

Introduction

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Introduction

Rebecca N. Mitchell

In 1907, a committee was formed to oversee the design and installation of a monument in honour of Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897) in St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh. *The Spectator*, along with many leading periodicals, carried the appeal: ‘Ten years have passed since the death of Mrs. Oliphant’, it began, ‘and if this test of time is needed to prove the strength of literary reputation, it seems in this case to have been successfully withstood’.¹ The committee emphasised Oliphant’s literary merits, declaring her ‘among the writers of the Victorian era as probably the most distinguished Scotswoman of letters the country has produced’, even as it allowed that the demands outside of her literary life were equally relevant to her reputation: ‘In her private life she was essentially one of the “great ladies”, great in her example, great alike in her joys and her sorrows’.² Of the list of supporters, several names were nearly always mentioned in the many news stories announcing the venture, including David Masson, J. M. Barrie, and George Meredith. Masson, eminent Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at Edinburgh University, cited Oliphant’s *Life of Irving* in his own writing on Carlyle’s years in Edinburgh, and Oliphant had glossed his work favourably in her *Victorian Age of English Literature*.³ Fellow Scotsman Barrie’s affection for Oliphant’s work was documented: in his biography of his mother, *Margaret Ogilvy* (1896), he wrote of his mother’s evening reading habits that ‘if the book be a story by George Eliot or Mrs. Oliphant, her favourite (and mine) among women novelists [...] she will read,

¹ Millar, J. H. ‘Memorial to Mrs. Oliphant in St. Giles’, Edinburgh’, *The Spectator*, 27 July, 1907, p. 126.

² Ibid.

³ David Masson, ‘Carlyle’s Edinburgh Life’ *Macmillan’s* 45 (December 1881), 145-163, and 45 (Jan 1882), 234-56; reprinted in *Edinburgh Sketches & Memories* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1892), pp. 302, 306.

entranced, for hours'.⁴ As for Meredith, Oliphant does not figure at all in his letters or his published work; if he held an opinion about her, it is not a part of the scholarly or archival record. But his name alone, prominently listed among the supporters of the fundraising effort, leverages his standing in the literary community to honour Oliphant's memory.

This kind of momentary connection, an affiliation recorded by the press as evidence of their shared literary standing in the public imagination, is typical of the pair of authors. Meredith and Oliphant shared a birth year, and each experienced a long and varied career that included mastery of an extraordinary range of genres, but they had little if any direct interaction. The contours of their biographies reveal parallel turns: the two were jobbing authors, dependent on their creative powers not simply to motivate a life well lived, but to sustain it practically. Oliphant's financial tribulations are well known, documented as they are in her forthright *Autobiography*, published posthumously in 1899. Meredith, more circumspect about his class background or struggles, was also single parent following the death of his estranged wife in 1861. Both engaged deeply with Continental culture. Oliphant's many journeys were reflected in her non-fiction and travel writing, and Meredith's formative years in Germany informed his prose and verse. Both were publisher's readers, wielding considerable influence over the fates of authors to sought a venue for their work. And both contributed—albeit to varying degrees—to progressive women's causes.

For all of these possible points of intersection or overlap, their most obvious connections occur in the pages of the newspapers and magazines that document their literary output. Across the second half of the nineteenth century, their names regularly share the same column inches in publication announcements or advertisements: Meredith's *Emilia in*

⁴ J. M. Barrie, *Margaret Ogilvy* (New York: Scribners, 1896), p. 97. Margaret Oliphant, *The Victorian Age of English Literature* 3 vols (London, Percival and Co, 1892) II, 279.

England and Oliphant's *Agnes* are touted in January 1864;⁵ his *Beauchamp's Career* stands beside her *Phoebe Junior* in January 1876;⁶ in 1884, Oliphant's *Madam* is serialised in *Longman's Magazine* at the same time that Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways* appears in the *Fortnightly*;⁷ in 1891, Meredith again took to the *Fortnightly* for *One of Our Conquerors* while Oliphant offered *The Marriage of Elinor* to *Good Words*.⁸

