

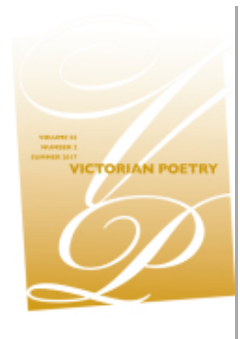


PROJECT MUSE®

The Search for a Good Cause in George Meredith's *Modern Love*

Alicia Williams

Victorian Poetry, Volume 55, Number 2, Summer 2017, pp. 211-229 (Article)



Published by West Virginia University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vp.2017.0011>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/671710>

The Search for a Good Cause in George Meredith's *Modern Love*

ALICIA WILLIAMS

George Meredith's unorthodox poetic project *Modern Love* (1862) is one of the bleakest depictions of love and marriage in nineteenth-century literature. The poem opens onto a disintegrating union between an anonymous husband and wife. The wife, we find out, has a lover, and the husband, on the advice of his doctor, responds by taking his own. Shortly after an overture for a return to monogamy on the wife's part, her suicide dissolves the relationship. Filling in the space between these sparse plot points are tableau-like episodes and passages of intense lyric density, which often recount the husband's psychological and emotional processing of small events in more detail than the events themselves. As a poet and a novelist, Meredith had particular reason to think about the differences between extended narrative and lyric forms and the effect of running those modes together in *Modern Love*. Formally, *Modern Love* sits uneasily in the gray area between a thematic collection of fifty sixteen-line sonnets and a variation on novelistic marriage and adultery plots. With this structural ambivalence, Meredith unfolds the answer to the poem's already grim animating question—how might we crawl out of this tragedy?—at a painfully halting pace.

At the very center of the poem, for example, Meredith stalls the already stalling narrative to offer a metacommentary on the adultery plot, taken from a French novel. This sonnet condenses into sixteen lines what I argue is *Modern Love's* generic argument for the limitations of the novel in representing marriage. Though the husband avows appreciation for the naturalness of the French novel's subject, the sonnet also parodies its narrative logic, which depends on a sequence of cause and effect:

You like not that French novel? Tell me why.
You think it most 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 overfond:
 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, they say, is worthy of the Muse. (Sonnet XXV, ll. 1–16)¹

If the husband wants to praise the naturalness of the adultery plot over the implied unnaturalness of English propriety or romanticized ideals, then why does Meredith comment on that form in the very middle of his narrative poem—instead of writing an adultery novel, for example? Meredith had in fact written a novel about adultery: *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, published in 1859, a few years before *Modern Love* and a few years after one such “French novel,” Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856). Meredith’s experience writing a novel about adultery sharpens Sonnet XXV’s specific critique of novelistic narrative, a critique that applies to both French and English novels, marriage and adultery plots: its causal logic. That is, he requires not an adultery novel but a uniquely narrativized sonnet collection to make his case against the novel’s forward-looking narrative logic. In the first three quatrains of Sonnet XXV, Meredith laughs at cause and effect: Edmond’s diet of blanc-mange and absinthe, an emphatically minute detail that parodies the naturalistic mode, leads to his pale aspect, which leads to the wife’s admiration, which leads to his change in diet to rosbif, which leads to the termination of the affair.

For a moment, of course, this conclusion is unclear, and that lack of clarity tellingly reflects *Modern Love* more closely: “Then hangeth all on one tremendous If:—/ If she will choose between them.” A marriage whose future appears to be contingent on the wife’s decision: the similarity of this situation to the husband’s sobers the otherwise dark comedy of the sonnet. Even here, though, there is an important distinction between *Modern Love* and the French novel. After the dramatic line break following the “tremendous If—,” the husband quickly diminishes the dramatic suspense by describing the resolution in the space of two lines. “If she will choose between them. She does choose” moves so quickly from “if” to “does” that it appears as if the case has been closed from the beginning—as if, in other words, it has been decided more by narrative convention than by the wife.

By contrast, in *Modern Love*, the resolution to the “tremendous If” question, if it will be adultery or fidelity, does not conclude the narrative. Infidelity has never fully explained the marriage’s failure to the husband, and it is all the more disturbing that after the couple appears to recommit to each other, the wife writes over that conclusion by committing suicide. More than the wife’s choice between men, the husband’s desire to effect causal change and, in failing that, to find a satisfying explanation of the marriage’s demise is the source of the vexed narrative energy in the poem. Through the uneven progress and frustrating repetitiveness of this process, Meredith lends real weight to the experience of the uncertainty of contingency invoked by the “tremendous If” of Sonnet XXV. A fleeting question for the French trio, contingency is a permanent problem for the marriage in *Modern Love*, and it is Meredith’s counterargument to the causal narrative logic of the novel.

