). They have offered innumerable readings of its more obscure passages – such as the famous concluding lines of the sequence, with their 'ramping hosts of warrior horse' throwing 'that faint thin line upon the shore',<sup>1</sup> which in spite of manifold and ingenious efforts remain less cryptic than many of the glosses designed to explicate them – and assigned a full spectrum of values to the 'modernity' invoked by the poem's title, from stark psychological realism to scientific rationalism or a moral principle of equality between the sexes. Oddly enough, one of the work's most conspicuous departures from convention, the spillage of each of its fifty sonnets from the customary fourteen to sixteen lines, has attracted perhaps the least controversy of almost any feature of *Modern Love*. Any student of literary form knows to identify a sonnet first and foremost by counting lines; yet Meredith's breach of this all-but-inviolable law passes largely unchallenged through the upheavals of a century and a half of scholarship on the text. The poet in his correspondence referred to the individual units of *Modern Love* more than once as sonnets; sonnet XXX of the poem itself gestures self-reflexively towards its generic affiliation, the

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis B. Bartlett (ed.), *The Poems of George Meredith*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

husband concluding a bleak meditation on the ephemerality of love between ‘scientific animals’ with a sardonic ‘Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes’; and his reviewers, obliging in little else, seem to have accepted the designation equably enough.

Several critics, to be sure, have since made efforts to mount a formal defence of Meredith’s chosen form, whether based on literary precedent or the self-justifying purposefulness of the expansion. Some appeal to the Italian caudate or ‘tailed’ sonnet of sixteen lines to diminish the unorthodoxy of the poem, or else to underscore the complexity of its engagement with the sonnet tradition. Meredith himself apparently thought to dismiss the notion of kinship between the two elongated forms by responding to an enquiry from William Sharp, who wished to include one of the poems of *Modern Love* in an anthology of contemporary sonnets, that ‘The Italians allow of 16 lines, under the title of ‘Sonnets with a tail.’ But the lines of ‘Modern Love’ were not designed for that form.’<sup>2</sup> Sharp was only the first to disregard this somewhat evasive gloss on the unusual length of the sections of *Modern Love*, labelling them ‘essentially “caudated sonnets”’ in *Sonnets of this Century* anyway; perhaps the most recent is Kenneth Crowell, who argues in his article ‘*Modern Love* and the *Sonnetto Caudato*: Comedic Intervention through the Satiric Sonnet Form’ for an artful coyness in Meredith’s remarks to Sharp, and for a reappraisal of the sonnet sequence in relation to the ‘tailed’ sonnet’s tradition of political critique.<sup>3</sup> Others simply point to the effectiveness of the added lines in mirroring the inconclusiveness of the poem as a whole. Barbara Garlick, for example, suggests that the extended form ‘belies the possibility of both the glib couplet conclusion of the Elizabethan sonnet and the justificatory tone of the Petrarchan sestet’, and sees in the symmetry of each sonnet’s four *abba* rhymed quatrains a structural echo of the poem’s general sense that ‘there can be no clear-cut resolution, only a presentation of event and weighing of argument in the futile attempt to paint a just picture of disintegration’.<sup>4</sup> Meredith’s critics as a body have been eager to

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<sup>2</sup> George Meredith to William Sharp, November 12, 1885, in C. L. Cline (ed.), *Letters of George Meredith*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), II, p. 798.

<sup>3</sup> William Sharp, *Sonnets of this Century* (1887), 8 vols. The remark is reported by William T. Going in *Scanty Plot of Ground: Studies in the Victorian Sonnet* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p. 102. Kenneth Crowell, ‘*Modern Love* and the *Sonnetto Caudato*: Comedic Intervention through the Satiric Sonnet Form’, *Victorian Poetry* 48:4 (2010), 539-557.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Garlick, ‘The Message from Her: Anthony Thwaite’s *Victorian Voices* and George Meredith’s *Modern Love*’, in Penny Gay, Judith Johnston and

endorse *Modern Love*'s claim to sonnethood in spite of the superfluous lines, presumably because it aligns itself so closely with the sonnet tradition in other respects – most overtly in its pointedly archaic diction ('my Lady', 'thee'/'thy', 'paths perilous' (XXVIII), 'languishing in drouth' (XXXII)) and deployment of the conventional imagery of *amour courtois* (stars, roses, poison, hair, eyes, lips, and so on) frequently characteristic of Renaissance sonnetry.<sup>5</sup> The invocation of the sonnet form, fourteen lines or no, is central to the poem's *raison d'être* as (in Meredith's words) 'a dissection of the sentimental passion of these days'.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the rigid formulae of the neoclassical genre-system on the one hand, and the outright rejection of genre constraints by such early twentieth century critics as Benedetto Croce on the other, most writers on genre and poetic form in recent decades affirm both the indispensability of genre to artistic production and the elasticity of generic reference. While many commentators on *Modern Love* have found ways of accommodating Meredith's sixteen-line sonnet within traditional definitions of the form, a more malleable conception of generic affiliation makes, I suggest, a more promising starting-point for a consideration of the form of *Modern Love* – such as underpins William Going's conclusion, in his study of the