In some instances, the two authors shared the pages of the very same issue, and one such example affords the opportunity of reviewing the general drift of public regard for the pair. The January 1879 number of *The New Quarterly Magazine* features among its varied contents a biographical account of Prince Bismark; an extended discussion of England's foreign policy with Afghanistan; a critique of British public schools; Meredith's dramatic ballad, 'The Nuptials of Attila'; and, by Margaret Oliphant, 'A Beleaguered City', a ghost story set in France. One reviewer surveyed the contents, noting with approval the articles on Bismark and the schools, but condemning Oliphant's 'terribly mysterious tale' as 'dull' and Meredith's epic ballad as fit only for 'his admirers'. As the critic himself was 'not among them', he opted 'not to say anything about' the poem.⁹ Another approved of both pieces, praising Meredith's poem, in which 'the imagery is fresh and the language powerful', while terming Oliphant's story 'the most remarkable of the purely literary contributions to the number'.¹⁰ But the critic for the *Staffordshire County Advertiser* reflects a rift in critical regard for the authors that mirrors their wider critical reception. About Meredith's 'The Nuptials of Attila', he holds up the standard complaint levelled at Meredith of being skilled but trying too hard to appear clever. 'There is considerable power in some parts', the

⁵ See 'Literature and the Arts', *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 25 January 1864, p. 1, or 'Literature', *Leeds Intelligencer* 23 January 1864, p. 13.

⁶ 'The Books of 1876', *Falkirk Herald* 4 January 1877, p. 6.

⁷ See e.g. 'Publisher's Special Column' in *The Globe* 29 September 1884, p. 4.

⁸ See e.g. 'Stories in the Magazines' *Inverness Courier* 10 February 1891, p. 8.

⁹ [Anon.] 'The First Quarterlies of '79', *Examiner* 25 January 1879, p. 120-122 (p. 121).

¹⁰ 'Reviews. Magazines, etc.' *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* 18 February 1879, p. 8.

reviewer allows, ‘but there is a want of definiteness throughout the poem. The description is somewhat confused, and the reader cannot rid himself of a feeling that the writer is straining effect. There is a want of repose that comes from conscious strength’.¹¹ Oliphant fares better in the reviewer’s assessment, which touts ‘the charm of style which is so characteristic of Mrs. Oliphant’s writings’ as being featured in the story ‘in a high degree’ and concludes that ‘readers will look upon it as the feature of the magazine’.¹²

This view that Oliphant’s work was more pleasing to the average reader, who would likely find Meredith’s verse more trying is reinforced by other metrics of the period. One literary barometer is Mudie’s lending library, whose enormous popularity ensured its outsized influence on the publishing world, though whether it dictated popular taste or simply reflected the will of its audience is a matter of debate. Lewis Roberts writes that the library based its purchases on factors including ‘how well that novel would be presumed to circulate’ and ‘how much appeal it might have for Mudie’s patrons’, yet he also notes that ‘a novel which Mudie’s chose to ignore would not be successful’.¹³ In 1876, to take a representative year, Mudie’s catalogue lists some twenty-nine works of fiction and eleven of non-fiction by Oliphant compared to only six novels by Meredith. Three of the novels that he had written prior to 1876 had not been adopted.¹⁴

As is clear from the reviewers’ responses to the minor ‘The Nuptials of Atilla’, Meredith’s work attracted sharp critique, even if it was accompanied with begrudging

¹¹ ‘Literature’, *Country Advertiser and Herald* (Staffordshire) 1 February 1879, p. 6.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lewis Roberts, ‘Trafficking in Literary Authority: Mudie’s Select Library and the Commodification of the Victorian Novel’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, (2006), pp. 1-25 (p. 4). See also Guinevere Griest, *Mudie’s Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970).

¹⁴ *Beauchamp’s Career* (1875), *Emilia in England* (1864), *Evan Harrington* (1861), *Farina* (1857), *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1856), and *Vittoria* (1867). Left out were *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (1859), *Rhoda Fleming* (1865), and *The Adventures of Harry Richmond* (1871), along with both volumes of verse, *Poems* (1851) and *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside* (1862) published to date. See *Catalogue of the Principal Books in Circulation at Mudie’s Select Library*, April 1876 (London: Mudie’s Select Library).

allowance for his talent. Nevertheless, it was generally acknowledged that the lack of mass popularity that drove Mudie's to pass on some of his novels was balanced by consensus praise from the critics. Oliphant herself was among those levelling this charge, suggesting that if Meredith simply reigned in his worst impulses, he might reach a broader audience:

Mr. George Meredith, whose praise is in all the circles of the critics, and some of whose works are already classics, has never condescended to those humble gifts of distinctness and plain story telling which find a novelist access to the crowd. Were his books subjected to a process of compression, and his sentences unwound from the extraordinary convolution of words in which he shows an increasing inclination to wrap up his meaning, the ordinary public would be in a better condition to understand and appreciate the high qualities with which the leaders of literary opinion have always accredited this remarkable writer.¹⁵

It is difficult to read Oliphant's comments on Meredith without considering her own work as a counterpoint to his. The contrast is compelling. Meredith, a critical darling, adored by scholars but from the start overlooked by readers who find the works often difficult and obscure persists, opposed to Oliphant, wildly popular in her own time, but dismissed soon thereafter for being too diffuse, too popular.

