

Material Cultures 2010: University of Edinburgh July 16-18, 2010  
Presentation Abstract

### **“Stamped on Hot Wax:” George Meredith’s Narratives of Inheritance**

In 1889’s “The Decay of Lying,” Oscar Wilde called Victorian novelist George Meredith “a child of realism who is not on speaking terms with his father” (976). Wilde’s comment exposes the idealistic strain within Meredith’s strange and understudied novels. As Wilde’s speaker puts it, Meredith “has made himself a romanticist” (976), a self-conscious reactionary against Victorian High realism despite being situated deeply within it. Meredith’s careful self-positioning within literary history is matched by his fascination with literal fathers and children. Many of Meredith’s novels center on texts-within-texts, works written or consulted by father figures attempting to raise sons and daughters. These include Sir Willoughby Patterne’s “Book of Egoism” in *The Egoist*, and the elocution manual “The Speaker” in *Harry Richmond*. In her list of “tutelary books,” Gillian Beer includes Diaper Sandoe’s volume of verses in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, and *The Rajah of London* and Colney Durance’s serial “the Rival Tongues” in *One of Our Conquerors*. Such “tutelary books,” she argues, serve to “intensif[y] the cerebral effect of his novels; his people live not only in a world of ideas but of books and writing” (Beer 81). More recently, Anne C. Henry wrote, in an essay about Meredith’s punctuation, that he “employs the metaphor of text in order to examine what it means to know oneself or others” (Henry 329). My goal is to show how these books can, in themselves, become the main event.

This presentation begins with the *Pilgrim’s Scrip* penned by Richard Feverel’s father in Meredith’s first full-length novel, 1859’s *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel: A History of a Father and Son*. It ends with the book *Maxims for Men*, penned by Carinthia’s father in Meredith’s final novel, 1895’s *The Amazing Marriage*. The questions I ask here apply also to other celebrated

works by Meredith, including *Harry Richmond*, *Diana of the Crossways*, and *The Egoist*.

Meredith's novels begin inside the pages of imagined books to ask pointed questions about the reception and recycling of patriarchal texts.

**For more information about this abstract, please contact:**

Prof. Melissa Jenkins  
Department of English  
Wake Forest University  
P.O. Box 7387  
Winston-Salem, NC 27109-7387

jenkinms@wfu.edu  
336-758-3919