

“*A Life-Drama, or The Moon & Stars*”: Modifications and Annotations
In a Copy of Alexander Smith’s *Poems*

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As with any other major research-based university, the library system and its holdings remain among the University of Virginia's greatest assets. Across the numerous libraries and special collections holdings on university grounds (and off-grounds holding facilities)—including a main research library with approximately 1,675,346 materials with a Library of Congress call number and around 643,000 government documents—the university owns a delightful array of resources that its userbase may consult (“Statement”). Many wonderful artifacts can be found here: from Dunlap broadsides of the Declaration of Independence to William Faulkner's manuscripts. However, with a collection as large as the university's, it is quite difficult to keep track of every noteworthy material owned by the library as a whole. While the university's cataloguing system, Virgo, is an excellent resource for students, faculty, and staff to find resources, some of the important aspects of individual copies of works—such as marginalia—had not been previously recorded. While the current trend across library systems to digitize collections makes works more accessible to masses (and is, therefore, a benefit), one loses some of the paratextual/extratextual idiosyncrasies of individual copies when doing so. This paper does not, however, argue the tired defense of the benefits of holding a physical book in one's hands and the *je ne sais quoi* that makes that special, nor does it set up a divide between the wishes of the library and the humanists who use it. Librarians innately understand the value of the physical medium as well as any user of the library. Instead, this paper seeks to detail the importance of cataloguing and preserving the unique aspects of singular copies that are located within libraries. It attempts to do so through examining a copy of an 1853 collection of poetry by Alexander Smith, aptly titled *Poems*, and viewing it as a case study for how individuals interacted with poetry written by the “Spasmodic school” of poets. One is able to learn a great deal through such a thorough first-hand account that would have been lost if it were not found

and catalogued. For example, the marginalia found within this copy allows for greater engagement with the critical reception of Smith's work during the nineteenth-century.

ALEXANDER SMITH

Since the physical book is integral to the primary arguments of this paper, it is worth providing some background information as to how it came into my hands. This particular copy of Smith's poetry was "re-discovered" as part of Andrew Stauffer and Kara McClurken's *Book Traces @ UVA* project. This project pulled all of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century works from the stacks of Alderman library to scan them for marginalia, inserts, flora, letters, drawings, etc. in anticipation of the massive move towards the digitization of archives and a foreseen removal of many physical materials from shelves ("About *Book Traces*"). The project, completed in 2017, was a successful attempt to detail the importance of digitizing such information—it looked at how books were interacted with as physical objects and attempted to "trace" the physical histories of each. The website for the project notes that *Book Traces* is meant to "engage the question of **the future of the print record** in the wake of wide-scale digitization" ("About"). They posit that it is especially prudent for the long nineteenth century because it is situated as a period where massive digitization is occurring. They explain this by writing that "[i]n most cases, pre-1800 books have been moved to special collections, and post-1923 materials remain in copyright and thus on the shelves for circulation" ("About"). *Book Traces @ UVA* has been one of many facets of the larger *Book Traces* initiative which is sponsored by the *Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship* (NINES) at the University of Virginia ("NINES: About"). Stauffer found this copy of Smith's poetry (as well as its marginalia and amendments) particularly fascinating and kept it aside—where I later came into possession of it.

In order to understand the significance of the collection, one must be familiar with Alexander Smith as well as the grouping of poets labelled under the “Spasmodic” moniker. In Rev. Thomas Brisbane’s 1869 biography titled *The Early Years of Alexander Smith, Poet and Essayist: A Study for Young Men Chiefly Reminiscences of Ten Years’ Companionship*, Brisbane notes that Alexander Smith was born in 1829 on “the last day of that year” (Brisbane 3) to Peter Smith and Helen Smith (née Murray) in a village near Kilmarnock (in East Ayrshire, Scotland) called Old Rome (2-3). As a young boy, he fell extraordinarily ill, which left one of his eyes slightly impaired for the rest of his life—being left with what Brisbane describes as a “squint” (10). Smith is also noted to have been an especially well-read child, with Brisbane writing that “books were his chiefest friends” (17) and that he delighted in reading the Romantic English poets—especially Byron and Wordsworth (17). “A Life-Drama,” his most famous work, and his first major work that made it to publication, was published in 1852 to exceptionally great fanfare (140-1). However, Smith is noted to have not been especially changed as a result of his newfound fame (144). Unfortunately for him, this period of fame was to be relatively short. Within three years, Professor William Edmondstone Aytoun published *Firmilian: a Spasmodic Tragedy* under the pseudonym of T. Percy Jones, which served as a satirical takedown/lambaste of the “spasmodic” school of poets to which Smith belonged (189). According to Brisbane, “no one in reading it could fail to perceive that Gilfillan, as a critic, and Bailey, Dobell, and Smith, as poets, were the chief *dramatis personae*” (189). While he was one of the chiefly lambasted poets, Smith was noted to have “never bore any malicious grudge against [Aytoun]” (189-90) and to have simply laughed in response to reading *Firmilian*. Brisbane maintains the position that *Firmilian* was unfair in its attacks against Smith, noting that the satire “happened to hit most

heavily those who had transgressed least—Gilfillan and Smith. Aytoun seemed to reserve all his sharpest strokes for his own country-men” (193).

While Brisbane’s biography primarily focuses on Smith’s life prior to the publication of Aytoun’s work, a great deal of his notoriety came about in later life—and is spoken about at greater lengths elsewhere. In a memoir for Smith that prefixes *Last Leaves: Sketches and Criticisms*, by Alexander Smith, Patrick Proctor Alexander noted that shortly before the Aytoun work was published, Smith ascended to the post of Secretary at Edinburgh University in 1854 as a result of the positive reception of “A Life-Drama” (Alexander xlix). This post granted Smith some degree of comfort due to an initial salary of one hundred and fifty pounds each year (liii). Yet, while he lived in comfort, the public’s perception of him began to waver. His later poetry did not garner a critical reception as positive as that of “A Life-Drama,” and he was falsely accused of imitating/plagiarizing Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King” which had appeared shortly before the publication of his own historical poem “Edwin of Deira” (Brisbane 193-5). As a result, he then shifted his attentions almost entirely to prose—including “Dreamthorp,” a volume of essays, and many magazine articles which have been collected in *Last Leaves* posthumously (198-9). The many articles that he had written helped to elevate his reputation back to what it once was—for a short time prior to his death (199). Smith had unfortunately contracted gastric fever which “became complicated with diphtheria, and, after deceitful symptoms of recover, lapsed into typhoid fever ;” (201) before being laid to rest “in his house at Wardie, at nine o’clock on the morning of 5th, January, 1867, at the age of thirty-seven years and four days” (201).