That eventuality is prefigured in Barrie's speech at the ceremonial dedication of the Oliphant memorial plaque. When it was unveiled on 16 August 1908, the inscription privileged the breadth of Oliphant's literary accomplishments, so that 'we may remember her genius and power as novelist, biographer, essayist and historian'. Barrie emphasised instead that her authorial persona was attenuated by her femininity: 'Mrs. Oliphant they admired as a

¹⁵ Oliphant, *The Victorian Age*, II, 196

woman and a writer, but the woman was the greater part of her'.¹⁶ Meredith lived long enough to witness major changes in his material circumstances and in his critical reputation; his final years were spent in the glow of near universal homage by a public happy to credit him with being the last of the great Victorians.¹⁷ Yet shortly after his own death, his critical star too had fallen.

This shared experience further justifies their authors being addressed jointly: both Oliphant and Meredith were widely read and discussed by the public and the critics throughout the entire second half of the nineteenth century, and yet today they are largely absent from the mainstream critical discourse and syllabi, the subject of perpetual calls for a revival of interest in their work. George Levine, for example, opens a 2014 article with the statement that Oliphant 'deserves to be regarded as a major novelist', suggesting that the quality of her prose might come as 'a shock' to those who believe 'that work produced that fast and that abundantly cannot really be taken seriously'.¹⁸ For Levine, Oliphant's sharp psychological insight renders her important reading for anyone wanting to understand the development of the Victorian novel, yet his approach acknowledges that today's readers might be surprised by claims that it is good in addition to being important.

Reconciling Multiple Modes of Authorship

It is worth pausing to consider why these authors of demonstrated talent and significance still require this kind of special pleading. One answer could be in the very

¹⁶ [Anon.] 'Memorial to Mrs. Oliphant', *The Bookseller*, 7 August 1908, p. 659.

¹⁷ In her *DNB* entry on Meredith, Margaret Harris notes that the 'obituaries celebrating Meredith as the last of the Victorians, anticipated the inevitable eclipse of his late-blooming fame, which did not long survive him'. Harris, Margaret. "Meredith, George (1828–1909), novelist and poet." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. October 04, 2008. Oxford University Press. Date of access 13 September

2018, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-34991>>

¹⁸ George Levine, 'Reading Margaret Oliphant', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 19 (2014), pp. 232-46 (p. 232).

variety of authorial tasks that both Oliphant and Meredith pursued. In a time of increasing scholarly specialisation, authors who excel across multiple genres can garner less attention, or be considered solely through the perspective of a single mode of writing—Meredith the novelist *or* Meredith the poet, Oliphant the biographer *or* Oliphant the novelist. And some of their writerly activities that fall outside of those genres deemed most valuable have been largely overlooked to date. Elizabeth Jay notes, apropos comparisons of Oliphant career to George Eliot's, that when faced with a narrative of progress towards greatness, 'the activity of literary reviewing [...] becomes an apprentice stage for creative talent: money-spinning rather than yarn spinning'.¹⁹ But this need not be the case if we view literary reviewing instead as an act deserving of study in its own right. Jay's admonition that 'the length and variety of Mrs. Oliphant's writing career prompts reconsideration of the terms by which we confer major or minor status',²⁰ might also be applied to Meredith, who, in addition to writing reviews for the *Westminster Review*, served as publisher's reader for Chapman and Hall for over thirty years, well past the point that his financial need dictated the task.

This inability to reconcile multiple modes of literary labour is not a quirk of our own time. Victorian audiences also took issue with perceived inconsistencies across those genres. Meredith's reports on the manuscripts he reviewed for Chapman and Hall were brief, often terse, a stark contrast to the prolixity of his prose fiction. But his contemporaries would have had little access to those views, and the public almost no inkling. Even today, tracking the work of publisher's readers is a difficult task. Royal Gettmann, one of the first literary historians to take up the question of publishers' readers, summarized the state of the field at the mid-twentieth century. 'The information on this subject', he wrote, 'is scattered and

¹⁹ Elisabeth Jay, 'Preface', *Mrs. Oliphant: 'A Fiction to Herself'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.

