

**POEMS OF OWEN MEREDITH (THE
EARL OF LYTTON) SELECTED,
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY M.
BETHAM-EDWARDS**

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Poems of Owen Meredith (the earl of Lytton) Selected, with an introduction by M. Betham-Edwards by Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton

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EDWARD ROBERT BULWER LYTTON

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DITH (THE EARL OF
LYTTON). SELECTED, WITH
AN INTRODUCTION, BY M.
BETHAM-EDWARDS.

AUTHORISED EDITION.

“Und so do ist der Dichter zugleich Lehrer, Wahnsager,
Freund der Götter und der Menschen.”—WILHELM MEISTER.

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AND MELBOURNE.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE		PAGE
FROM "CLYTEMNESTRA" —			
Clytemnestra	1	The Vampire	51
FROM "THE WANDERER" —			
The Magic Land	8	A Remonstrance	52
Desire	9	Meeting Again	53
Fatality	10	Earth's Havings	57
Thoughts at Sunrise	12	The Last Farewell	59
Thoughts at Sunset	12	The Last Assurance	61
To Irene	15	The Deserted Palace ..	61
An Evening in Tuscany ..	16	The Buried Heart	62
The Storm	19	How these Songs were	
Song	22	made	64
The First Farewell	23	The Portrait ..	66
Forbearance	23	Going back again	70
To a Woman; or, the		Two out of the Crowd ..	71
Last Wish	24	Bluebeard	76
A Love-Letter	24	Fatima	78
The Message	31	Resurrection	78
Sea-Side Elegiacs	47	The Chess-board	83
The Shore	49	Fata Morgana	84
		Consolation	88
		A Footstep	89
		Requiescat	90
		Madame la Marquise ..	91

	PAGE		PAGE
Midges	94	Divided Lives	171
Good-night in the Porch	97	Sacrifice.....	172
Spring and Winter.....	106	Duty	173
SONG FROM "LUCILE"—			
* The Bird of Paradise ..	109	FROM "FABLES IN SONG"—	
FROM "SONGS OF SER- VIA"—			
The Stag and the Vile ..	113	Introductory	174
Love and Sleep	114	The Thistle	176
Tittle Tattle.....	116	Possession.....	186
Love confers Nobility ..	117	Prematurity	187
Neglected Flowers.....	117	The Far and the Near..	188
FROM "CHRONICLES AND CHARACTERS"—			
Generic	118	The Blue Mountains; or, The Far	189
The Dauphin	119	A Wheat-Stalk; or, The Near.....	196
Misery	123	Lost Treasures	200
The Apple of Life	132	Only a Shaving	204
Last Words	142	Questionable Consola- tion	208
FROM "ORVAL"—			
Epithalamium	148	FROM "GLENAVERIL"—	
FROM "MISCELLANEOUS POEMS"—			
Ode to a Starling	150	Part I, Canto II.....	212
The Lay of the Cock....	163	Human Destinies	215
Little Ella.....	160	The Family Board.....	217
Droppings.....	163	FROM "AFTER PARA- DISK"—	
Know Thyself.....	164	North and South	219
Knowledge and Wisdom	165	Athens	220
Side by Side.....	165	Citra	220
		Sorrento Revisited.....	228
		A Sigh	228
		Necromancy.....	229
		Strangers	229
		Uriel	233
		Transformations.....	245

INTRODUCTION.

As the nosegay indicates the luxuriance of the garden, so should a selection epitomise the genius of the poet. Old acquaintances are reminded of many a familiar flower, strangers are enticed to enter. If the first may miss more than one especial favourite, they will still feel grateful for so much beauty presented to them in small compass; if the last cannot roam over the entire domain, they are compensated by the gift of lily or rose. "The poet," writes the all-sympathetic Goethe, "is alike teacher, seer, the friend of gods and men." A more modest yet gracious and self-rewarding function is that of the poet's interpreter, of one who culls choicest blossoms of poesy for others, pointing to the pleasance wherein they grow.