Scholars have taken the narrative aspect of *Modern Love* to be Meredith’s means of critiquing traditional love sonnetry, including Victorian contributions such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) and the saccharine forms published in periodicals. Under this view, narrative lends the poem an atypical degree of both plot and contextual topicality and thus allows Meredith to illustrate the perils of modern marital and sexual mores through the demise of a representative couple.² In arguing that we should also see Meredith making a generic argument about the limitations of the *novel* in representing marriage, I suggest that narrativizing his collection of sonnets ensures that the poem will be taken as a revision not just of love sonnetry but also of the novel’s causal logic, which he implies conveys false promises for the forward progress of love in marriage. In what follows, I first consider how Meredith’s relationship to generic conventions of both sonnet sequences and novels informs this revision. The most immediately noticeable change may be that rather than suggest future progress for the marriage in which the plot culminates, *Modern Love* begins with a marriage in crisis. If Meredith narrativizes his poem so that he can critique the novel, the poem’s seriality, more specifically, structures Meredith’s critique of the causal narrative logic of that genre. By presenting *Modern Love* as a “sonnet serial,” I mean to purposefully echo and yet distinguish seriality from serialization, in which the momentum-based narrative logic of the novel finds its most explicit expression. Though work on serialization has explored intertextuality between fiction and nonfiction prose genres, a general emphasis in this area on book history, on material culture, and above all on novels rather reinforces the critical divide between nineteenth-century prose fiction and lyric forms that *Modern Love* seeks to blur. Meredith has been relegated to

the edge of nineteenth-century literary scholarship for some time, but this blurring, what Dino Felluga would call a generic “perverse crossing,” should be of interest to critics in many fields, from Victorian literary history to narratology to historical poetics (“Novel Poetry,” p. 490).

The subsequent sections of this essay draw out the implications of this “crossing.” First, in response to the causality associated with the novelistic narrative progress, *Modern Love*’s seriality attenuates progress by foregrounding contingent relationships,³ both between sonnets, formally, and between husband and wife, thematically. The husband’s experience of the marriage on which the poem focuses is one of overriding, constrictive contingency. Contingency in the sense of uncertainty and chance exacerbates contingency in the sense of conditionality, as the husband’s psychological and emotional stability precariously depend on a variety of outside forces, most notably his wife. In *Modern Love*, the husband, not the wife, is the exemplary “contingent being” whose existence depends on the other partner, if not on marriage as an institution. Thus, second, through the emphasis on the husband’s contingent state of being, Meredith restores gender equality to his perverse rendering of the marriage plot. The cost of this restoration, however, is the desperate unhappiness that attends the husband’s inability to effect narrative progress and his realization that such progress may be a false expectation for the progress of love in marriage. This implication asks us to consider a more nuanced picture of Meredith’s critique of Victorian marriage, one that can capture the tension between suffocating contingency and companionate suffering.

I. A Sonnet Serial

We typically refer to *Modern Love* as a sonnet sequence, but doing so anachronistically applies a term coined almost two decades after the poem was first published. Editors, critics, poets, and poet-critics quickly brought the term into common vocabulary after Dante Gabriel Rossetti used it in the subtitle of the 1881 publication of *The House of Life*. After Rossetti, A. C. Swinburne used a version of the term in *A Sequence of Sonnets on the Death of Robert Browning*, as did the prolific Victorian sonneteers Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and John Addington Symonds. Though Meredith did not pick up the term in his 1892 reprint of *Modern Love*, critics began to apply the term to *Modern Love* and other published compilations and collections, until “sonnet sequence” became basically “synonymous with *series* and *cycle* of sonnets.”⁴ Besides the idea of “unity within a larger unity,” the standards that rendered a collection of sonnets a sequence were quite vague, particularly when compared to the formal precision of the

sonnet (Going, p. 401). Meredith's use of a sixteen-line sonnet, of course, alters even the most crystallized element of the form.⁵

Despite the flexibility of the conventions for grouping sonnets together for publication, *Modern Love* largely met with condemnation. Critics took issue not just with its provocative content but also with the lacking strength of the connections between sonnets on which its narrative depends. *The Athenaeum* critic J. W. Marston, for example, leads his review with the issue of missing links: "The story of 'Modern Love' is rather hinted at than told. There is nothing of orderly statement and little of clear and connected suggestion. These sonnets resemble scattered leaves from the diary of a stranger."⁶ Thirty years later, following the publication of an unauthorized edition in 1891, another reviewer again takes issue with narrative cohesion: "Strictly speaking, it is not a poem. . . . The intent is narrative; the plan is a series of photographs of various occasions during the story, mixed with reflections by the hero and the author, and independent description."⁷ These reviewers are describing what Brian McHale calls "weak narrativity," an apt term for narratives that are told "poorly, distractedly."⁸ But Swinburne, one of *Modern Love's* most vociferous defenders (who were all part of Meredith's circle), praises the poem's connectedness: "As to execution, take almost any sonnet at random out of the series, and let any man qualified to judge for himself . . . decide on its claims. And, after all, the test will be unfair, except as regards metrical or pictorial merit; every section of this great progressive poem being connected with the other by links of the finest and most studied workmanship."⁹ Taking his point further, Swinburne goes on to lament how much "colour" and "effect" one loses when excerpting sonnets for the review.