SPASMODISM

While many agree that Smith was one of the primary figures within the Spasmodic movement, there seems to be less agreement as to what exactly *defines* their poetry as “spasmodic.” As Alexander points out in his memoir, “the epithet [while famously associated with Aytoun] did not originate with Aytoun, who merely ‘conveyed’ it from Carlyle, who had used it with his wonted facility to characterize the Byronic *aestros*” (Alexander lxv). Alexander argues that Byron certainly did not suffer from his association with the term and goes on to ponder what exactly defines “Spasmodic poetry” as it is commonly known (lxvi). He offers one possible “definition” when he says that it is “the Poetry of unrest and despair ; of irregular struggle ; of baffled effort, wild, bewildered, and mistaken—the Poetry, in one word, of *Scepticism*, not cool in the intellect, as Hume’s, but raging...” (lxvi). However, this does not seem quite adequate due to its lack of specificity and technicality. It serves as more of a subjective description than an impartial definition. In fact, it might be argued that much poetry of the long nineteenth century contains these same elements. They are not limited only to the Victorian-era’s Spasmodic works. Alexander’s partiality towards Smith also complicates his take on Spasmodic poetry somewhat as the definition that he provides *does* appear within Smith’s memoir. This also lessens the credibility of his assertion that those who denounce it would “*expunge* very much of the noblest Poetry of the world” (lxvi). As a result of his loyalty to Smith, one must look towards other sources for a more impartial and complete definition.

The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature describes Spasmodic poetry as tending “to describe intense interior psychological drama, were violent and verbose, and were characterized by obscurity, pathetic fallacy, and extravagant imagery (“Spasmodic”). It also notes that Spasmodic poetry used language that was highly derivative of poets admired at the time—such as Shakespeare, Keats, and Tennyson—and starred heroes that tended to be “lonely,

aspiring, disillusioned, and [were] frequently poets themselves” (“Spasmodic”). A fuller definition might be realized through Herbert Tucker’s essay on the Spasmodics, “Glandular Omnism and Beyond: The Victorian Spasmodic Epic,” where he notes that Spasmodic poets “wrote very large certain Romantic tenets that persist among us, involving the centrality of the self, the sanctity of the moment of heightened perception, and the totality of the truth to which creative poets enjoy privileged if fitful access” (Tucker). Tucker considers Spasmodic poetry to operate almost as an intermediary between the Victorian and Romantic eras—or, at least as Victorian-era poetry with Romantic sentiments. He claims that “it was spasmodism that fully lyricized narrative, or narratized lyric, in long texts aspiring to string together the best and happiest moments of the poet’s mind” (Tucker). Indeed, most Spasmodic works tended to be written in a form of “verse drama”—as evidenced by Smith’s own “A Life-Drama.”

While many of the works termed “Spasmodic” share the aforementioned Romantic tendencies, to consider Spasmodism a traditional “school” of poetry would be ill-advised. In their editorial introduction to *Spasmodic Poetry and Poetics*, Charles LaPorte and Jason Rudy note that “most of those who came to be associated with Spasmodism did not know one another, or developed relationships after having published their major poems” (LaPorte and Rudy 421). They claim that early criticism did not fairly grant Spasmodism the appropriate respect, noting that criticism often “emphasized its ephemerality as a cultural movement, casting it as the literary equivalent of the Bloomers fad in women’s fashion (another short-lived radical movement of the period)” (426). They argue instead that the phenomenon had much “breadth, complexity, and even longevity” (426) which was not always appreciated by critics after Aytoun’s infamous intervention. However, LaPorte and Rudy also dispute the claim that Aytoun “single-handedly” caused the ruin of the Spasmodics, stating that while *Firmilian* brought about

great change to careers of authors such as Smith, the Spasmodic mode continued for quite some time (426).

THE PHYSICAL BOOK AND ITS HISTORY

The physical object needs to be detailed at some length as well. This is one of three copies of *Poems* by Smith that the University of Virginia library has housed within Alderman stacks. The collection of poetry has been rebound by the library in what looks to be a more modern binding. This rebinding poses its own issues in regards to the marginalia—some of the writings within it have been unfortunately cut off during the process, which makes some lines illegible. As a result, a moderate amount of guess-work is required to read some of the lines close to the edge of the page. The first eight numbered pages (following two end-papers) of the work contain adverts for other books published by Ticknor, Reed, and Fields in Boston, with authors such as Tennyson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Goethe represented. These advertisements are printed with a different font and were most likely added late in the production of the collection—to keep the advertisements up to date. Following this section are two blank leaves which precede the title page of the work and the subsequent table of contents. Contained within the collection itself are Smith's aforementioned work, "A Life-Drama," which is followed by "An Evening at Home," "Lady Barbara," "To —," and a collection of sonnets. "A Life-Drama" encompasses most of the leaves of the text, with 160 numbered pages out of 188. The collection ends with a series of "Notices from the London Press"—which are book reviews from London magazines which praise Smith and "A Life-Drama" in particular.

What makes this particular copy interesting may first be noticed on the aforementioned title page of the work. Located in the upper righthand corner of this page are two signatures. The first is "W: Meredith. | Sept: 2. 1853. | Philade." and the second, located beneath the former, is

“Fred. W. M. Holliday | July 76.” The front endpaper of the collection has a placard from the UVA library that reads, “LIBRARY OF THE | UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA | university insignia | FROM THE LIBRARY | BEQUEATHED BY | GOVERNOR HOLLIDAY.” This placard helps to explain the latter signature from the former Governor of Virginia, Frederick Holliday, on the title page. This was a material from his personal collection later donated to the university. However, the first signature—that of either William Meredith, former Secretary of the Treasury of the United States and Attorney General of Pennsylvania, or his son William Keppeler Meredith, both of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—proves to be the more fascinating of the two. Mr. Meredith has written his thoughts throughout this copy on well over half of the pages, though he has also actively edited, added to, and amended aspects of “A Life-Drama” in addition to the “pure commentary” that he has provided.