It is no easy task to review in a few short pages the poetic career of Owen Meredith and the Earl of Lytton, one and the same person, yet characterised by work so widely divergent in scope and treatment as to suggest two individualities. No less might doubtless be averred of many another poet, but authorship and personality in

their case being united from the onset, such contrasts are less striking. With a constancy, almost universally witnessed, a constancy often illogical enough, the vast majority of readers prefer the poet's earlier to his later utterances—Owen Meredith to the Earl of Lytton. Such is the verdict passed on most writers winning the laurel crown in early youth. Perhaps the world is too lazy, too pre-occupied, to bestow the same amount of thought and sympathy upon their maturer achievements; it is so difficult, moreover, to believe that the same wand can enchant us twice over! But may there not in this case be another reason? When a writer has pleased, his readers, for the most part, wish to go on being pleased in the same way; no matter how often he repeats himself, if the repetition is up to his standard, nothing more is expected or asked of him. When every new work is a wholly new departure, the striking out of a new path, then he is sure, at least for a time, to forfeit popularity; he is under the necessity of creating his public. Thus it has come about that the poetic achievements of Lord Lytton's maturer years still await the fame they deserve. In the words of an able critic, "The first work in which Lord Lytton's genius did itself full justice was *Glenaveril*, published in 1885. By this time Owen Meredith, the poet, had well-nigh been forgotten in the Earl of Lytton, diplomatist and statesman. The great originality of this work, its wealth of ideas and creation of character, obtained no adequate recog-

dition."* My endeavour has been to make the accompanying selection a representative one, revealing the various aspects of a many-sided genius, the subtle and the sportive, the picturesque and the reflective, the dramatic and psychological. It has also been my plan to avoid fragmentariness, and give, with one or two exceptions, only such pieces as are complete in themselves. This arrangement has necessarily led to the exclusion of descriptive passages of great brilliance and beauty, but which, gems removed from their setting, were more suited to a volume of mere extracts.

Middle-aged lovers of poetry well remember the pleasure with which they hailed the appearance of *Clytemnestra*. Scidom indeed has a first attempt secured its youthful author such poetic rank. This noble dramatic poem, like the "Iphigenie auf Tauris" of Goethe, is no mere echo of the old Greek drama, but an interpretation in the modern spirit of one of its most striking episodes. In the "Agamemnon," writes Dr. Donaldson, the queen's jealousy of Cassandra and guilty connection with the worthless Ægisthus, who does not make his appearance till towards the end, are scarcely touched upon as motives, and remain in the background.† In Owen Meredith's *Clytemnestra*, her vacillating lover, like Macbeth, eager to reap the fruits of crime, but shrinking from the crime itself, is a prominent figure, the protagonist of the play, the

* See the *Scott's Review*, 1887.

† Donaldson's *Theatre of the Greeks*.

faithless wife adducing reprisals for her slaughtered child in order to excuse the murder of her husband.

"Whate'er I am, be sure that I am that
Which thou hast made me,—nothing of myself,"

is her passionate outpouring to Ægisthus, calling forth the fervid reply—

"Oh, you are a Queen,
That should have none but gods to rule over!
Make me immortal with one costly kiss!"

Readers will do well to turn from the extract here given, a piece of description complete in itself, to the account of the same event in the old drama.

The difference between the ancient and modern spirit is strikingly brought out. In Æschylus the sacrifice at Aulis reads like a page out of the "Prometheus Bound." All is rugged, stern, awe-inspiring. The poet of our own day softens the picture, a magic spell overtakes us as we read, the harmony of the numbers takes from the horror of the scene described.

Touching too, and serving as a relief to the sombre story, is the scene between the young Orestes and his sister Electra, the affectionate, neglected daughter of the murderess Queen, who, wedded to a herdsman, is the heroine of one of Euripides' charming plays.

With *Clytemnestra* appeared "The Earl's Return," abounding in weird description, and