This critical disagreement suggests that *Modern Love's* narrative logic, generated from the connections between its sonnets, has been a live site of contest since its first publication. The generic argument that Meredith makes in his poem shapes the reception of its narrative structure: Marston would not have "scattered leaves" tell a story through hints. And the second reviewer opposes the narrative "intent" of the poem to its execution, which involves everything that narrative, for him, is not: a "series" of "photographs" of "occasions," "reflection," and "description." By contrast, Swinburne's assertion virtually defines contingency as the poem's prevailing connective force: individual sonnets only have "pictorial merit" when excerpted, as their real effect is contingent on their place within "the series," a word he uses without suggesting a conflict with narrative. For Swinburne—and for Meredith—contingent connections take the place of the causal links that the other reviewers expect from a narrativized poem. "Weak narrativity," or contingent narrativity,

attenuates narrative progress but does not erase narrative. This distinction is crucial, for Meredith's critique of novelistic plotting depends on *Modern Love* being recognized as a narrativized poem in conversation with other narrative forms.

The formal difficulty that contingency lends to the poem contributed to Meredith's expectation that it would meet with a limited readership, another indication that he wrote *Modern Love* against the grain of the novel. Announcing as much, the epigraph to the first edition reads, "This is not meat / For little people or for fools" (p. 22).¹⁰ In a letter responding to the Reverend Augustus Jessopp, Meredith expands on his view on why *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside*, published two years earlier, was not selling well. Jessopp attributed the low numbers to the "prosaic" nature of the age—a particularly apropos term for "common" given the relevance of prose and lyric genre to *Modern Love*. But Meredith wanted to specify:

I don't think the age prosaic for not buying them. A man who hopes to be popular, must think from the mass, and as the heart of the mass. If he follows out vagaries of his own brain, he cannot hope for general esteem; and he does smaller work. "Modern Love" as a dissection of the sentimental passion of these days, could only be apprehended by the few who would read it many times. I have not looked for it to succeed. Why did I write it?—Who can account for pressure?¹¹

The oft-excerpted line from this letter, Meredith's reference to the poem as a "dissection of the sentimental passion of these days," is typically taken to indicate his distaste for the idealized romantic norms of his period. Many critics read *Modern Love* as a product not just of Meredith's general frustration but also of his experience with his first wife, who, already estranged, left with the Pre-Raphaelite painter Henry Wallis in the late 1850s. Perhaps, then, Meredith was being facetious when he claimed not to know why he wrote the poem, but his questions do ask us to revisit the common assumption that he had a personal motivation to write a scathing report on marriage. Taken at face value, his questioning of the poem's origin reflects the husband's interrogation of causes that can account for the failure of his marriage in *Modern Love*. "Who can account for pressure?" indeed: where did the pressure on this marriage originate, and what kind of pressure can counter its dissolution? In this sense, the "dissection of the sentimental passion of these days" refers neither to a bitterly personal nor a clinical, scientific critique but rather to the creation of a hybridized form for representing the fruitless questioning after causal forces when stymied by contingency.

Meredith's comments on readers in this letter suggest that the form best suited to perform this "dissection" is anathematic to the structures designed for the novel, especially in its most popular serialized form. First, what Meredith (taking him to be the "man" to whom he refers) "follows out" are the "vagaries of his own brain." This process opposes that of building a narrative logic according to the interrelated demands of plot convention and publication format, where one instead "follows out" the story in line with predetermined expectations for a sequence of causes and effects leading to logical closure. In this sense, Marston's opinion that the poem resembles the "scattered leaves from the diary of a stranger" is not far from Meredith's own description. Second, Meredith expects that only the "few who would read it many times" will "apprehend" the poem. In referencing rereading, Meredith invokes the contrast between intensive reading (the careful reading of few texts, with an emphasis on quality) and extensive reading (the quick reading of many texts, with an emphasis on quantity and turnover, a trend associated with mass consumption). As evidenced by the contemporaneous critical debate over the tenuous links between sonnets, Meredith makes intense intellectual demands on readers seeking out the connective narrative thread of the poem. If both serial narratives and poetry are, in Sean O'Sullivan's words, "the art of fracture, of separation," and "the art of the energy required to stitch together those pieces,"¹² Meredith seems to think that only a few readers will be able to marshal enough energy to perform such stitching for *Modern Love's* contingently connected sonnets. Through sonnets that spread horizontally or pile up vertically, with minimal forward progression, Meredith offers the "dissection" of what was once whole and which cannot be put back together through the novelistic linkages of cause and effect. He is in this way rewriting serial form to better convey the painfully slow, uncertain, and complicated disintegration of the relationship that the poem narrates.