William Morris Meredith was born on June 8, 1799 in Philadelphia and was the son of William Meredith—a lawyer and president of Schuylkill Bank—and Miss Gertrude Gouverneur Ogden (Ashhurst 202). He was the eldest of eleven children and served as a parental figure to his younger siblings following his mother’s death on October 9, 1828 and his father’s deteriorating health (203). Meredith had entered Grammar School at the University of Pennsylvania at seven, graduated from the collegiate department of the university at the age of thirteen with second honor, and was admitted to the Bar five years later in 1817 (204). Following in his father’s footsteps, he was a successful lawyer who presided over many notable cases. According to the University of Pennsylvania’s *American Law Register*, he was “a conspicuous figure in Pennsylvania during the middle fifty years of the 19th Century, and played a highly important part in its history” (201). The *Register* bemoans the fact that “there are probably few so great

Americans so little remembered outside of Pennsylvania” (201) due to their insistence that he not only impacted Pennsylvania, but had an influence on the entire nation.

Apart from being a successful lawyer, William Morris Meredith held many other roles. The Meredith Family Papers (collection 1509) held by The Historical Society of Pennsylvania located in Philadelphia (and processed by Katherine Gallup) note that they hold many of his civic papers and correspondence (Gallup 6). Gallup writes that he served “as a Pennsylvania state representative (1824-1828), as the United States secretary of the treasury (1849-1850), and as the Pennsylvania attorney general (1861-1867)” (35). According to Gallup, Meredith’s main focus as Secretary of the Treasury during the Taylor administration was “a revision of the free trade legislation, which had been passed in 1848 by his predecessor Robert J. Walker” (36). Meredith argued in favor of raising duties on imports due to the rising national debt as a result of acquiring California and having warred with Mexico (36). While not mentioned by Gallup, Ashhurst states that Meredith was “elected in 1871 at the head of the Republican ticket as a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1872-3, and was elected, by the unanimous vote of the members of the Convention when they assembled, their President” (242). He served in this role until he fell ill in June of 1873 to a disease which would eventually take his life on August 17, 1873 (242-3).

William Keppeler Meredith, the only son of William Morris and Catherine Meredith (née Keppeler), was born in 1838 (Gallup 42). As a young boy, he suffered from cataracts, and is noted to have been recovering from cataract surgery as he sent and received his first correspondence with extended family members (42). When his father was selected to serve as Secretary of the Treasury, William relocated to Washington, D.C. with him, though he quickly returned to Philadelphia to begin his formal education (42). The younger William was aided by

recurring issues with cataracts his entire life and was also affected by a stammer which seemed to have negative consequences regarding his schooling (43). He attended Princeton for two years from 1851-1853, though he ranked 53rd in a class of 68 students through his first year (43). His parents seemed to have expressed the idea that much of this was caused as a result of his stammering, though his issues with cataracts certainly also played a part (43). William left Princeton and returned home to Philadelphia and “seems to have spent most of his time as a man of leisure” (43) for the years following. William Morris Meredith eventually arranged for his son to “assume a position as the military secretary for Major General George A. McCall” (43) which made him a Major, though he did not see any combat. William continued to suffer from what his father describes as “tremors in his face and eyes” (43) and attended to his father’s estate. While the write-up for the Meredith Family Papers do not note a death date for the younger Meredith, the *Their Own Words* project hosted by Dickinson College lists his death year as 1903 (Browndorf).

At some point following the death of William Morris Meredith in 1873, this collection passed into the hands of Frederick W. M. Holliday—who presumably picked it up in July of 1876 when he signed his own name under Meredith’s. There is no concrete evidence of any interaction between Holliday and the Meredith family. They were on opposite sides of the Civil War. Frederick Holliday served as a Confederate colonel and was injured during “an assault on the Union line” (Moore 83), and both Meredith men were aligned with the Union. The elder Meredith and Holliday’s only commonalities were that both were practicing lawyers and politicians—and may have interacted around the Washington D.C. metropolitan area—though this is mere conjecture. Holliday was notably assigned as the Commonwealth of Virginia’s “representative on the U.S. Centennial Commission, a post which consumed an ever-increasing

share of his time as the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876 drew near” (84), so he was in and around Philadelphia for a period of years (before and after William Morris Meredith’s death) prior to becoming Governor of Virginia in 1878. This *does* place him in and around the area at the time that he came into possession of the copy. However, there is no evidence that the younger Meredith met Holliday in Philadelphia/knew him well enough to give him the collection. It is just as probable that this book was sold to a bookstore in Philadelphia that Holliday happened upon, or was purchased at an estate sale, or any number of possibilities. With the lack of any letters noting a relationship between the family and Holliday, one may never be sure.

It seems plausible that either of the two Meredith men annotated the poetry collection, since the Meredith Family Papers write-up mentions that each had a love of poetry and wrote their own poems (Gallup 36, 42). The signature lists the date that the book was acquired as Sept. 2, 1853, which would have placed William Morris Meredith at 54 years old and practicing law, and William Keppeler Meredith as a 16 or 17-year-old student freshly out of Princeton—both would have been old enough to have read through this collection of poetry and annotate it shortly after it was published. I would be remiss here not to mention the blog post that *Book Traces @ UVA* wrote about this collection when it was first found that arrived at some of the same conclusions about the annotator of the work—narrowing it down to one of these two Merediths. Maggie Whalen, a research assistant for *Book Traces* at the time, also agrees that the penmanship of the annotations throughout the text match the “W. Meredith” signature due to its looping quality, rather than the more condensed signature of Holliday (Whalen). However, she does not seem ready to venture towards differentiating between the two possible annotators.

While either could have annotated the collection, it seems more likely that it was the younger Meredith who did so. Much of the commentary reads tonally like the commentary that a much younger man might write, with quotes such as “I should like to pitch this fool into the Atlantic” (Meredith 74). Furthermore, the signature does not closely resemble William Morris Meredith’s signature during the time that he operated as Secretary of the Treasury. While not able to physically visit the Historical Society of Pennsylvania to look at the Meredith Family Papers, I was able to find various signatures of the older Meredith by looking through websites such as Abe Books, HistoryForSale, and eBay. I was able to locate two separate manuscripts from William Morris Meredith penned during 1850, and in each he signed his name as “W. M. Meredith” with the first down-stroke of the “W” closer to the first up-stroke, so that it looked almost like a capital “N.” Additionally, the “Meredith” in these signatures was slightly more looping and illegible overall when compared to the signature at the front of this copy. The discrepancies in signature and the overall tone/voice of the annotator leads me to think that the younger Meredith was the author.