4.

²⁰ Ibid.

tantalizingly incomplete, for it has been a matter of professional ethics to keep the publisher's reader out of sight'.²¹

No wonder, then, that Victorian readers were fascinated when a libel case was brought against Chapman and Hall. Meredith had served as manuscript reader for the firm from 1860—when he took up the reins from John Forster, the friend and biographer of Charles Dickens who had been in the post since 1837—until 1895. The publisher had released a collection of stories by a Colonel Ellis set in West Africa; as reader, Meredith endorsed the collection.²² One story featured a character called James Peacock, and a West African trader called James Pinnock sued for libel on the basis that the character was a thinly veiled version of himself.²³ Meredith was examined as part of the proceedings, his testimony widely reported in the press. According to one account, when Meredith was 'asked, in cross examination, if he thought that the opening of the story [...] did not offend against the canons of good taste', he replied 'that it was the attempt of a writer of serious mind to be humorous. It might almost be called a stereotype of that form of the element of humour. It was a failure, but still it passed with the public'. The Judge commented 'A kind of elephantine humour'. To which Meredith replied 'Quite so. I did not like it, but one would have to object to so much...'.²⁴

²¹ Royal A. Gettmann, "The Author and the Publisher's Reader" *Modern Language Quarterly* 8 (1947), pp. 459-471 (p. 459). Joanne Shattock has surveyed and documented the scattered archives of publishing houses, the bulk of which remain undigitized today, but even a full accounting of the formal correspondence between publishers and readers is insufficient to trace full range of influence. See "Sources for the Study of Victorian Writers and Their Publisher," *Browning Institute Studies* 7 (1979), 93-113, p. 94.

²² S. M. Ellis, *George Meredith: His Life and Friends in Relation to his Work* (London: Grant Richards, 1920), p. 219.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

²⁴ "The Law Courts," *London Evening Standard* 9 December 1891, p. 2.

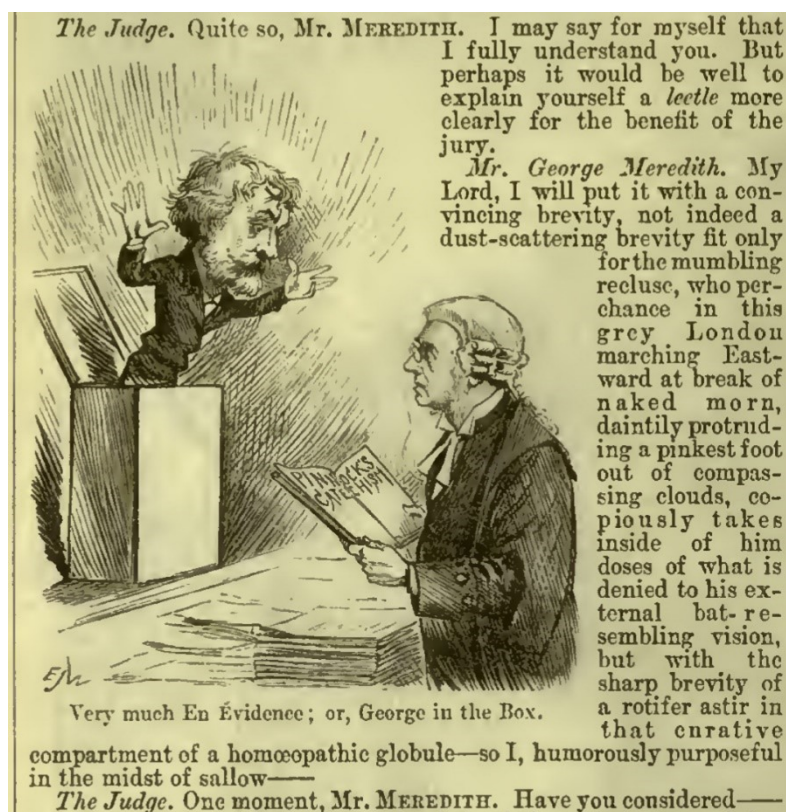


Fig 1: [Rudolph Lehmann?], “By George!” *Punch* 19 December 1881/December 1891, p. 300.