II. Contingency and Effect

Turning now to a closer examination of the hybridized form of the poem, I suggest that Meredith writes over the novel's agential male protagonist with *Modern Love's* husband, whose compromised ability to effect and even determine cause in the face of overwhelming contingency emerges both within and across sonnets. While *Modern Love's* serial structure underscores the repetition of this problem, even from the beginning of the poem seriality emphasizes contingent relationships by highlighting the points of juncture between sonnets, the breakages on which seriality depends. Meredith calls attention to these tenuous hinges through a marked use of deixis, words whose semantic meaning does not change but whose referents depend on context, such as pronouns and

demonstratives. Deictic first lines stress the contingent effect of each sonnet (really, each sonnet stanza) relative to the rest of the poem. For *Modern Love* as a whole, these lines make for a complicated procession through the poem, since deixis points both outside the sonnet, as if we already are or should be privy to the referents, and inside the sonnet, as if to propel us forward to discover them. For example, the first sonnet begins abruptly, “By this he knew she wept with waking eyes” (Sonnet I, l. 1). Both the second and third sonnets also open with deixis: “It ended, and the morrow brought the task” (Sonnet II, l. 1); “This was the woman; what now of the man?” (Sonnet III, l. 1). Though these deictic first lines serve as transition points, they also compromise narrative progress within each sonnet by obliging further explanation at the cost of narrating action through causal sequence. Paralleling the husband’s struggle with contingency in his marriage, these explanations turn into syntactically challenging attempts to determine the relationship between pronouns and between an evident outcome and indeterminate cause. The arc of the first sonnet, for example, suggests that the deictic “this” of its first line is difficult to explain, despite the apparent obviousness of the contextual evidence:

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
That, at his hand’s light quiver by her head,
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed
Were called into her with sharp surprise,
And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
Dreadfully venomous to him. (Sonnet I, ll. 1–6)

Though the husband knows his wife is crying rather than sleeping, the “And” beginning the second quatrain carries the explanation forward into the middle of the sonnet, indicating the need for an elaboration that becomes increasingly oblique and obscure. What originally seemed easy to know about his wife and his relationship can quickly become both muddled and painful: such is the lesson with which the poem begins and which the husband will continually—serially—find himself subjected to learn.

Exacerbating the pain already thick in the atmosphere of the bedroom of the first sonnet, the speaker casts action outside the couple’s control:

She lay
Stone-still, and the long darkness flow’d away
With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes
Her giant heart of Memory and Tears

Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
 Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet
 Were moveless, looking thro' their dead black years,
 By vain regret scrawl'd over the blank wall.
 Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
 Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
 Each wishing for the sword that severs all. (Sonnet I, ll. 6–16)

In keeping the problem of reference originating in the deictic first line alive, the images of the middle quatrains are not simply figurative; they are also difficult (“little gaping snakes”) or impossible (midnight’s “giant heart of Memory and Tears”) to draw up, even as figures. The atmospheric effects they generate for the husband appear impossible not only to experience but also impossible to grasp, to answer to. Moreover, the images become the main source of movement in the sonnet. After the quivering hand, the shaking bed, and the sharp inhale, the couple remains motionless, but the snakes gape, darkness flows and pulses, and the “giant heart” of midnight drinks “the pale drug of silence” to “beat / Sleep’s heavy measure.” In place of human action, the speaker depicts another source of movement that both comes from within the husband and wife’s relationship and yet also overpowers it. Finally, with the “sculptured effigies” on the marriage tomb, the imagery becomes as still as the “moveless” couple. Looking through the “dead” past and into the future, the couple is constrained to imaginative movement, “wishing for the sword that severs all” but not yet severing anything.

This tension between thought and action returns recursively, continually reminding the husband of his emotional and psychological dependency on his wife and foregrounding his contingent state of being. A case in point, in the very next sonnet, the speaker puts the idea of action in the forefront of our minds, such that we are more cognizant of what we are *not* seeing as the sonnet proceeds. The “It” of its deictic first line—“It ended, and the morrow brought the task” (Sonnet II, l. 1)—likely refers to the night described in the previous sonnet. “It” could also be ambiguous, however, and refer not just to the night but also to the feeling on which the first sonnet closed, “each wishing for the sword that severs all.” Whatever ended, though, is off-stage and quickly passed by; there is an allusion to narrative, day following night, but no hint of a human causal force. Moreover, despite the ambiguity of the line, the abruptness and definitiveness of “It ended,” like the allusion to “the task,” suggests that its referents are givens. Explanations of referents lag for the reader because the husband either cannot or does not need to name them. In this way, deixis helps Meredith simultaneously focalize readers through the husband’s perspective and confound

narrative progress, heightening our sense of his helpless experience of marriage. Rather than name the task, for example, which from the husband's perspective needs no explanation, the rest of the first quatrain steps back to give context: "Her eyes were guilty gates that let him in / By shutting all too zealous for their sin: / Each suck'd a secret, and each wore a mask" (ll. 2–4). In three lines, the wife's eyes perform four different actions, while the husband stands in a passive role, being "let in" and wanting some form of agency.