While not directly relevant, a similar case where the authorship of an annotated collection has been disputed between this father-son duo may be seen in the University of Pennsylvania’s Rare Books collection. In the aptly named “William Meredith collection of Philadelphia theatrical commentaries,” one of these two men has annotated a collection of playbills from shows that he viewed in Philadelphia from December 1852 to January 1857 (Hutt). The “finding aid,” prepared by Molly B. Hutt, notes that “A note from the donor, Horace Howard Furness Jayne, ... suggests that the collection may also have been created by William Meredith, Sr.’s son, William Keppele Meredith,” (Hutt). The donor argues that since William Morris Meredith was an active lawyer at the time, that he may not have been able to view the numerous plays

shown in the collection. This time period also lines up with the period that Gallup noted William Kepple Meredith as acting primarily as a man of leisure. If he was living a relaxed life during this period, it seems more probable that he *would* have attended the theater than his father. This collection of playbills also sheds some degree of light onto the Alexander Smith book that has been annotated. The Smith collection was published during the same period that these playbills were annotated and the plays performed. The pair of men were clearly culturally literate and well-read—both enjoying pastimes such as the theater. It seems very likely that whichever man annotated the playbills also worked with this copy of poetry. More work would need to be done looking through both the Meredith Family Papers and the collection of playbills at UPenn and comparing each against this copy of poetry, but it seems highly plausible that the younger Meredith annotated both.

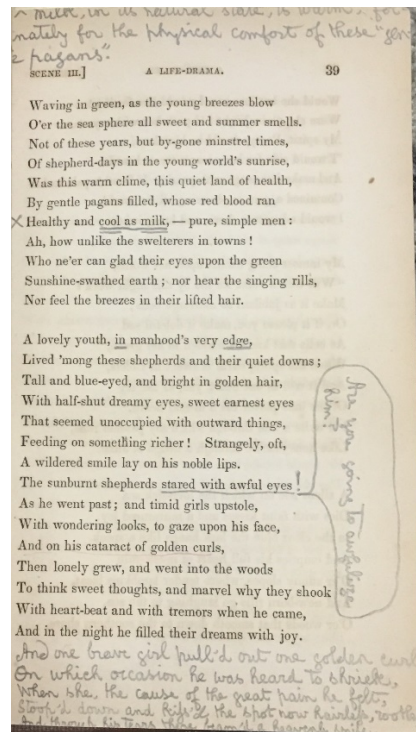
NOTES ON THE MARGINALIA AND ANNOTATIONS

Regardless of which of the two Meredith men owned and annotated this collection of poetry, it remains an important artifact to examine and illuminates how an educated mid-nineteenth century reader engaged with the Spasmodics. Meredith primarily annotates Smith's "A Life-Drama," with a few underlined and commented upon passages in the other works—though not nearly to the same degree. However, Meredith *does* seem especially fond of one of the sonnets in this collection, having "circled" it with two semi-circles enclosing the text (Smith 182). Most of the attention of this paper will be focused on "A Life-Drama," both because it is the most heavily interacted with, and because of its importance to Spasmodism in general.

There *are* a few instances (less than five or so over the course of the text) where it seems as though a more modern reader—assumed to be a user from the UVA library system—has underlined a passage or two. However, these are easy to differentiate from Meredith's writings

due to the fact that each of these are in a reddish-pink color. It seems that the more modern reader used a red-inked pen to underline/highlight and the ink has faded. Besides the signature on the title page, Meredith writes exclusively in pencil, and the handwriting stays consistent throughout the text. As a result, any fears or concerns that multiple persons are being conglomerated into/subsumed by the voice of Meredith may safely be disregarded.

Over the course of the work, Meredith thoroughly engages with Smith's poetry to an extent infrequently seen. Rather than simply annotating/commenting upon the work, there are entire sections where he amends and/or edits the poem. He frequently "steals" a line or two from Smith and tries out his own poetic voice—often mocking Smith during these parodic sections. Due to the varied ways in which he interacts with the text, it is helpful to speak about these different registers separately. While all of his notes are connected to one another (his amendments/own poetical sections act as commentary upon the text, for example), they generally operate in different modes and grant the reader different insights, accordingly. As a result, the paper speaks of these notes/amendments as units rather than moving through the text chronologically.



(Smith 39)

Since Meredith's annotations are the most important aspect of this copy of Smith's poetry, a representative picture of them has been provided above. One can see how Meredith comments upon the passage that he has underlined and marked with an "X" at the top of the page. One may also view an instance of Meredith amending the text—changing the end punctuation of a line in the second verse-paragraph to an exclamation point before he makes a pun out of the ending "awful eyes" (Smith 39) by asking "Are you going to awfulize him?" (39). Finally, Meredith parodies Smith's poetic voice at the bottom of the text here, as he frequently does. Rather than provide an image for every passage that will be discussed, the text has been reproduced within the paper to the best of my ability. In those instances, I have tried to keep the lineation the same as it is represented in the collection. In all cases where italics appear within the poetry, those are the places that Smith (or Smith's editor) intended for words to be italicized. When reproducing Meredith's words alongside Smith's, I have chosen to underline those

passages that he underlined and have emboldened his commentary and amendments to the text. However, when Meredith's commentary stands alone, I have left them unchanged save for underlining sections appropriately. In those instances where Meredith has changed the punctuation of the text (or stricken anything out), I have struck through them in this paper.

MEREDITH'S POETICS

The most unique of these registers through which Meredith engages with the text may be when he tries out his own poetical voice and makes amendments to the poem as commentary. This can be initially seen on the first page of "A Life-Drama," where Meredith has amended the title to read "**Beautiful, Absurd, and Trashy Stuff. A Life-Drama-, or The Moon & Stars**" (5). From the onset of the verse drama, Meredith has made his thoughts on the work explicitly clear. As he shows throughout all of his amendments and commentary, Smith's words range from beautiful to absurd and trashy. He changes the period after "A Life-Drama" to a comma, extending the title and adding the alternative subtitle: "The Moon & Stars." This title change—while the first thing that a reader sees—seems to have been made at the end of his time with the work. Throughout the work, he comments upon what he sees as Smith's overuse of astral imagery. These frustrations with the repeated mentions of the moon and stars are made quite explicit as he comments upon Walter (the hero of the work) having said, "Still o'er him rose those melancholy stars !" (23). To this Meredith replies, "The Wind that harps upon the trees / Is doubtless proud of its high breeze, / But Mr. Smith its triumph mars, / By always harping on the stars!" (23) in the margins of this page. The set of rhyming couplets actively mock Smith for his reliance on repeated imagery here.