In the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the episode is recorded in a short piece on the trial, and the author’s comments shed some light on why the trial of a minor collection of short stories by an unknown author would attract such attention in the press. After quoting Meredith’s testimony, the author opines, ‘There, provokingly, the criticism stops. We cannot but think that a great opportunity was lost. It is not every day that we get our authors under

question on oath’.²⁵ Sympathising with those ‘whom Mr. Meredith’s style rather puzzles than fascinates’, who would have had little patience in the proceedings, the *Pall Mall Gazette* author hints at the hypocrisy of a writer whose prose was and is regarded by some as obscure and baroque, deigning to assess the writing of others, and to pass judgment on what might appeal to the masses.²⁶

Punch went even further (see fig. 1), imagining Meredith’s testimony if the questioning had continued, and offering a clever if painful pastiche of Meredith’s prose stylings in a mock response to the judge:

My Lord, I will put it with a convincing brevity, not indeed a dust-scattering brevity fit only for the mumbling recluse, who perchance in this grey London marching

²⁵ ‘Perils of Realism’, *Pall Mall Gazette* 9 December 1891, p. 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Eastward at the break of naked morn, daintily producing a pinkest foot out of
compassing clouds, conspicuously takes inside of him doses of what is denied to his
external bat-resembling vision, but with the sharp brevity of a rotifer astir in that
curative compartment of a homeopathic globule—so I, humoursly purposeful in the
midst of sallow— etc.²⁷

As much as it pokes fun at Meredith's famously difficult style, the *Punch* piece signals the
gulf between that style and the briskly insightful, concise and precise comments that
Meredith routinely made in his thirty years as Chapman's reader ('I did not like it'). If the
court of public opinion reviewed Oliphant's life and felt that the 'woman was the greater part
of her', the court of public opinion in Meredith's time found the imperious novelist of
unreadable books was the better part of him. In court, Meredith (the publisher's reader) was
held up as an arbiter of morality as well as of taste, but the nuances of that role seem to pale
in comparison to his persona as an author of highbrow and impenetrable prose.

Oliphant and Meredith Now

I recount that history to document the deep roots of an impression of Meredith that
scholars today still work against, an impression fixed in Meredith's own time by his
contemporaries. Yet against claims of critical neglect, both Meredith and Oliphant have both
been the subject of sustained scholarly inquiry in recent decades.²⁸ The ten authors who have
contributed to this volume are surely among the converted, having moved well beyond
arguing that the merits of Oliphant and Meredith's writing justify serious critical engagement,
and choosing instead to engage. Significantly, rather than consolidating the focus of Meredith

²⁷ 'By George!' *Punch* 19 December 1891, p. 300.

²⁸ In Levine's 2014 article, he credits Joseph Bristow with the observation that 'that there are at least 150 items in the Oliphant bibliography over the last 30 years'. Levine, 'Reading Margaret Oliphant', p. 232 n.4.

and Oliphant studies on a few best-known works, the essays collected here push the range of consideration, addressing some of the lesser-explored aspects of the authors' oeuvres.

'Modern Love' and *The Egoist* are not mentioned in these pages, but his lesser-studied fiction, epigrams, poetry, and art criticism (with heavy emphasis on the fiction) do appear. Oliphant's criticism, fiction, and journalism receive the greater share of attention than her best-loved novels.

In July 2015, conferences were held in the UK to explore Meredith (in Lincoln) and Oliphant (in Leicester).²⁹ The Oliphant event marked the publication of the twenty-five-volume selected edition of her works, issued first by Pickering and Chatto and now by Routledge, under the general editorship of Joanne Shattock and Elizabeth Jay (both contributors to this volume). The appearance of the edition is certain to facilitate new interest both by readers and scholars of Oliphant's extensive body of work. As Jay notes in her essay, the sheer quantity of Oliphant's output necessitated the limitation of what could be published: even with the seemingly generous scope of over eleven-thousand pages, fiction and non-fiction alike had to be left out. This signal contribution to Oliphant studies not only attests to the vibrancy of her varied oeuvre—novels comprised only half of the volumes of the edition—it establishes an essential point of reference for future studies, ensuring the accessibility of definitive, scholarly texts; the essays in this collection cite both Oliphant's original publications and the *Selected Works* wherever possible. The edition does seem to have spurred new interest in issuing mass market editions of Oliphant's works. In 2018, Broadview released new editions of *Queen Eleanor and Fair Rosamond* (1886), edited by Pamela Perkins, and *The Library Window* (1896), edited by Annmarie Drury.

²⁹ 'Margaret Oliphant in Context', University of Leicester, 6 July 2016; 'George Meredith and His Circle', Bishop Grosseteste University, 24-25 July 2015.

