

Chapter 1 : Meredith Placko - IMDb

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George Meredith is no exception. He frequently interpolates or refers to letters in his novels. But their effect in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* is more specific than that. As well as conveying information and varying the point of view, they reveal the perils that subvert communication – a theme with which Meredith would become increasingly preoccupied. It is in such a setting, "above green-flashing plunges of a weir," with lilies swaying among the reeds, that Richard meets Lucy in later adolescence. However, Harrison Miller has depicted rather a heavy, even slightly spooky scene – perhaps intended to have an ominous note. Letters in this novel surprise by their sheer quantity. In the opening chapter of the original edition, "[s]howers of the enthusiastic rose-pink" descend on Raynham Abbey, the Feverel family home. Their colour confirms that they have been penned by sentimentalists, women who have either failed to register the depth of the misogyny indicated by the aphorisms, or mistakenly suppose they can cure him of it. This is a sign of things to come. Letters fly back and forth throughout the narrative, often either betraying or causing similar confusion. Rip wants to know whether they should flee justice, but his febrile messages are mistaken for love-letters by his puzzled mother and sisters. At length his youngest, prettiest sister Letitia manages to get hold of a reply. Letty is bemused, and has to read the letter three times to make sense of it. When letters arrive with such frequency, their non-appearance assumes significance too. Unhesitatingly, Lucy replies, "Oh you will have mine, Richard." But her confidence is misplaced. Efforts to separate the couple start the very next day, when Richard is tricked into going to London. Then suddenly they stop. She has been pressured into giving him up, and dispatched to the institution, perhaps a convent, where she was educated. Not knowing this, Richard panics. Even when letters are duly written and read by the appropriate parties, true communication is not guaranteed. This lack of communication may be due to reticence on the part of the sender, or obtuseness on the part of the recipient – or, indeed, both. When the older woman reports the interview in a letter to Sir Austin, she assures him that Lucy will renounce Richard "and sacrifice herself for his sake. Lady Blandish is clearly worried about the way Sir Austin is conducting himself, but feels able to criticise her mentor only very indirectly. Something of this does come across to Sir Austin: He trifled with the letter for some time, rereading chosen passages as he walked about the room, and considering he scarce knew what. There are ideas language is too gross for, and shape too arbitrary, which come to us and have a definite influence upon us, and yet we cannot fasten on the filmy things and make them visible and distinct to ourselves, much more to others. Why did he twice throw a look into the glass in the act of passing it? Why did he for a moment stand with erect head facing it? Sir Austin scrutinises himself, finds himself dignified in appearance, but gazes with wide eyes, "as one who looks at this essential self through the mask we wear. It is left to the narrator to remark cynically on his lack of a sense of humour: All Meredith is here already, in this one brief episode: As it is, Sir Austin manages to put the letter out of his mind and continues to be obtuse. Only the frontispiece comes from the latter.

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