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Catherine Waters (eds), *Victorian Turns, Neo-Victorian Returns: Essays on Fiction and Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), p. 195. Cynthia Tucker, similarly, argues that the division of Meredith's sonnets into 'four uniform and independent units' serves both 'to promote an attempt at logical thought' and to 'structurally prevent its consummation', creating the effect of 'a mind desperately grappling with an experience which can never be fully resolved or understood'; Alison Chapman takes a slightly different line, reading into the supplementary lines an 'attempt to delay the sonnet's traditional volta and closure, just as the tortured speaker attempts to postpone the final dissolution of his marriage'. Cynthia Grant Tucker, 'Meredith's Broken Laurel: "Modern Love" and the Renaissance Sonnet Tradition', *Victorian Poetry* 10:4 (1972), 351-365: p. 355n6; Alison Chapman, 'Sonnet and Sonnet Sequence', in Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman and Antony H. Harrison (eds), *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 99-114: p. 110.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that Marianne Van Remoortel, in her recent work *Lives of the Sonnet, 1787-1895: Genre, Gender and Criticism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), identifies a period of *Modern Love* criticism in the first half of the twentieth century that takes an 'exclusively novelistic approach' to the poem and as a result neglects or denies its claim to the sonnet form (p. 135). However, disagreement over the generic label nonetheless constitutes a surprisingly minor aspect of *Modern Love* criticism.

<sup>6</sup> George Meredith to Augustus Jessop, September 20, 1862, in *Letters*, I, p. 156.

Victorian sonnet, that Meredith ‘must be given credit for knowing what he was about when he decided upon a verse form that would above all things be flexible: it should suggest the sonnet without being one in its strictest sense’ (p. 104). To treat generic membership less as a pass/fail test than a set of resources which can be more or less fully mobilised by a poet, according to the relation he wishes his work to bear to the established associations and implications of a particular genre, is to recognise how Meredith could so successfully bring into play the range of meanings which inhere in the sonnet tradition while flouting the most basic of the form’s conventions.

In this *Modern Love* displays its consanguinity with a group of other mid-Victorian poems arising at least partly out of a common intention of demonstrating the legitimacy of contemporary, everyday life as a subject for poetry – an ambition rendered controversial both by a widely-shared sense that the modern age was unpropitious to poetry, and by the rapid rise of the novel as the form most naturally suited, it seemed, to representing the fragmented and mundane realities of the nineteenth century. That Meredith’s most novelistic poem belongs to the same category as such other mid-century ‘verse-novels’ as Arthur Hugh Clough’s *The Bothie of Tober-na-vuolich* (1848) and *Amours de Voyage* (written 1849, first published in 1858), Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House* (1854–1862), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) has been noted before. Graham Hough, in the introduction to his volume of Meredith’s poetry, has no doubt that *Modern Love* should be classified with these works – or that the enterprise as a whole may be dismissed as a failure:

Among the many phantom projects that haunted the imagination of the mid-nineteenth century was the poem of modern life, the poem that could deal with contemporary circumstances and settings as naturally as earlier romantic poetry had dealt with historical and legendary themes... Success was variable, and never of a very high order... Meredith in ‘Modern Love’ is clearly working the same vein, and his title is meant to call attention to the fact.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Graham Hough, Introduction to *Selected Poems of George Meredith* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 5-6.

It is not clear that Hough's scepticism is entirely justified; several of these poems were immensely popular at the time of their publication, and several (not, with the honourable exception of *Aurora Leigh*, generally the same works) are attracting increasing attention from scholars of the period today. Clough and Meredith in particular forge new, unconventional, and highly flexible poetic forms capable of uniting within themselves both the dignity and heightened intensity with which verse tends to imbue its subject, and a naturalness more readily associated with prose.

For all of these writers seeking to poeticise what must have seemed, in more ways than one, the most novelistic of ages, it was by fitting the mundane or awkward or confronting elements of contemporary life to the contours of traditional poetic genres – such as epic, pastoral, and sonnet sequence – that they hoped to establish the ongoing compatibility of daily experience with the beauty and dignity of poetry. Meredith's fellow poets of this school look mainly to the epic as a means of affirming the worth of modern, everyday life, in defiance of a pervasive contemporary rhetoric declaring the age of heroism long past, and the present a comparatively petty and prosaic affair. Clough, for example, casts his narratives of an undergraduate reading party (*The Bothie*) and a classically-educated young gentleman's first experience of modern, 'rubbishy' Rome (*Amours de Voyage*) in Homeric hexameters in order to test the validity of the epic impulse in the modern world, and Barrett Browning employs a full panoply of epic conventions – division into books, epic similes, ship catalogues, voyage and homecoming motifs – in her triumphant account of the hero as woman of letters. In *Modern Love* Meredith turns instead to the discourse of courtly love that found expression in particularly the Petrarchan sonnet tradition, measuring the chequered reality of a modern, middle-class marriage against its idealised conventions. As is the case with Clough, Patmore, and Barrett Browning, it is largely through the apparent antagonism of form and content (in a sonnet sequence chronicling the painful implosion of a once-loving marriage) that Meredith grapples with the place of the 'poetic' in actual modern life, and of actual experience within 'modern' poetry.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Meredith's membership of this movement towards the poetic representation of modern, everyday life is, however, more qualified than for these other poets. *Modern Love*, as is well known, arises most directly out of Meredith's own unhappy experience of his marriage to Mary Ellen Nicolls (daughter of Thomas Peacock), and thus in terms of its genesis serves only secondarily as a contribution to the defence of modern subjects in poetry. Meredith also differs from the leading figures of this school in being the only one to actually write novels as well as