Jay's discussion of the practical considerations of choosing which of Oliphant's ninety-eight novels to include in the *Selected Works* facilitates the exploration of Oliphant's late fiction. These novels differ considerably from her more familiar mid-century works; Jay shows that Oliphant was deeply cognisant of fin-de-siècle trends, engaging with decadence and the figure of the New Woman even if she did not endorse them. Joanne Shattock explores the astonishing range of the nearly 250 articles that Mrs Oliphant produced for *Blackwood's*. She was, as Shattock notes, a self-described 'general utility woman' for the journal; Oliphant's articles provide a case study in the range of scope of her oeuvre, and of the symbiotic relationship between author and editor.

Valerie Sanders's turns to Oliphant's fiction to address the 'sociology of shopping', attending carefully to the material culture that Oliphant describes in great detail. Sanders excavates the means through which the novelist achieves her brand of realism, as well as the concomitant social critique that encompasses class, motherhood, and taste. Joanne Wilkes takes up Oliphant's literary context as opposed to her material one: she considers Oliphant's writings on other authors to suggest that her mode of biography reveals her own authorial investments as much as those of her subjects. Addressing an author she admired but did not know—such as Walter Scott—could reveal emotional and aesthetic commitments even stronger than those she held for authors she knew personally—such as Arthur Symonds. Through writing about authors and their works, Wilkes argues, Oliphant was able to situate herself within the pantheon of nineteenth-century writers from Dickens and the Brontës to Henry James and Stevenson.

Meredith's works have not benefitted from an infusion of interest—and consistency in citation—afforded by the issuance of a new critical edition. In her essay in this volume, Margaret Harris tracks Meredith's position in literary scholarship since the 1970s, the last time of a major surge of interest. Despite what she describes as a perpetual call for a Meredithian revival,

there is no critical edition of his works in print today, and many of his novels are out of print. Phyllis Bartlett's magisterial two-volume edition of his poetry (Yale 1978) has fallen out of print. An anniversary edition of his 1862 *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads* (Yale) appeared in 2012 under my co-editorship with Criscillia Bedford, but that represents the smallest fraction of his verse. And even though the Norton Critical series, that bulwark of classroom-focussed editions, has kept *The Egoist* in print, the edition has not been updated since 1979.

Harris shows that critical interest has remained consistent in Meredith despite this lack of readily accessible, high-quality texts. In fact, this dearth of mainstream press editions seems coincide with a move among scholars to explore works that might have been overlooked in earlier phases of Meredith criticism. Sally Shuttleworth demonstrates the degree to which Meredith's trenchant depictions of interiority were informed by scientific thinking about the unique psychical challenges of modernity, including the 'strain and exhaustion' that constitute the 'Diseases of Modern Life'. Advances in psychology and neurology are reflected in the narrative form of Meredith's *One of Our Conquerors* (1891). Alice Crossley explores the way that Meredith 'mobilises alternative experiences of heterosexual desire' in his novel *Rhoda Fleming* (1865). Meredith's depiction of triangulated desires involving both men and women, as demonstrated through homosocial competition or rivalry, pose a challenge to heteronormative sexual and narrative expectations.

For Melissa Jenkins, Meredith's early, experimental novel *The Shaving of Shagpat* (1855), leverages the exotic, eastern body as site for reshaping Victorian ideals of labour as well as their representations. Sean O'Toole considers Meredith's legacy as manifest in the work of two fin-de-siècle aesthetes: Oscar Wilde and Richard Le Gallienne. Both were prose stylists as well as poets, critics as well as novelists, and both demonstrated their debt to Meredith through their work. My essay for the volume explores the Pre-Raphaelite contexts

of Meredith's earliest verse and his long-ignored art criticism in the *Westminster Review*, articles that enter the same public sphere as Margaret Oliphant's contemporary discussions of art and illustration in *Blackwood's*. In the *Westminster* and in *Blackwood's*, neither writer invoked the other directly, yet apprehending their criticism in combination gives a sense of the breadth of transmission of Pre-Raphaelite ideas in the late 1850s.

The same benefits might be said to arise from the combination of articles in this volume. In their lifetimes, the Oliphant and Meredith did not interact, but rather proceeded along parallel tracks; after their deaths, their rise and fall in critical and popular regard continued comparably apace. These studies embrace the full range of their prolific writings and explore their contributions to Victorian literary culture broadly conceived and stand to reverberate beyond the straining boundaries of single-author or single-genre studies.