When the sonnet turns to the maddening effect of the wife's beauty, we see more clearly that the husband's struggle to take action is a struggle against contingencies:

But, oh the bitter taste her beauty had!
 He sicken'd as at breath of poison-flowers:
 A languid humour stole among the hours,
 And if their smiles encounter'd, he went mad,
 And raged, deep inward, till the light was brown
 Before his vision, and the world forgot,
 Look'd wick'd as some old dull murder spot. (ll. 5–11)

Contingency appears in two guises here. First, the husband's sanity depends on the wife's beauty. A staple image of love sonnetry, the wife's beauty in *Modern Love* is no less arresting than the beloved's in the sonnet tradition. Meredith's tone, however, encourages a more critical interpretation of beauty-inspired illness and ambient "languid humour." Second, contingency in the sense of chance—"if their smiles encounter'd"—exacerbates the husband's already vulnerable mental state. In an attempt to exercise agency over contingency, he strives to imitate an ideal version of love: "and then again / He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove / To ape the magnanimity of love, / And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain" (ll. 13–16). This is not the first time, evidently, that the husband has performed "the task." This task, an apparently repeated imitation of a romantic ideal, amounts not to effectual agency but rather to painful self-effacement. Thus, in this case, while the husband's struggle with contingency generates narrative energy to propel momentum within the sonnet, that energy does not fall into a causal sequence. Meredith not only resists a narrative logic of cause and effect but also refuses the translation of such narrative expectations into lived experience: construing his marriage in accord with plot conventions borrowed from the novel and associated both with forward progress and the "sentimental passion" of the "magnanimity of love" is precisely what the husband learns *not* to do.

Whereas in the first two sonnets a speaker focalizes the poem through the husband's point of view, referring to him with the third-person masculine pronoun, the third sonnet makes perspective—speaker, husband, and wife's lover—into a deictic problem of reference. (Indeed, the only proper names in *Modern Love* belong to Auguste and Edmond of Sonnet XXV, where they preclude the uncertainty about masculine pronouns that plagues *Modern Love*.) Drawing on the anonymity of sonnet convention, Meredith invites confusion over who is related in what way to whom and who is capable of what in those relationships. With little notice and no commentary, the husband takes over the first-person speaking position in the middle of the third sonnet and continues in that position through Sonnet XLVIII. Critics have persuasively taken the odd change in speakers to underlie the poem's account of the precarious psychological state of being in (modern) love, what I refer to here as the husband's contingent state of being. Stephen Regan, for example, argues that the alternation of speakers may "be understood in terms of a single, protean consciousness in a profound state of distraction, desperately confronting the circumstances of an appalling personal tragedy."¹³ Adela Pinch suggests that Meredith separates out thinking, the "practice" of the first-person speaker, from knowing, "claim-making about another person."¹⁴ Whether the husband's consciousness is amorphously protean or divided between knowledge claims and thought, the speaker change reveals both first- and third-person points of view to be individually incomplete and provisional.

The way in which the husband's first-person pronoun emerges in the third sonnet suggests a connection between this conditionality of perspective and his vulnerable psychological state of dependency on his wife. Driving the emergence of the first-person pronoun is the pressure the husband feels to distinguish himself from another man's third-person pronoun. In other words, it seems the husband wants to take hold of the narrative of his own marriage:

This was the woman; what now of the man?
 But pass him! If he comes beneath our heel
 He shall be crush'd until he cannot feel,
 Or, being callous, haply till he can.
 But he is nothing:—nothing? (Sonnet III, ll. 1–5)

At this point, the speaker emphatically removes the capacity of the "man," the wife's lover. However, because the previous sonnets have referred to the husband as "he," it is not clear that this "he" refers to the lover for several lines. In the meantime, the energy with which the man in question is disparaged begins

to indicate that we may not just be focalized through the husband's perspective but that he is also taking over the speaking position, effectively trying to contain his wife's lover in a third-person position. We do not in fact "pass him" with indifference, and the contingency of his being "crush'd" ("if he comes beneath our heel") does little to assure the husband's victory. Nor does the self-doubt that immediately arises after condemning him to "nothing": "he is nothing:—nothing?" Whereas the wife's lover in the French novel of Sonnet XXV really does become nothing over the course of a line, here the effect is immediately inverted rather than confirmed. Finally, the husband's "I" emerges when the sonnet returns to the "woman," the moment the husband dislocates himself from the "man" out of his pressing need to reconnect himself to his wife:

Lord God, who mad'st the thing so fair,
See that I am drawn to her even now!
It cannot be such harm on her cool brow
To put a kiss? Yet if I meet him there!
But she is mine! Ah, no! I know too well
I claim a star whose light is overcast:
I claim a phantom-woman in the Past.
The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell! (ll. 9–16)

The loss of control indicated in the series of exclamatory reversals ("Yet . . . ! But . . . ! Ah, no!") depicts the husband's compromised agency, even as his first-person pronoun emerges. Thus, though the source of the husband's first-person speech is his irrepressible desire for his wife, in distinction from the lover's desire, this first-person coup is only partially successful: the consciousness connected to the husband's desire is not autonomous but rather contingent on the wife and her adulterous relationship. The husband is aware of the limitations of his claims on his wife, namely, their belatedness. Much like the speaker's announcement of "the task" in Sonnet II, the repetition of "I claim" highlights the possibility of the husband exercising agency, such that we feel the futility of that exercise—"I claim a phantom-woman in the Past"—all the more strongly.