The instances where Meredith engages with the text through mimicking Smith's poetic voice—and trying his own out, a bit—begin innocuously enough. The first of these moments

comes on the ninth page, during the first scene of “A Life-Drama,” as the poet-hero Walter is detailing the moon and its “fame” (Smith 9). Meredith’s additions to the scene do not attempt to satirize it or sardonically comment upon it, as he does in later instances. With his additions, the final lines of the scene read as such:

O Fame ! Fame ! Fame ! next grandest word to God !
 I seek the look of Fame ! Poor fool ! – so tries
 Some lonely wanderer ‘mong the desert sands
 By shouts to gain the notice of the Sphynx,
 Staring right on with calm eternal eyes.
So tries some archer to bring down a star,
Or shoot an arrow that shall fly to God.
So vainly tries some weary traveler
On foot, to overtake the four-horse stage.
And so the four-horse stage, with ---- strides,
Vies with the rushing, roaring iron steed. (Smith 9)

The “----” that has placed here stands in for a word that is not quite legible, but appears to begin with a down-stroke (perhaps a “p”) and ends with a down stroke in the opposite direction (perhaps a “y”). However, this does not make the effect any less evident. Meredith rather successfully takes on Smith’s voice here—elaborating upon the vanity of the speaker by extending the metaphor that Walter has provided for his own situation. He likens an archer trying to shoot a star or an arrow to God to the lone wanderer shouting at the Sphynx. Furthermore, the situations are akin to trying to race a stagecoach pulled by four horses, and that same coach’s ability to keep up with a train. The lines that he has added could, believably, have been written

by Smith—which may be made easier by the mode in which Smith writes. It is not overly difficult for Meredith to add lines into verse paragraphs and have them fit appropriately. Meredith does, however, write a little too pointedly at times, such as when he straightforwardly denotes the acts as vain rather than taking a more subtle approach.

Meredith quickly moves towards mocking both Smith and his poetics/style in the following pages. One fascinating amendment that he makes sees Meredith comment upon the act of reading the poetry collection as he does so. On the seventeenth page of the work, he amends the final line—as Walter ponders the captivating nature of books—to read: “They seize the reader / As tempests seize a ship, and bear him on / **Down to the bottom of the seventeenth page.**” (17). Meredith co-opts the discussion here to seemingly comment upon the chore of reading this work. He argues that reading this work is akin to being drowned during a tempest, which is not an especially forgiving note.

Meredith more directly ridicules Smith through parodying his voice a few pages later (in one of the most overt references to the author). During the second scene of “A Life-Drama,” Walter is singing a song for an unnamed lady who he is courting—the reader later discovers that the pair were lovers in the past, but time has separated the pair and she is betrothed to another. Walter sings of a poet he once knew (later revealed to be himself) whose “words set [him] on fire ;” (Smith 25) and is quite literally singing his own praises. Meredith slightly modifies this first line, and a few others, to provide his own commentary:

His words set me on fire; I cried aloud,

“I’ll be that Poet—that immortal mind!”

He grasp’d my hand,—~~he~~ I look’d upon ~~my~~ his face,—

A thought struck all the blood into his cheeks,

Like a strong buffet. His great flashing eyes

Burn'd on my own. He said, your name is Smith

Why am I cursed with that damning name?

Why am I not Jones,—Milligan,—McShinn

Pips,—anything but Smith (Smith 25)

This, unlike much of the other commentary and amendments, does not focus on the weak poetry and often implausible circumstances that Meredith finds issue with. This amendment acts in a much more childlike manner—merely mocking Smith here in the same way that a schoolhouse bully might. His primary change simply states that anyone would certainly rather have any other name than Smith's (presumably due to his shoddy writing). Meredith only mentions Smith directly on two other occasions and only one of these is through verse. The next mention comes as Meredith notes the similarities between Walter and his creator as he writes "Walter's another Smith" (85) and notes that the "great work" that Smith had written about is the very text that Meredith is reading (85). The final instance where Meredith mentions Smith by name comes at the end of scene eleven as Meredith elaborates upon the ending—adding sixteen lines of his own poetry across two pages (142-3). This instance, much like the above, merely speaks of Smith as the punchline of a joke.

Many of the other cases of Meredith taking on Smith's poetic voice see him re-arrange lines from the work and use them to ask questions of it, point out inconsistencies, and criticize the poetics and style. One typical instance of this comes mid-way through the fourth scene, as Walter is singing verses from the "poet" that he knew. Walter sings: "Round her heart, a rosebud free, / Reeled I, like a drunken bee ; / Alas ! it would not ope to me" (54). Meredith takes these passages that he has underlined and responds to Walter as he writes: "If it would not ope to thee,

/ How was it a rosebud free? / Was it because thou drunken be?" (54). He is commenting on what he sees as fallacies in the verse that Smith has provided—the fact that her heart is simultaneously a rosebud that was free, but would not open for Walter does not quite make sense to Meredith. While Smith was probably alluding to her heart as being a rosebud free for the plucking by another suitor (as the narrative plays out), the way in which he writes leaves room for alternative readings, which Meredith provides.

A sense arises that Meredith parodies Smith in an effort to “prove” that he was capable of composing a “better” story than Smith was able. Roughly half of the instances where he provides his own verse simply extend the writings (as exemplified by the earlier “iron steed” section). One of the larger changes that Meredith makes in the work comes at the verse-drama’s close. By this point in “A Life-Drama,” Walter has been rejected by the unnamed lady and won the affections of another woman, Violet. Meredith modifies the ending of the scene to read:

WALTER

This mournful wind

Has surely been with Winter, ‘t is so cold.

The dews are falling, Violet ! Your cloak—

Draw it around you. Let the still night shine !

A star ’s a cold thing to a human heart,

And love is better than their radiance. Come!

Let us go in together. **Love’s bright sun**

Is in our east, and when we pray to-night,

We will not turn our backs upon him. Come !