1. Mismatch: form versus content in *Modern Love*

Perhaps more than any other poetic form, the sonnet in its fixity functions as a play on expectation. Conditioned by long tradition to both formal (anticipating the customary volta or turn in the thought of the sonnet) and thematic (the exaggerated devotion of courtly love) conventions, the seasoned sonnet reader encounters the text progressively as a series of confirmations of, or deviations from, the expected. The sense of disjunction that is the predominating effect of *Modern Love* arises from an elaborate counterpoint of form with content; the rhyme scheme of the individual units of the poem and their relation to one another conjure up the outlines of the sonnet sequence, yet the refusal of a volta, the obstinate symmetry of each sonnet with its additional pair of lines, resists the conventional logic of the genre. Similarly, the poem's imagery and diction invoke the love sonnet's traditional range of associations, while the reality with which they correspond is a thoroughly unromantic one of domestic misery and alienation. Both formal and thematic features of Meredith's poem, then, show up the tension between the generic mould of the sonnet and the content or story of *Modern Love*, a tension that in fact mirrors the predicament of the husband in the poem. The sequence records his struggles to come to terms with the disjunction between prefabricated form and actual content in his own life – the gap between the one-size-fits-all institution of marriage and his idiosyncratic experience of it, between expectation and reality.

Thus the husband's fragmented narration of the dissolution of his marriage largely depends on the interactions of the traditional sonnet form with the novelistic realism of the poem's 'modern' content. By casting his experience of marriage in the middle of the nineteenth century in terms of the stylised woman worship and romantic posturing of courtly love, the husband-narrator weighs the literary paradigm against the reality of 'modern love' and finds it profoundly anachronistic – irreconcilable to either the banality of domestic life in the modern world or the rationalistic outlook of Victorian science. The latter is brought repeatedly to bear on the romantic clichés that no longer hold true for the protagonists' marriage, notably in the personifications of 'Nature' that punctuate the sequence. A product both of his time and his trauma, the husband aligns his own sense

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poetry; indeed, he had already engaged with the personal trauma of his wife's infidelity in very different mode in his first full-length novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859).

of disillusionment in a love he thought immutable with the contemporary vision of nature ‘red in tooth and claw’, defined by transience, and ranging from cheerful indifference to cold callousness in its relation to the human world. In the shift from divinely ordered and ultimately benevolent creation to a chaos of blind, indiscriminate forces to which *Modern Love* bears cynical witness, ‘Love’ is evacuated of the mystery and sublimity with which poetic tradition invests it and reduced to ‘a thing of moods’ (X), a chance conjunction of elements subject to change and decay along with everything else. Throughout the poem the language of courtly love is juxtaposed with that of scientific and specifically evolutionary discourse, to varying effects. The tension between the two is at its most acute in the pained cynicism of sonnet XXX (already quoted in part for its overt, if sardonic, claim to sonnethood):

What are we first? First, animals; and next  
 Intelligences at a leap; on whom  
 Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,  
 And all that draweth on the tomb for text.  
 Into which state comes Love, the crowning sun:  
 Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.  
 We are the lords of life, and life is warm.  
 Intelligence and instinct now are one.  
 But nature says: ‘My children most they seem  
 When they least know me: therefore I decree  
 That they shall suffer.’ Swift doth young Love flee,  
 And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream.  
 Then if we study Nature we are wise.  
 Thus do the few who live but with the day:  
 The scientific animals are they. –  
 Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes.

The ‘sonnet’ expresses in theatrically poetic idiom – ‘Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb’, ‘Love, the crowning sun’, ‘Swift doth young Love flee’, ‘shivering from our dream’ – a thoroughly unpoetic sentiment, precisely opposed to the protestations of the exalting and eternal nature of love in the service of which such language is traditionally deployed. While this sonnet achieves a kind of grim resignation to the lesson of Nature’s ruthlessness and impermanence, commending the resolutely modern detachment of ‘scientific animals’, the struggle involved in replacing the old, romantic paradigm with the new, empirical one registers in an earlier sonnet dealing with the same principle. Sonnet XIII opens with a Nature

once more personified and vocal about her predilections: “‘I play for Seasons; not Eternities!’” she declares, ‘laughing on her way’, and affirms the applicability of the maxim for “‘All those whose stake is nothing more than dust’”. Affecting, in quintessential Victorian fashion, a matter-of-fact realism about ‘the laws of growth’ that apparently govern the natural world, the husband-narrator cannot quite persuade himself that the social, human realm is subject to the same logic, that love is merely a matter of elective affinities between ‘scientific animals’:

This lesson of our only visible friend,  
 Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn?  
 Yes! yes! – but, oh, our human rose is fair  
 Surpassingly! Lose calmly Love’s great bliss,  
 When the renewed for ever of a kiss  
 Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair!

Here traditional sonnet motifs such as roses and eternity (underpinned by the hackneyed fair/hair, bliss/kiss rhymes) take on a power and sincerity absent from the husband’s more mechanical use of courtly love conventions (such as his later description of ‘the sweet wild rose’ as his mistress’s ‘emblem’ (XLV)). The problem for ‘modern’ lovers is not simply that their inherited language and conceptual framework for romantic experience is incompatible with reality as conceived by modern science, but that they continue, despite giving intellectual assent to the materialist’s view of the universe, to find the old ideals instinctively compelling.