As the poem builds from these first three sonnets' representation of the husband's experience of contingency, its serial repetition begins to take effect, and he remains frustrated by his inability to act as a causal force. The final sonnet indexes the lack of progress the couple has made, after the most definitive action in the poem, the wife's suicide, precludes future forward progress of the marriage. The outside speaker (now returned) figures the husband and wife as "rapid falcons in a snare, / Condemn'd to do the flitting of the bat" (Sonnet L, ll. 3–4).

They wander'd once; clear as the dew on flowers:
 But they fed not on the advancing hours:
 Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
 Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
 Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
 Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
 When hot for certainties in this our life!—
 In tragic hints here see what evermore
 Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
 Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
 To throw that faint thin line upon the shore! (ll. 6–16)

Rather than move forward with “the advancing hours” of the couple’s relationship, along a progressive narrative logic, they have remained trapped by yearning for their happier past. The first sonnet’s image of a “sword that severs all” (l. 16) ironically returns here in the guise of “the fatal knife.” Whereas in the first sonnet the couple wished for the sword to end their misery, here the “fatal knife” does indeed “sever all,” though only by first becoming the source of that misery in the form of “deep questioning” that returns a desire for “certainties” with “a dusty answer.” Pinch speaks to this problem when she refers to *Modern Love* as “a painful refutation of the liberal, ameliorative belief that understanding, psychological insight, and attention can make things better” (p. 387).¹⁵ If in “dusty answer” the speaker alludes to the wife’s suicide—death returning her to dust, a recurrent motif throughout the poem—he also characterizes that “answer” as unsatisfactory: cloudy, muddled.

The difference that knowledge and understanding fall short of making becomes a difference in plotting: because the husband’s insights do not determine subsequent events, the narrative comes through in “tragic hints.” In this light, another double meaning, on “endless dole,” articulates the generic argument of the poem in miniature by connecting the husband’s emotional state, endless distress over his state of contingency, to the poem’s serial structure, regular partitions. While the characters “want to sit apart and brood or something,” E. M. Forster says in *Aspects of the Novel*, the plot, “a sort of higher government official,” is “concerned at their lack of public spirit.”¹⁶ In Meredith’s response to novelistic narrative, it is not simply that moments of lyrical excess serve to brake plot progression (as is sometimes the assumption with generically hybrid narrative verse). Nor is it, however, that plot marches on by force of will. Rather, *Modern Love* keeps pace with the husband’s repetitive brooding, which he appears to both

indulge in and resent in an ambivalence that only further attenuates narrative progress.

In part through sheer repetition, the poem's serial structure continues to undergird the husband's experience as a contingent being rather than a causal force. But more specifically, throughout the poem, the husband's ambivalence over plotting and brooding is manifest in his nomination of a host of different surrogate protagonists, actors who repeatedly pull against his agency, who *would* be the sources of causality he seeks out after his own attempts to effect change fail. Despite finding his first-person voice in the third sonnet, the husband is by turns enfeebled, fascinated, and enraged by his wife's beauty, by their history, and by his definition of love. This mental state prompts exclamatory addresses to various causes. He asks in another important first line, for example, "But where began the change; and what's my crime?" (Sonnet X, l. 1). He goes on to find little satisfaction in his pursuance of an answer to that question:

The wretch condemn'd, who has not been arraign'd
Chafes at his sentence. Shall I, unsustain'd,
Drag on Love's nerveless body thro' all time?
I must have slept, since now I wake. Prepare,
You lovers, to know Love a thing of moods:
Not like hard life, of laws. In Love's deep woods
I dreamt of loyal Life:—the offence is there! (ll. 2–8)

Without an arraignment, the husband goes on to determine his own charge: "My crime is that, the puppet of a dream, / I plotted to be worthy of the world" (ll. 11–12). In adopting legalistic language, the husband invests Love with the power to sentence criminals in its own court and contrasts the opacity with which it does so to the apparent legibility of legal procedure in the "hard life, of laws." Love becomes a surrogate but unpredictable actor. As the husband imagines himself its victim, his assertion of his own power here takes the form of knowing Love's capriciousness, advertising it to others, and naming his offense. Thus, in his own eyes, the crumbling of his dream renders him more a casualty of Love's capriciousness than of his own idealism. For the husband, this account of the situation makes little practical headway because it strikes an irresolvable tension between assuming agency in one's own narrative, as he "plotted to be worthy of the world," and being subjected like a "puppet" to an external force that dictates that plot.