We’ll kindle up a flame shall pale his light,

Or singe him black and burn his hot life out!
Like two red cups of sparking wine, brim-full,
Dash'd each to each, we'll merge in one-another!
And as those two cups, when their life is spent,
Fall to the ground and leave their mark on it,
We'll leave our mark upon the world. So, come!
Love once was crucified, has risen again,
And now, as you have said, is our Redeemer.

Violet

Yes, Walter! I will sleep upon thy breast,
As yonder moon sleeps on the quiet river.
The stars, and he in the moon, are looking at us,
So come away, for I'm afraid of blushing.

Walter

You look more pale than ever. (Smith 160)

Here Meredith extends the metaphor that likens love and its redeeming qualities (that Smith had set up in the pages immediately prior) to the radiance of a star. He makes the ending much more passionate, literally burning brighter than in the ending that Smith had originally given it. However, Meredith adds in some Christian imagery as well—with the “love” that Walter and Violet discuss being turned into the love of Christ the redeemer. This newfound Christian influence shifts much of the reading as a whole, and does not quite fit in with the rest of the work—though may illuminate some of the sentiments of Meredith himself.

There is an additional bit of humor in Meredith's re-working of the final lines of the work. He ends with the decidedly un-romantic line of "You look more pale than ever," (160) following Violet's newfound fear of blushing as a result of the moon and stars looking down upon them. The change to have Violet explicitly sleeping on Walter's breast rather than simply leaving with him makes the sexual relationship between the two much more prominent. Presumably, this is the reason for why Violet fears blushing. It also adds some parallelism to Meredith's amended subtitle, "or The Moon & Stars," (5) from the first page of the verse drama. The work is now overtly bookended by references to the astral imagery that has recurred throughout Smith's lines.

In every instance where he amends the text, Meredith shows an incredibly high amount of readerly intervention. While he does not quite re-work the story to the degree of modern "fan fiction," he certainly makes enough edits/commentary to fundamentally change the work (provided that one reads them in addition to Smith's verses). Reading Meredith less as a commentator upon/judge of "A Life-Drama" and focusing on his editorial moves proves a worthwhile exercise as well. In addition to providing Meredith's thoughts on Smith's writing, his added verses emphasize different facets of characters that are in place in Smith's original work, but were not quite as overt—such as emphasizing romantic characteristics of Walter and Violet at the verse drama's close.

MEREDITH'S ANNOTATIONS AS COMMENTARY

The primary manner in which Meredith interacts with Smith's text, and the manner that may be more beneficial from the standpoint of reception history, is through his annotations on the work. There is rarely a page within "A Life-Drama" that has not been marked by Meredith in some way. Through reading his annotations, one starts to develop a greater sense of who

Meredith *was* and how he reacted to the reading than through simply reading his added verses. For example, Meredith frequently quotes other literary and theatrical figures—such as Shakespeare (on multiple occasions), Fanny Kemble, and Thomas Moore. These references signal that he was obviously quite well-read and able to pick up on those instances where Smith seems to take influences from other authors since he responds with literary allusions of his own.

In the same manner as his poetical commentary, Meredith's annotations tend to converge on those moments of the text where the rhyme and meter is slipshod, where he believes metaphors are not completely realized, or where the rhetorical moves that Smith makes do not quite make sense. One early example of a metaphor that Meredith takes fault with may be seen when Walter is singing to the unnamed lady at the beginning of the drama as he tries to gain her love. Meredith has drawn a line next to a stanza and marked it with an "x" before commenting at the bottom of the page. Smith had written "Ye are my menials, ye thick-crowding years! / Ha ! yet with a triumphant shout / My spirit shall take captive all the spheres, / And wring their riches out" (14). In response, Meredith posits that "All the spheres must be exclusively spongy if such a d----d fool as this can wring them" (14). It is this slightly antagonistic/frustrated voice that Meredith carries throughout much of his running commentary. He repeatedly lambastes Smith and Walter throughout the text—going so far as to call Walter (and by extension, Smith) a "damned fool," though he has censored himself. He also provides judgment on the quality of character that Walter represents. From just the fourteenth page of the work, Meredith has decided that he will not like Walter.

These frustrations with the use of metaphor and Smith's poetics are most fully realized in a comment that he provides in the fourth scene of the work. In the middle of a large verse-paragraph, Walter asks "Shaken from odorous hills, what tender smells / Pass like fine pulses

through the mellow nights ;” (51). Meredith speaks directly on the issue of poetics here by noting that “To liken smells to pulses, is carrying the poetic license al-most too far” (51). The comparison here does not appeal to Meredith and he continues questioning Smith’s use of simile and metaphor throughout the text.

There are also instances where Meredith engages directly with Walter as a character, speaking directly to him as though he were an independent agent from Smith. These moments seem to primarily be focused around the center of the text (especially from pages sixty-nine through eighty-two). Among the most notable of these within the work occurs when Walter states, “My heart is weak as a great globe, all sea” (74) in the fifth scene of the drama. Meredith responds and says, “I should like to pitch this fool into the Atlantic, to convince him that his heart is a little weaker than a great globe, all sea” (74). It seems strange that Meredith wishes to pull a literary figure from the page and pitch him into the sea in an effort to “teach him a lesson.” Though, this type of direct address occurs on a few other occasions throughout the text. In one such instance, Walter reads from a manuscript and says “Through the long spring, till autumn’s peaches / were drooping full-juiced in my reaches—!!!!” (77). Meredith has added the four exclamation points and written “you sentimental old hypocrite!” (77) down the edge of the page. This assertion may give new meaning to the aforementioned passage where Meredith writes “Walter’s another Smith” (85). It seems that Meredith may be operating as though Walter stands in as a placeholder for Smith and is directing his frustrations directly to him as a result.

