

**POEMS OF OWEN  
MERIDITH (THE  
EARL OF LYTTON)**

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Poems of Owen Meredith (the earl of Lytton) by M. Betham-Edwards

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**M. BETHAM-EDWARDS**

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MERIDITH (THE  
EARL OF LYTTON)**



# The Canterbury Poets.

EDITED BY WILLIAM SHARP.

POEMS OF OWEN MEREDITH (THE  
EARL OF LYTTON).

P O E M S OF OWEN MERE-  
D I T H (THE EARL OF  
L Y T T O N). S E L E C T E D, W I T H  
A N I N T R O D U C T I O N, B Y M.  
B E T H A M - E D W A R D S.

*AUTHORISED EDITION.*

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

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## CONTENTS.

	PAGE		PAGE
FROM "CLYTEMNESTRA"—		The Vampire .....	51
Clytemnestra .....	1	A Remonstrance .....	52
		Meeting Again .....	56
FROM "THE WANDERER"—		Earth's Havings .....	57
The Magic Land .....	8	The Last Farewell .....	59
Desire .....	9	The Last Assurance .....	61
Fatality .....	10	The Deserted Palace ..	61
Thoughts at Sunrise .....	12	The Buried Heart .....	62
Thoughts at Sunset .....	12	How these Songs were	
To Irene .....	15	made .....	64
An Evening in Tuscany ..	16	The Portrait ..	65
The Storm .....	19	Going back again .....	70
Song .....	22	Two out of the Crowd ..	71
The First Farewell .....	23	Bluebeard .....	76
Forbearance .....	23	Fatima .....	78
To a Woman; or, the		Resurrection .....	78
Last Wish .....	24	The Chess-board .....	83
A Love-Letter .....	24	Fata Morgana .....	84
The Message .....	31	Consolation .....	88
Sea-Side Elegiacs .....	47	A Footstep .....	89
The Shore .....	49	Requiescat .....	90
		Madame la Marquise ..	91

BRUCE

	PAGE		PAGE
Midges .....	94	Divided Lives .....	171
Good-night in the Porch ..	97	Sacrifice.....	172
Spring and Winter.....	106	Duty .....	173
SONG FROM "LUCILE"—		FROM "FABLES IN SONG"—	
The Bird of Paradise ..	109	Introductory .....	174
FROM "SONGS OF SER-		The Thistle .....	176
VIA"—		Possession.....	186
The Stag and the Villa..	113	Prematurity.....	187
Love and Sleep .....	114	The Far and the Near..	188
Tittle Tattle.....	116	The Blue Mountains; or,	
Love confers Nobility ..	117	The Far .....	189
Neglected Flowers.....	117	A Wheat-Stalk; or, The	
FROM "CHRONICLES AND		Near.....	196
CHARACTERS"—		Lost Treasures .....	200
Genseric .....	118	Only a Shaving .....	204
The Dauphin .....	119	Questionable Consola-	
Misery .....	123	tion.....	208
The Apple of Life .....	132	FROM "GLENAVEBH"—	
Last Words .....	142	Part I, Canto II.....	212
FROM "ORVAL"—		Human Destinies .....	215
Eplithalamium .....	148	The Family Board.....	217
FROM "MISCELLANEOUS		FROM "AFTER PARA-	
POEMS"—		DISE"—	
Ode to a Starling .....	150	North and South .....	219
The Lay of the Cock....	153	Athens .....	220
Little Ella.....	160	Cintra .....	220
Droppings.....	163	Sorrento Revisited.....	228
Know Thyself.....	164	A Sigh .....	228
Knowledge and Wisdom	165	Necromancy.....	229
Side by Side.....	165	Strangers .....	229
		Uriel .....	238
		Transformations.....	245



## INTRODUCTION.

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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 wherewith 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-

nition."\* 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*. Seldom 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 *Scots' Review*, 1887.

† Donaldson's *Theatre of the Greeks*.