If the cold rationalism of a nineteenth-century scientific worldview – seeing only randomness and decay where previous generations had discerned immortality and divine purpose behind the transience of the physical universe – assaults the courtly love tradition from lofty intellectual heights, eroding the same code from below is the sheer prosaicism of everyday married life. The classic formulation of the incompatibility of marriage with romance, and specifically of lawful, lifelong, wedded love with the passionate intensity of sonnet-love, is Byron’s:

There’s doubtless something in domestic doings,  
 Which forms, in fact, true love’s antithesis;  
 Romances paint at full length people’s wooings,  
 But only give a bust of marriages;  
 For no one cares for matrimonial cooings,



There's nothing wrong in a connubial kiss:  
Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife,  
He would have written sonnets all his life?<sup>9</sup>

Marriage, in short, is inherently unpoetic. The sonnet in its brevity and concentration lends itself to the somewhat static ecstasy of chivalric love-at-a-distance, whereas the humdrum, durational texture of the marriage relationship finds its natural expression in the narrative protraction of the novel, especially in the domestic realism that seemed at the time of *Modern Love's* publication to be fast becoming the sole purview of the mid-Victorian novel. Fitting the novelistic reality of 'domestic doings' (if characterised more by isolation and acrimony than by 'matrimonial cooings') to the sonnet form, Meredith expounds in *Modern Love* the married lovers' conundrum of how to fit the high romance of poetic tradition to the confines of the domestic sphere when long familiarity and the banality of 'household matters' (V) make a nonsense of the grand gestures of courtly love. The spaces of the poem concretise the mismatch between romantic form and prosaic content, enacting the dramatics of the love-stricken sonneteer within the incongruous settings of middle-class Victorian domesticity: the bedroom, the fireside, the dressing-room; around the dinner-table, 'on the cedar-shadowed lawn' (XXI); celebrating Christmas in a country house, strolling along the terrace, and so forth. Typical is the contrast in sonnet XXXIV between the threatened eruption of matrimonial hostilities (characterised in terms of newspaper reports on Mount Vesuvius and Niagara Falls, 'The Deluge or else Fire!') and the restrained blandness of the actual conversation: 'With commonplace I freeze her, tongue and sense. / Niagara or Vesuvius is deferred.' That 'commonplace' renders the elegant poses of *amour courtois* both false and absurd.

The implication of both the title and the melodramatic/mundane dialectic of *Modern Love* is that the impossibility of sustaining the ardours of courtship in the face of the wearing daily routines of married life is a specifically modern predicament. This anxiety is of a piece with contemporary concern over 'how deeply *unpoetical* the age and all one's surroundings are', as Matthew Arnold famously lamented to Clough.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jerome J. McGann (ed.), *Don Juan*, in *Lord Byron: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), III.8.

<sup>10</sup> Howard Foster Lowry (ed.), *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to A. H. Clough* (London: Oxford University Press/Humphrey Milford, 1932), p. 99 (February 1849).

Humphry House explains that one of the ‘big problems’ for this generation was

to try to see the daily life of Victorian England – complete with all its keepings of dress and furniture and social habits – as having an equivalent spiritual and human significance to that which medieval life had in all its details for medieval poets and painters [...] There seemed to be an irreparable cleavage between the facts of modern society and the depths it was recognised poetry ought to touch.<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not medieval artists did, in fact, find their daily lives poetic is a question rarely raised in nineteenth century discussion of the age and its relation to poetry (Barrett Browning’s assurance in *Aurora Leigh* that ‘Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat / As Fleet Street to our poets’ is a rare exception).<sup>12</sup> For the most part, Victorian social commentators inherit and develop a linear pattern of literary history according to which the progress of civilisation corresponds to an inverse decline in the beauty and heroism on which poetry was thought to thrive. The banality of everyday life, the inhospitableness of the domestic sphere to the raptures characteristic of traditional love poetry, presents itself as a peculiarly modern malady – as though the Renaissance love sonnet brooked no gap between its own rhetoric and the social realities of the period, and only in the age of trousers and drawing-rooms and railways, of middle-class respectability and comfort, had this rift between the two opened up. As with House, this historical relativity seems to infect, or at least infect, the way in which more recent critics of *Modern Love* assess the poem’s relation to its nineteenth century moment. Alan Barr, for example, equates the mundane with the modern in remarking that Meredith’s imagery throughout the sequence ‘contributes strongly to its modernity, inculcating us and our mundane existences’; and Stephen Regan suggests that the sonnets reveal that ‘there was something tragically *anachronistic* in those mid-Victorian concepts of love which still drew on a tradition of Romantic idealism nurtured by Platonic and chivalric notions of goodness and purity’,

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Pre-Raphaelite Poetry’, BBC Third Programme (1948), printed in James Sambrook (ed.), *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 128-29.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Reynolds (ed.), *Aurora Leigh* (New York: Norton, 1996), 5.212-13.

apparently endorsing the assumption that such ideas were at one time more applicable to ordinary human experience than they are today.<sup>13</sup>