Perhaps even more damning from Meredith are the numerous instances where he simply writes one-worded/short rebukes of Smith’s poetry. For instance, during the middle of the second scene, Meredith has underlined “Trembles with pity o’er bright bleeding day” (23) and simply written “nonsense” (23) in response. On the very next page, Meredith has underlined two verses

that speak of “grappl[ing] with the questions of time” (24) and responded with “absurdity” (24). A third, and slightly longer, example may be seen later during this scene as Walter and the unnamed lady are conversing. Walter states, “With showery tresses like a child from sleep, / Upon the splendid-mooned and jeweled night,— / The loveliest born of God.” (35) and Meredith has written “What stuff and nonsense!” (35) immediately next to the final verse. One final, notable instance comes towards the drama’s close, as Walter responds to an unnamed girl asking him where he is going by saying “My heart’s on fire, by hell, ! and on I drive / To outer blackness, like a blazing ship” (139). Meredith has both edited the line—adding a comma before “by” and changing the original comma after “hell” to an exclamation point—and commented upon it. He writes that the two lines are ‘unnatural’ (139) and then, at the end of the scene, under the final two lines, simply writes “Disgusting Affectation” (139). Each of these are indicative of the manner in which Meredith seems to view Smith’s work—he seems increasingly frustrated by Smith’s grandiose descriptions—and keeps this mindset throughout “A Life-Drama.”

Meredith quite obviously feels that Smith’s writing is lacking in finesse and refinement. It seems that he not only feels as though the metaphors that Smith is attempting come off a little weak, but that Smith repeats the same imagery/ideas throughout the work. Upon Smith returning to astral imagery and the idea of love’s brightness and how it may pierce the darkness, Meredith becomes annoyed. Walter has soliloquized and mourned the loss of his chance of winning the lady’s heart as he notes, “And still that Child’s face sleeps within my heart / Like a young sunbeam in a gloomy wood, / Making the darkness smile — I almost smile” (82). Meredith has written in the margins of this page that “every idea in this Poem is repeated five times at least” (82). Meredith also seems frustrated with the flow of the work as it is read phonetically. At the top of the same page, Walter had been reading aloud from a manuscript, and had said “and one

star like a hound! / Wearily the chase I eyed, / Wearily I saw the Dawn's..." (82). Meredith both comments to the side of the first line, asking which star was like a hound and comments at the top of the page saying that "We've had quite enough of your I-I-ing" (82). It seems that Smith may have been alluding to the star, Sirius, through this passage—playing on the double meaning of "hound." This would, of course, rectify the first issue Meredith raised. However, the second "I-I-ing" complaint has a bit more weight to it. Walter has been pontificating about numerous facets of both love and love-making throughout the work. The pun that Meredith makes off of "I eyed / Wearily I," being an instance of three words in a row that are all phonetically similar is quite a brilliant way to draw out his criticism of Smith. Walter is repeating himself in multiple ways, both in his ideas and through the sound of his words.

One final, albeit extended, example (though certainly not the final instance) of Meredith finding fallacies within Smith's logic comes at the start of the seventh scene of the work. Walter opens overlooking the sea while speaking to Edward on a balcony and states, "The lark is singing in the blinding sky, / Hedges are white with May. The bridegroom sea / Is toying with the shore, his wedded bride." (90). Here, Meredith provides anecdotal evidence for why this adjective is unwarranted. He notes:

John and Polly have been married 40 years. To call John a bridegroom, or Polly a bride would be apt to provoke a smile from the most rigid practicer of decorum. I therefore feel myself the less criminal in having actually laughed at the idea of bride-grooming and briding the Sea and the Shore, that have been married (man and wife) for thousands of years. (Smith 90)

This note does not really need much further explanation—Meredith simply thinks that the comparison between a bride and bridegroom to the moon and the sea is preposterous—though it

gets compounded upon later as the bridegroom metaphor returns. Edward later speaks to Walter and says “Like God, I would pervade Humanity, / From bridegroom dreaming on his marriage morn., / To a wild wretch tied to the farthest bough” (91). In response, Meredith quotes Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* at the bottom of the page, having picked up on similar themes: “Those dulcet sounds at break of day, that creep into the dreaming bridegroom’s ear, and summon him to marriage” (91). Meredith later turns the bridegroom metaphor around on Smith, noting a discrepancy in his description. Edward speaks of the sea and tells Walter: “The garrulous sea is talking to the shore, / Let us go down and hear the greybeard’s speech.” (93). Meredith’s words curl from the end of the line down the margin of the page as he questions Smith by stating “Just now he was a bridegroom” (93). It seems illogical to Meredith that the sea could be described as both an elderly man and a bridegroom. While his commentary does not generally revolve around a recurring idea such as this, these comments remain indicative of the manner in which he typically engages with the text.

It must be granted to Smith, however, that not *all* of the commentary that Meredith provides is negative. Two instances in particular stand out as sincere reactions to the text. The first comes in the second scene as the unnamed lady reads from Walter’s notebook as he sleeps before their initial interaction within “A Life-Drama.” Walter had written a long poem, consisting of quatrains (one of which is added by Meredith), and in one instance says:

A Terror and a Glory ! Shocked with light

His boundless being glares aghast ;

Then slowly settles down the wonted night,

All desolate and vast.!!!

(Smith 13)

Meredith has added three exclamation points at the end of the stanza before writing “Love is sometimes said to be incomprehensible” (13) vertically down the edge of the page. He was clearly moved by this passage and was similarly affected by a section later in the same scene that he describes as “Beautiful, by God!” (19). This secondary exclamation seems to have almost taken him by surprise, as though he could not believe that Smith was capable of writing any quality lines. It also appears that Meredith may have been more forgiving at the onset of the work, since his words take on a more curmudgeonly air as the story progresses.

SMITH’S CRITICAL RECEPTION

Contrary to the position that Meredith held, “A Life-Drama” was originally very well-received by critics. The final two pages of this copy have “NOTICES FROM THE LONDON PRESS” with an array of positive reviews about the work, in an effort to move copies. One such review, by the *Spectator* (though listed without a volume number or year), heaps an inordinate amount of praise upon Smith and his writings. They claim that:

It is to the earlier works of Keats and Shelley alone that we can look for a counterpart, in richness of fancy and force of expression. . . . These extracts will induce every lover of true poetry to read the volume for himself ; we do not think that, after such reading, any one will be disposed to doubt that Alexander Smith promises to be a greater poet than any emergent genius of the last few years. (Smith 189)