The husband's repeated surrender to external forces such as Love does not negate causality in principle, then; rather, in locating forces of causality

outside himself, the husband renders his own life contingent on those outside forces, just as it is contingent on his wife. In the throes of his own affair, for example, he finds himself elated with his lover, the “Lady,” for understanding that he will not love her as much as he loves his wife, known as “Madam”: “Soft moon! I feel thy song, my fairest friend!” he exclaims in happiness (Sonnet XXXIX, l. 6). In the final quatrain, however, he falls back into despair upon happening to see his wife with her own lover: “What two come here to mar this heavenly tune? / A man is one: the woman bears my name, / And honour. Their hands touch! Am I still tame? / God, what a dancing spectre seems the moon!” (ll. 13–16). This quick turn of events brings many of the forms of contingency circulating in the poem together. Contingency as chance occurrence heightens the husband’s experience of contingency as a conditional state of being, in which his precarious mental and emotional state depends on his wife. Thus he turns to his lover, his wife and her lover, and the changeful moon, one moment his “fairest friend,” the next a “dancing spectre,” to pinpoint causal forces. In doing so, he negates his own agency; in the next sonnet, he laments, “Helplessly afloat, / I know not what I do, whereto I strive” (Sonnet XL, ll. 13–14). Later, he places responsibility neither with a dream version of Love nor the moon but with the Passions: “I see no sin: / The wrong is mix’d. In tragic life, God wot, / No villain need be! Passions spin the plot: / We are betray’d by what is false within” (Sonnet XLIII, ll. 13–16). Here the husband tentatively assumes responsibility. The compromise between active and passive voice mixes the wrong, and this mixture troubles the location of the original cause, for the same subject that is betrayed by Passions contains them, as they make up the “false within.”

III. *Modern Love’s* Companionate Marriage

The more these episodes pile up—episodes of shifted responsibility, of frustrated interrogation, of chance encounter, of swinging moods from high to low—the more examples of weakened causality Meredith arrays before us in serial form. But the cumulative effect of this array is not simply a sum total. More than plurality, the repetition of the husband’s struggle to generate and determine cause designs a narrative structure to counter the cause-and-effect logic of the novel. If contingency exists in the conventional version of the novel’s marriage plot, it attaches to the woman’s traditional status as the exemplary contingent being whose economic and social security is dependent on men. Whether they will or will not end up together is often synonymous with whether she will or will not make it, such that both the plot’s structure for suspense and its traditional *telos*, the marriage, support that exemplary status. The marriage plot thus romanticizes a legal reality: according to nineteenth-century coverture laws, the married

woman, the *feme covert* whose existence was legally “covered” by her husband’s, enjoyed less legal freedom than did the *feme sole*, the single woman. In this context, when Love’s moods overpower “hard life, of laws” by condemning the husband without arraignment (Sonnet X, l. 7), Meredith suggests that the experience of contingency can surmount laws that inscribe gender inequity into marriage. Similarly, when the husband proclaims “I see no sin: / The wrong is mix’d” (Sonnet XLIII, ll. 13–14), he places the naturalistic “Passions” above a religious understanding of sin that would clearly designate the wife as a wrongdoer. For John Holmes, “it is her pre-Darwinian conviction of sin that drives the wife to suicide”—that is, her conviction not of equalizing biological instinct but of religious doctrine. The wife’s desire to “reassert propriety” in the face of both her and her husband’s extramarital infidelity, Holmes claims, leads her to “martyrdom.”¹⁷ Yet while Holmes concludes that *Modern Love* is “an indictment of misogyny, the doctrine of sin, and the tyranny of miserable marriages over both men and women” (p. 534), the “tyranny” in this marriage is the very force that levels the traditionally gendered understanding of contingency.

Meredith, that is, generalizes the definition of the contingent being from its traditional descriptor, the wife dependent on her husband, to both partners. As the foregoing readings suggest, in *Modern Love* the contingent being denotes a partner in a psychological state of provisionality and dependency, of interpersonal vulnerability, rather than economic and social dependency. While the poem largely focuses on the husband’s experience of the marriage, that focus underlines the novelty of attaching contingency to the male partner in the relationship. Indeed, it is the wife who takes the most drastically autonomous, causal actions in the poem, culminating in her suicide. Thus *Modern Love* suggests that when one sees contingency as an affective state of being that impacts both partners, the causal logic of the novel’s marriage plot can no longer provide suitable narrative form. Instead, the recursive structure and precarious junctures of Meredith’s sonnet serial underline contingency. Because the husband and wife feel trapped within a loveless marriage, we have typically assumed that the relationship and the poem’s bleakness result from what Meredith sees to be unnatural, suffocating Victorian marital and sexual mores. But, making for a more nuanced picture of Meredith’s indictment of these mores, his representation of gender equality depends on this same bleakness, emerging as it does from the husband’s recursive and desperate experience of contingency.

One of the most “companionate” moments in *Modern Love* shows how this kind of contingency affects both husband and wife and infects even their seeming feats of shared agency. Barring their final, short-lived hopeful

moment of reconciliation, the couple feels most positively connected when they perform norms and normalcy to others during the game of “Hiding the Skeleton.” With biting irony, the sonnet detailing this game begins, “At dinner she is hostess, I am host. / Was the feast ever cheerfuller?” (Sonnet XVII, ll. 1–2). Despite the husband’s bitterness toward this pretense and Meredith’s bitterness toward the social norms that require it, the husband cannot escape another irony, the bond that their pretense generates: “But here’s the greater wonder; in that we, / Enamour’d of our acting and our wits, / Admire each other like true hypocrites” (ll. 9–11). Even in a relatively early stage of the poem, then, the husband recognizes both the problematic falseness of these norms *and* the equally problematic—that is, unsustainable—happiness that falseness can provide. Though the couple plays to expectations in this scene, Sonnet XVII arrests the narrative with a domestic tableau, another instance of how seriality stalls forward movement. Performing social expectations brings temporary relief but is doomed to add to the husband’s frustration over an inability to carry out *narrative* expectations for the forward progress of his marriage.

