

A POSY OF VIOLETS:
AN UNPUBLISHED POEM BY GEORGE MEREDITH

David Latham

Musings from the Editor's Desk

Finding an old manuscript of an unpublished poem by a Pre-Raphaelite author is always exciting, even when the poem is a mere couplet of verse, a couplet by George Meredith that reads more like a brief draft for a letter he may have sent in the post to a friend. The verse is written down the side of letterhead stationery hastily cut in half, the half measuring approximately 7 inches by 3 3/8 inches, as if Meredith had cut several leaves of stationery in half for just this kind of scribbled draft, composing a few lines of verse or a sentence or two of prose intended to be copied to a cleaner draft for reviewing the progress of his composition. Only in this case, the strip is a draft for a whole poem. The letterhead – in an upper-case red font – identifies his home address in Surrey – BOX HILL, DORKING – where Meredith lived from 1868 until his death in 1909. The verse reads in full:

We little violets from Surrey banks:
Come to your breast, & beg no word of thanks.

Perhaps it is the red letterhead that seduces me into reducing the poem to an autobiographical document, as I cannot help presuming this scribbled scrap reveals a gesture of intimacy by its author. I envision Meredith copying this scrap onto another strip of paper and tucking it with a posy of violets into an envelope addressed to a friend. And next I wonder what occasion may have motivated this verse. Did it serve as a token of appreciation for a friend or as a note of reassurance for a beloved or as the initial gesture of yet another courtship among the many flirtatious affairs Meredith pursued over the years after the death in 1884 of his second wife? Its tone suggests the latter, the posy and the poem complementing each other as an early gift in courtship, a cautious advance before he dares to wax rhapsodic. We can imagine the effect: the posy and the poem provide a symbolic trellising of the earthly

The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies, 23 (Spring 2014)