Another selection of a review, pulled from *Literary Gazette*, claims Smith to be the poet with the most amount of promise since Tennyson (189). Yet another, the *Westminster Review*, notes a “Shakespearian felicity of expression, or some striking simile” (189) in Smith. Across these three reviews coming out of London during this time, Smith has been set in the same league as Keats, Shelley, Shakespeare, and Tennyson—which remains an exorbitantly high bar to be judged

against and one that Smith could not possibly hope to meet. Smith's work seems to have been initially as well-received in the United States as well. The *North American Review* from July 1853 (volume 77, number 160) opens with a paragraph that states that "POEMS by Alexander Smith, a volume recently published in London, and by this time reprinted in Boston, deserve attention" (*NAR* 1). They provide a very positive outlook for this work and compare it quite favorably against a few other emerging works of the same time period. It seems that it was not just literary critics who regarded Smith's work highly. A Master's Thesis titled "Alexander Smith (1830-1867): A Biographical and Critical Study" presented to the University of Virginia in July, 1934 by Orvetta Talbott Weston, notes that in her letters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was enthusiastic regarding Smith's future career as an author (Weston 39-40). Of additional note is that his positive critical reception was followed by an extraordinary number of sales. Brisbane notes that after the rise in his fame from "A Life-Drama," "An edition of double the usual number of copies, had been sold of "A Life Drama" in the course of a few months, and a second had appeared. Foreign journals had also made his name favourably known on the continent ; while in America his book was being sold in thousands" (Brisbane 175).

However, not all initial reviews were quite as positive regarding this work. Weston notes that "As a rule, reviewers were most kind, though there were several who, from the start denounced Poems as a ridiculous collection of meaningless images. Blackwood's Magazine and the New Quarterly Review were especially severe in their attacks" (Weston 39). While it seems as though the detractors (to which Meredith belonged) were decidedly fewer, their perspective became the predominant one quickly following Aytoun's intervention. Brisbane posits that:

Nothing so prejudices the mass of men against a public man or author as, though excessive, deserved, and so successful ridicule. And as this was achieved in "Firmilian"

with superlative cleverness, public sentiment which had, perhaps, become already sated with its own over-rapturous applause at “A Life Drama,” began to look shy at its author. (Brisbane 190).

Aytoun is far from the only reason for Smith’s declining fame/popularity, however. No matter their validity, Smith’s aforementioned plagiarism charges certainly aided in this regard.

However, Aytoun’s *Firmilian* certainly *did* help spur on the downfall of the careers of many major Spasmodic poets. LaPorte and Rudy suggest that either *Maud* (released in 1855) or *Aurora Leigh* (released in 1856, though dated 1857) were the last of the truly Spasmodic literary works, although some later works continued the “legacy” of the Spasmodics (LaPorte and Rudy 422, 426).

In his preface to *Firmilian*, under the pseudonym T. Percy Jones, Aytoun makes a point to “dispute” the fact that he is a Spasmodic poet, saying that he does not belong to any school of poetry, but *has* chosen to take place the word “Spasmodic” in the title of his work (Aytoun v). He contests that *all* poetry is “spasmodic” and claims that if one eliminated those elements from Shakespearian works that one would be left with “a mere *caput mortuum*.” (v). He also claims “I have been accused of extravagance, principally, I presume, on account of the moral obliquity of the character of *Firmilian*. To that I reply, that the moral of a play does not depend upon the morals of any one character depicted in it” (vi) and continues to compare *Firmilian* against Iago, Richard III, Macbeth, and Hamlet to “prove” this point. He ends with the assertion that one might be hard-pressed to discover a finer poem than *Firmilian* (ix). These “charges against” *Firmilian* are the exact reasons that led Aytoun to satirize Smith. His “defense” of *Firmilian* and assertion that it is an extraordinary work is an obvious ploy to point out how ridiculous similar works are—and it was, undoubtedly, successful in doing so.

CONCLUSIONS

Meredith's commentary upon Smith's "A Life-Drama" and his parody of it certainly seem to have foreseen Aytoun's takedown of the same work to some degree. Both men acted upon the urge to satirize this work due its style and poetics, faulty metaphors, and the pastiche innate in incorporating Romantic influences into the poetry. It may be that "A Life-Drama," with its self-aggrandizing poet-hero that is easily read as a stand-in for Smith, was a readily available target for this type of parody/criticism. Meredith's writings cannot be said to be prototypical for Aytoun, he only provided his personal thoughts and opinions—though for whom his annotations were meant is unclear. Nevertheless, there are many similarities between the two and the existence of Meredith's annotations and amendments provides evidence for Aytoun's position not being an uncommon one. These same criticisms of the work (and the work of other Spasmodic authors such as Sydney Dobell), led to their "movement" being forgotten/ignored or only being considered by Victorianists insofar as it acts as "window-dressing for more 'refined' poetry, or [provides] an easy laugh" (LaPorte and Rudy 421).

The notion that Spasmodism was on an almost meteoric rise with most readers heaping its praises until Aytoun intervened and single-handedly caused its immense collapse proves to be an ill-formed one. While it may seem almost "common sense," Meredith's commentary provides definitive evidence that there were detractors (outside of literary critics) who grew frustrated with Smith's work. The mere act of taking on Smith's voice and writing his own verses in the work suggests that Meredith thought that he could improve upon the work/write better than Smith. In this context, Aytoun's intervention does not seem nearly as revolutionary or out of place. Meredith's opinions on the text as well as his modifications to it, should certainly be

thought of on the same level as those critics from the *New Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, for whom Aytoun himself was a contributor and editor ("Death").

Many humanities scholars tend to innately recognize the benefits of working with an original manuscript or first-edition of a work. However, the importance of engaging with texts annotated and modified by others is not so innately ingrained insofar as scholarship is concerned. The discovery of Meredith's extensive engagement with the work highlights the importance of such scholarship and of projects like *Book Traces*. An effort should be made to comb through collections that are being digitized in order to look for alterations, commentary, and histories such as the ones provided by this copy of Smith's poetry. It remains a foolish endeavor to try to inhibit the digitization of works. While there remains a fear that access to physical works will be hampered, librarians know which materials are circulated the most and operate in a way to best serve the learning community at large. Digitization of works increases a user's ability to access materials (both rare and commonplace) and aids in speeding up the discovery of materials for research purposes. Not to mention, it clears up some library shelving space for more materials to be added—which, in turn, aids research. At the same time, by only digitizing copies from a select number of universities/other sources (a common practice of HathiTrust and Google Books), one risks losing those aspects of individual copies that make them unique. This remains a difficult prospect—to gauge the value of the marginalia and inserts against the cost of the labor that is inherent in combing through a library's holdings. However, stories such as Meredith's would be lost if a larger emphasis was placed on digitization without first having scanned each of the nineteenth-century works in Alderman's stacks.

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