This acute sense of the prosaicism of daily life in nineteenth century England competes with an adverse Victorian tendency towards the glorification of the domestic sphere as the locus of all virtue, happiness, and meaning in British life. The tension between the two is also comprehended in the form/content antithesis of *Modern Love*: the disjunction of sonnet form with novelistic content functions, not as a simple opposition between past and present, but also as a critique of the romantic idealisations typical of Meredith's own period ('the sentimental passion of these days') and their remoteness from the realities of contemporary marriage. The husband of the sonnets is distressed not only by the discrepancy between a conception of love inherited from the past and its manifestation in the modern world, but equally by the impossibility of fitting his experiences of love to the patterns his own society holds up as authoritative – whether in the form of literary precedent ('Fairy Prince' (X), tragic figure (XV), Byronic hero (XX)) or of social etiquette (from stiff restraint to righteous indignation). He spends much of the sequence attempting to conform his own behaviour, that of his wife, and their daily interactions to pre-existing templates – vengeful husband, fallen angel, classic love triangle, and the like. The poses he strikes and the dramas he plays out (whether in his head or in actuality) constitute an effort to order his experiences according to the moulds furnished by his culture. From injured but magnanimous spouse to egoistic philanderer, the protagonist finds the conventional roles and responses open to him at once inadequate to the actual complexity of life and relationships, and ludicrous in light of the obdurate selfhood of others, their refusal to play along with his little fantasies.

The most blatant example of this 'fitful role-playing'<sup>14</sup> on the part of the husband-narrator is the Othello scene of sonnet XV. He carefully stage-manages the episode: he sets the scene, describing his wife's posture in sleep, with one arm hanging down beside the bed; he gives himself stage directions: 'Now make fast the door', 'Now will I pour new light upon that

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<sup>13</sup> Alan P. Barr, 'How All Occasions Do Inform: "Household Matters" and Domestic Vignettes in George Meredith's *Modern Love*', *Victorian Poetry* 42:3 (2004), 283-293: pp. 285-86; Stephen Regan, Introduction to *Modern Love* (Peterborough: Daisy Books, 1988), pp. 8-9 (italics mine).

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Regan, 'The Victorian Sonnet, from George Meredith to Gerard Manley Hopkins', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36:2 (2006), 17-34: p. 25.

lid'. Sneeringly, he delivers his contrived lines ('Sweet dove, / Your sleep is pure. Nay, pardon: I disturb. / I do not? good!') and melodramatically confronts her with the props with which he has earlier provided himself – an old love letter she wrote to him and an approximate double of it, written more recently to another. The direct reference to Othello which interrupts this careful performance – 'Sleep on: it is your husband, not your foe. / The Poet's black stage-lion of wronged love, / Frights not our modern dames: - well if he did!' – betrays at once the theatricality of his actions (the attempt to align his experience with the archetypal representation of jealous love) and the incongruity of trying to recreate the wrath of Shakespeare's Moor in a modern bedroom. Rod Edmond treats these lines rather dismissively, observing that 'Othello's passion is ridiculously inappropriate for modern love, and the wish that this were not so ("well if he did!") is bombast. Othello's revenge was terrible; the husband's will be petty and modern'.<sup>15</sup> He overlooks, however, the husband's evident frustration at the pettiness of his actions, at the hollowness of the literary exemplar of the jealous husband when transplanted into actual everyday life in the middle of the nineteenth century. Even more damning than this mid-sonnet acknowledgment of the toothlessness of the modern husband is the complete ineffectuality of the confrontation: though the scene is manufactured apparently in order to bring matters to a head with his wife, the dramatic encounter makes no impact whatsoever on the progressing narrative of the sonnet sequence, or of the marriage. The following sonnet reverts nostalgically to an anecdote concerning the couple's 'old shipwrecked days' (XVI), and by XVII the pair are back gaily performing a set-piece of impeccable host and hostess, 'waken[ing] envy of our happy lot' amongst their dinner-party guests with their 'Warm-lighted looks, Love's ephemerioe' – in fact a mere side-effect of the exhilaration of the pretence. Cutting across the classic Victorian distinction between public and private spheres, the couple find their society performance taking on a grim authenticity ('we / Enamoured of an acting nought can tire, / Each other, like true hypocrites, admire') while their relations to one another are increasingly mediated through a series of conventional dramatic roles. The domestic realm becomes subject to the same laws of antagonism and duplicity as the outside world of commercial and political competition (significantly, Meredith's working title for the poem was the ambiguous 'A Love Match').

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<sup>15</sup> Rod Edmond, *Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian Poetry and Domestic Narrative* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 212.

*Modern Love* is the chronicle of a husband's repeated failures to accommodate his experience of marriage within existing parameters – whether derived from the courtly love tradition, nineteenth century evolutionary thought, or the stock responses of literary and social convention. While only the first of these comprises an integral part of the sonnet sequence's generic baggage and therefore comes automatically into play when the form, language and imagery of the genre are invoked, the continual jarring of form against content, of expectation against actuality, comes to ramify more broadly. The pattern of pre-existent, more or less rigid forms failing to comfortably contain the awkwardness and irreducible complexity of the content assigned to it manifests itself across all levels of the poem. The structural quirk of each sonnet's extra pair of lines reflects the overflow of the poem's subject matter from the bounds of the conventional sonnet sequence, which in turn mirrors the discordance between the couple's actual marriage and the interpretative tools they bring to it. The oppositions between past and present, the conventional and the natural, literary exemplars and real people, according to which the husband-narrator orders his experiences are undergirded by the generalised conflict of codified system with messy reality embodied in the use of the sonnet form to represent the workings of 'modern love'.