Thus, while there is no denying that *Modern Love* gives a failing grade to marriage as an institution, it also presents at least one experience of marital equality—what would normally be regarded as positive, progressive reform—as a reality already painfully achieved. By presenting a torturous account of gender equality, the poem can neither fully encourage future reform for *more* equality nor fully condemn marriage as it already stands. This conflict helps us understand why the poem feels as bleak as it does. Beyond its dark imagery and halting narrative, here is a new trap, one fit for a poem that ends with its protagonists caught in a snare and fit for a cultural moment in which the “modern” in *Modern Love* is both progressive, protomodernist, and contemporary, a product of “these days.”

Notes

- 1 George Meredith, *Modern Love*, in *Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads*, ed. Rebecca N. Mitchell and Criscilla Benford (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 21–72.
- 2 See, for example, Dorothy M. Mermin, “Poetry as Fiction: George Meredith’s *Modern Love*,” *ELH* 43 (1976): 100; E. Warwick Slinn, “Experimental Form in Victorian Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), p. 59. For more examples, set in the context of a “turbulent reception history, during which the poem evolved from sequence of ‘sonnets’ to ‘novel in verse’ and back,” see Marianne Van Remoortel, “The Incon-

- stancy of Genre: Meredith's *Modern Love*," in *Lives of the Sonnet, 1787–1895: Gender, Genre, and Criticism* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 115–140 (quotation on p. 116). Dino Felluga classes *Modern Love* as a verse novel in "Verse Novel," in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 171–186. Elsewhere, though Felluga does not mention *Modern Love* specifically, he indicates that verse novels constitute a major strain of poetry's critique of Victorian ideology. Felluga, "Novel Poetry: Transgressing the Law of Genre," *VP* 41 (Winter 2004): 496.
- 3 Slinn makes a related reading of Tennyson's *Maud* (1855), which he says "frequently encourages the sense of a literal context within which the speaker's story takes place, and yet referents are notoriously vague. . . . Thus the usual narrative structure of a plot based on cause and effect connections is broken apart, challenging conventional narrative expectations and their inherited assumptions about causality and continuity" (p. 61).
 - 4 William T. Going, "The Term Sonnet Sequence," *Modern Language Notes* 62 (1947): 400–401. Emphasizing the originally very open potential of the term, Going also points out that Rossetti offered "sonnet sequence" as a subtitle to Hall Caine's chronological anthology, which was eventually titled *Sonnets of Three Centuries*.
 - 5 Kenneth Crowell argues that we should read (against Meredith's own avowal to the contrary) the poem's sixteen-line form as an invocation of the Italian "sonetti caudati," or tailed sonnets. His argument is based on the special purpose typically reserved for the tailed sonnets, social satire, as it accords with *Modern Love*'s response to social norms. Crowell, "Modern Love and the Sonetto Caudato: Comedic Intervention through the Satiric Sonnet Form," *VP* 48 (Winter 2010): 539–557.
 - 6 J. W. Marston, "Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside, with Poems and Ballads," *Athenaeum*, May 1862, p. 719. The review was originally published anonymously, per *Athenaeum* conventions.
 - 7 "George Meredith's 'Modern Love,'" *Travelers Record*, February 1892, p. 6.
 - 8 Brian McHale, "Weak Narrativity: The Case of Avant-Garde Narrative Poetry," *Narrative* 9 (May 2001): 165.
 - 9 A. C. Swinburne, "Letter to the Editor," *Spectator*, June 1862, pp. 632–633.
 - 10 Note that in the 1892 edition of *Modern Love*, Meredith removed this epigraph and replaced it with a Petrarchan sonnet titled "The Promise in Disturbance." Restoring *Modern Love* to its original context, Mitchell and Benford use the 1862 edition.
 - 11 George Meredith to Rev. Augustus Jessopp, September 20, 1864, in *The Works of George Meredith: Letters Collected by His Son*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 156.
 - 12 Sean O'Sullivan, "Broken on Purpose: Poetry, Serial, and the Season," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 2 (2010): 62.
 - 13 Stephen Regan, "The Victorian Sonnet from George Meredith to Gerard Manley Hopkins," *Yearbook of English Studies* 36 (2006): 24.
 - 14 Adela Pinch, "Love Thinking," *Victorian Studies* 50 (Spring 2008): 388.

- 15 Pinch makes a similar point in "Transatlantic Modern Love," in *The Traffic in Poems*, ed. Meredith L. McGill (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 168–169.
- 16 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Harcourt, 1927), p. 85.
- 17 John Homes, "Darwinism, Feminism, and the Sonnet Sequence: Meredith's *Modern Love*," *VP* 48 (Winter 2010): 533.