## 2. The Love Match: form and content reconsidered

If *Modern Love* is ostensibly governed by an ethos of conflict and even violence (from the opening sonnet's 'sword that severs all' to the 'fatal knife' and 'ramping hosts of warrior horse' of the concluding lines to the sequence), closer scrutiny of the poem's anatomy reveals an unexpected correspondence between form and content which belies their apparent antagonism. This symmetry is evident both in the gradually-evolving argument for hybridity (in life and art) that runs through the poem, and in the self-contained tensions of the sonnet form itself within the context of Victorian literary debates.

Much of the frustration and bewilderment expressed by *Modern Love*'s husband-figure, as we have seen, stems from his repeated discoveries that life simply will not fit into the clear-cut categories favoured by social custom, philosophical precept, or artistic representation. Sonnet XXXIII, which sees our hero delivering to his mistress (a touch pretentiously) a kind of art history lecture on Raphael's painting *St Michael Vanquishing Satan*, questions the black-and-white treatment of good and

evil, blame and infidelity, implied in the arch-angel's apparently effortless victory over Lucifer:

‘Oh, Raphael! when men the Fiend do fight,  
They conquer not upon such easy terms.  
Half serpent in the struggle grow these worms.  
And does he grow half human, all is right.’

The moral ambivalence of human, and particularly matrimonial, battles – the inaccessibility of the high ground to either party – is again contrasted to the easy logic of conventional fiction, with its clearly defined heroes and villains, in the oft-quoted conclusion to sonnet XLIII:

I see no sin:  
The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,  
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:  
We are betrayed by what is false within.

The attempt to account for ‘the death of Love’ (XLIII) between husband and wife, and to assign responsibility for the tragedy, is thwarted by the difficulty of ascertaining anything so tangled and murky as human desires, motivations, and actions. This realisation about the nature of life and love is neatly encapsulated in the husband's early observation – prompted by his sense that past, present and future, reality and illusion, are becoming distressingly blurred – that ‘the whole / Of life is mixed’ (XII). The conception of reality as itself a kind of hybrid, an often confused mixture of factors and registers (tragedy and comedy, melodrama and banality, high seriousness undermined by the petty or ridiculous), serves as a *de facto* defence of *Modern Love*'s generic mixing. The work's abrupt shifts in tone and fusion of poetic form with novelistic content find their rationale in this vision of life as characterised by miscegenation and dissonance.

This at once metaphysical and aesthetic principle of hybridity renders intelligible some of the more enigmatic aspects of the poem. A reading of the form-content dichotomy of *Modern Love* as a straightforward critique of the unreality of the sonnet tradition and its attendant values via the domestic realism of the mid-Victorian novel struggles to account for glitches in both the vapidness of its sonnet conventions and the verisimilitude of its novelistic aspects. (The exuberance of Meredith's own style as a novelist, very unlike the more sober realism of fellow practitioners like Eliot and Thackeray, complicates this picture further.) At

certain points in the poem, that is to say, the supposedly bankrupt resources of the sonnet form assume a new vigor and substance; and, conversely, the husband-narrator's sole direct reference to the novel appeals, confusingly, rather to the melodrama of a trashy French novel than to the prosaicism of the more realistic variety. As has already been observed of sonnet XIII's lament for 'our human rose', the hackneyed imagery of the conventional love sonnet with which Meredith punctuates the sequence has a disconcerting way of breaking its habitual banks and becoming a channel for genuine, spontaneous emotion. The poem's recurrent star metaphors furnish probably the most pronounced example of this pattern. From as early as sonnet II, in which the husband declares his wife 'A star with lurid beams [...] crown[ing] / The pit of infamy', the sonnets seem to run the gamut of conventional signifieds for 'star'. Sonnet IV identifies the stars with high Philosophy, as distinct from Passion: 'Not till the fire is dying in the grate, / Look we for any kinship with the stars.' Yet, between the representation of his own past misdemeanours as 'like some aged star, gleam[ing] luridly' (XX) and an expression of bitterness in the face of simpler lives and loves in sonnet XXII ('You burly lovers on the village green, / Yours is a lower, and a happier star!'), the husband abandons the term's standard associations of lustre, distance, fate, and so on in a suddenly wistful description of his wife who, coming to after having fainted, 'looks the star that thro' the cedar shakes: / Her lost moist hand clings mortally to mine' (XXI). Cliché has modulated into live, affecting metaphor. In similar fashion, a number of critics have remarked the way in which sonnet stereotypes assume, at times, a kind of grotesque realism. Cynthia Tucker catalogues some of these effects: 'Neither the woman's coldness and cruelty, the inevitable sonnet-Lady's epithets, nor the husband's distraction, sleeplessness, and want-of-voice, the traditional symptoms of true courtly love, are preserved as mere literary devices but emerge here as psychological realities'.<sup>16</sup> Equally, the husband's histrionics become, in hindsight, grimly literal; throwaway phrases such as 'The

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<sup>16</sup> 'Meredith's Broken Laurel', p. 354. In the same vein, Hans Ostrom notes how 'the particular conventional motifs of the sonnet tradition become actual qualities of mind – as if a mask one was used to wearing to charm friends suddenly became a real face', and Carol Bernstein writes of the image in sonnet IX, of the husband drinking his wife's expression 'from her eyes, as from a poison-cup', that 'a glance that feeds as a poison cup is transformed from the simulative to the literal with the wife's suicide'. Hans Ostrom, 'The Disappearance of Tragedy in Meredith's "Modern Love"', *Victorian Newsletter* 63 (Spring 1983), p. 30; Carol M. Bernstein, *Precarious Enchantment: A Reading of Meredith's Poetry* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1979), p. 11.

misery is greater, *as I live*' and 'thy mouth to mine! / Never! *though I die thirsting*' (XXIV, italics mine) go beyond mere empty rhetoric as the game the two are playing becomes, in earnest, a matter of life and death.

At the precise halfway point of the sequence, the much-discussed sonnet XXV likewise undercuts generic expectation, though with an inverse movement from the supposedly realistic to the absurd. As the only overt reference to the novel form that broods over *Modern Love* as a whole – a kind of reverse mirror image of the archaic, artificial, quixotic love sonnet around which the work is constructed – the reader might reasonably anticipate some kind of apology for the poem's at once shocking and yet banal subject matter. The novel this pivotal sonnet invokes, however, is not the inventory of domestic detail and investigation of complex, authentic selves rapidly becoming the nineteenth-century norm, but the notoriously sordid and sensational French variety:

You like not that French novel? Tell me why.  
 You think it quite unnatural. Let us see.  
 The actors are, it seems, the usual three:  
 Husband, and wife, and lover. She – but fie!  
 In England we'll not hear of it. Edmond,  
 The lover, her devout chagrin doth share;  
 Blanc-mange and absinthe are his penitent fare,  
 Till his pale aspect makes her over-fond:  
 So, to preclude fresh sin, he tries rosbif.  
 Meantime the husband is no more abused:  
 Auguste forgives her ere the tear is used.  
 Then hangeth all on one tremendous IF:  
*If* she will choose between them. She does choose;  
 And takes her husband, like a proper wife.  
 Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:  
 And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse.

Many a critic has puzzled over the anomaly of this sonnet's preposterousness; Cathy Comstock pinpoints the difficulty in the narrator's choice of 'the most incredible setting of the poem for an insistence upon the correspondence between art and life'.<sup>17</sup> Comstock gets around the apparent incompatibility of the melodramatic plot of the novel described

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<sup>17</sup> Cathy Comstock, "'Speak, and I see the side-lie of a truth': The Problematics of Truth in Meredith's *Modern Love*", *Victorian Poetry* 25:2 (1987), 129-41: p. 139.



with the statement of realistic intent capping it by relinquishing the force of the latter, interpreting the sonnet as a whole as an indication that the husband may not be the reliable narrator-figure he seems – a wink to the judicious reader not to accept his version of events as any more accurate or impartial than the paradigm furnished by this flimsy French romance. I suggest, rather, that just as the counterintuitive shift from stereotype to psychological realism in some of Meredith's traditional sonnet imagery reflects the husband's alarm at seeing his experience overstep the literary bounds he tries to prescribe for it, the flamboyance of the novel his wife is reading in sonnet XXV serves as a comment on the frequently perverse nature of reality. The justification of mimetic art via this farcical narrative of Edmond, Auguste, and his irresolute wife has its roots in the husband-narrator's bitter realisation that his own life seems to have taken on the contours of farce (theatrical confrontations, game-playing, love triangles) – and also, perhaps, in Meredith's awareness of his public's distaste for a realism willing to stoop to the sordid, grotesque, or ludicrous in human relationships. 'In England we'll not hear of it': the mid-Victorian novel reader wishes to believe in an ordered, rational, morally unambiguous reality and therefore demands that the novelist navigate carefully between a Scylla of melodrama and Charybdis of banality. In *Modern Love* Meredith as poet embraces both, suggesting that life is more complex and uneven than either the idealising sonnet tradition or the decorous domestic novel allows.

In this regard the poem is more unblinking in its realism even than the contemporary novel; the poet's apparently self-defeating choice of a light, fashionable novel as a model for his own narrative principles becomes a serious defence of the artist's right – indeed, duty – to represent life as the often unpleasing or laughable mixture of elements that it is. An American critic, writing soon after Meredith's death in 1909, favourably compared his efforts to fuse high and low, tragedy and comedy, the earnest and the ridiculous, in his work to the practice of poets and novelists across the nineteenth century:

Tragi-comedy as the position of equipoise in life and art – that, in Meredith's time, was a notable discovery [...] Wordsworth had been obliged to seek out the great universal impulses in the cottages of Cumberland peasants. The Brontës studied them in mad country squires. George Eliot found them among the yeomen of Warwickshire. Even Thomas Hardy has had to resort to shepherds and dairy-maids

– so fugitive is our sense of solemn splendor from the roar of cities and civilized men [...] That is hardly to see life whole. Meredith sought his splendor in another place. His problem was how to make tragedy and comedy meet together in the drawing-room. Comedy was there to stay; but as for tragedy, Thackeray, for example, avoided it. Dickens and his public preferred murder.<sup>18</sup>

Alongside such iconoclastic poets as Clough and Barrett Browning, the Meredith of *Modern Love* champions a poetry capable of treating the seemingly petty and often depressing life of modern, urban, bourgeois England, dignifying the daily interactions of the drawing-room, bedroom, garden, dining-room, without smoothing over the irregularities of actual experience. The hybrid form of the poem – sonnet sequence married with novel, with unexpected variations on the conventions of both – takes its cue from the hybrid nature of modern life.

A brief reappraisal of the sonnet's generic implications, in its nineteenth-century rather than Renaissance incarnation, reaffirms the complex symmetry of form and content in *Modern Love*. Although the effect foregrounded by Meredith's use of the sonnet is one of disjunction, an understanding of the debates which raged across the nineteenth century on the nature of the form nuances this picture of opposition and renders it, on the contrary, a multifaceted symbol of the broader concerns of the poem. The tensions inherent both to marriage, as experienced by our protagonist, and to the position of poetry in the modern world, find a parallel in the internal contradictions of the sonnet as conceptualised by nineteenth-century poets and critics. Wordsworth's prolific sonnet production and yet stated ambivalence towards the form at the beginning of the century set the terms for the constantly reprised discussion of the sonnet of the following decades.<sup>19</sup> Joseph Phelan, in his recent study of *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet*, offers a comprehensive summary of the poles around which the two camps ranged themselves in these debates:

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<sup>18</sup> S. P. Sherman, *Nation* 88, 3 June 1909. Reprinted in Ioan Williams (ed.), *George Meredith: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 495.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Wagner, in her study of the career of the nineteenth-century sonnet, is particularly concerned to establish Wordsworth's centrality to debates about the form throughout this period. See *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

It is both spontaneous and rule-governed, both personal and conventional. [...] It is an ephemeral and occasional form, and at the same time a 'monument' which will immortalize both poet and subject [...] As a conventional and arbitrary form it runs counter to the prevailing belief in the necessity of an organic connection between form and content, leading to a series of attempts to 'organise' the form and demonstrate its indissoluble connection with certain states of mind and feeling. Again, as a form proverbial for its insincerity it seems to conflict with the very strong post-romantic emphasis on sincerity as a criterion of poetic value, and the result of this conflict is a sustained endeavour to position the sonnet as the most sincere and personal of poetic forms [...]<sup>20</sup>

Thus the sonnet contains within itself the full spectrum of paradoxes that mark the marriage relationship, to the bewilderment and frustration of both husband and wife in *Modern Love*: as an intersection point of the most private and personalised of experiences with the most public and commonplace social roles; a freely-chosen imprisonment; the institutionalisation of spontaneous, intense emotion; the tethering of immortal passion to daily routine. C. Day Lewis identifies 'the deepest cause of the [couple's] agony' and 'the basic theme of the poem' as the 'demoralising, paralysing effect of a bond created, and then abandoned, by love'.<sup>21</sup> This is the tension vividly bodied forth by the form of *Modern Love*: the problem of maintaining sincerity within the bounds of formality.

From this perspective, the relation between form and content in Meredith's most novelistic poem becomes much more than one of simple opposition. Both the sonnet form and the narrative content of *Modern Love* explore the nature of convention and conventionality and its effects on authenticity, and therefore double one another in spite of their superficial conflicts. This mirroring of (discordant) form and (contentious) content turns the tables on those contemporary critics who objected to the mismatch of the two. Richard Holt Hutton, for example, expressed his disapproval of Meredith's

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Phelan, *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> C. Day Lewis, Introduction to *Modern Love* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1948), p. xix.

choice of poetry rather than the novel as the appropriate form for the story in no uncertain terms:

Clever bold men with any literary capacity are always tempted to write verse, as they can say so much under its artistic cover which in common prose they could not say at all. It is a false impulse, however, for unless the form of verse is really that in which it is most natural for them to write, the effect of adopting it is to make the sharp hits which would be natural in prose, look out of place – lugged in by head and shoulders – and the audacity exceedingly repellent. This is certainly the effect upon us of this volume of verse.<sup>22</sup>

The underlying assumption of the verdict is that the kind of subject matter treated by *Modern Love* is inherently unsuited to representation in verse, inherently ‘unpoetical’. Yet the question of what is ‘natural’, in life and art, is one of the chief preoccupations of the poem, which sets out to discover whether and in what respects reality does conform to poetry by enacting the process of fitting life to verse (self to society, love to marriage). Though it could not be accommodated within mid-Victorian canons of poetic beauty, Meredith’s controversial sonnet sequence is masterful in its matching of form to content. Structured throughout by a recurrent opposition of sincerity to artifice, the poem establishes marriage and poetry as tropes for one another and therefore, by mediating an investigation of the place of both love and poetry in the modern world through the sonnet tradition, proves an unexpectedly fitting form for modern love.

Natasha Moore received her PhD in 2012 from Queens’ College, Cambridge, looking at the long poems of the middle of the nineteenth century and their attempts to capture the everyday life of the age in which they were written. She is currently researching Anglo-Irish poet William Allingham as a Visiting Research Fellow in the School of Letters, Art and Media at the University of Sydney.

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<sup>22</sup> *Spectator* 35, 24 May 1862. Reprinted in Williams, p. 92.