Singular Plots: Female Vocation and Radical Form in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

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A dissertation

submitted to the Faculty of

the department of English

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Boston College
Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences
Graduate School

December 2017

Singular Plots: Female Vocation and Radical Form in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

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"Singular Plots" challenges the commonplace that the marriage plot defines the nineteenth-century British novel by uncovering the plot of vocational singleness. In this plot, a heroine renounces marriage and seeks another occupation – caring for parents or siblings; participating in philanthropy, business, or art. "Singular Plots" traces the history of representations of single women, arguing that unmarried women were often represented as plotless in the early century, while around mid-century the vocational plot coalesced in novels including Brontë's *Villette,* Trollope's *The Small House at Allington,* and Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain*. In order to uncover vocational plots that exist alongside and against marriage plots, I advocate a method of reading called "analeptic reading" in which readers pivot from the final pages back to the more radical center and outward past the end – a process that expands our notion of which moments in a plot can be definitive. The project joins recent work by scholars including Sharon Marcus and Talia Schaffer to challenge and expand our understanding of the role of the marriage plot in nineteenth-century literature. "Singular Plots" uncovers single women as a group with uniquely and instructively particular relationships to gender, marriage, work, and the form of the novel itself.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CW	*The Clever Woman of the Family*
CYFH	*Can You Forgive Her?*
DC	*The Daisy Chain*
H	*Hester*
JE	*Jane Eyre*
LC	*The Last Chronicle of Barset*
LH	*To the Lighthouse*
MH	*Millenium Hall*
MM	*Miss Mackenzie*
MM	*Miss Marjoribanks*
OV	*Our Village*
PH	*The Pillars of the House*
R	*A Room of One's Own*
SH	*The Small House at Allington*
V	*Villette*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to my dissertation committee, Drs. Maia McAleavey, Aeron Hunt, and James Najarian, for their stimulating conversation, challenging questions, and support from initial idea to final product.

Attendees at NCSA, BWWC, and NAVSA provided valuable suggestions that strengthened this project. I am grateful to students in my Fall 2016 class, "The Single Girl in the Nineteenth Century," for helping me to clarify and explore the contemporary stakes of nineteenth-century singleness. A version of Chapter One appeared in *Victorians: A Journal of Culture and Literature* in June 2017.

Thank you to my parents, Elaine and Doug, and my sisters Chloe and Faith, for nothing less than a lifetime of support. Thank you especially to Jamie for his patient partnership and encouragement. This project is dedicated to my favorite research assistant, Leo, who gave me my most joyful plot yet.

INTRODUCTION: THE SINGLE GIRL IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Defying the Victorian notion of separate spheres, the nineteenth-century woman understood the double burden of home and work. Florence Nightingale writes in *Cassandra* in 1852 of the typical woman that, "if she has a knife and fork in her hands during three hours of the day, she cannot have a pencil or brush" (30). Frances Power Cobbe echoes the sentiment a decade later: "No great books have been written or works achieved by women while their children were around them in infancy. No woman can lead the two lives at the same time" ("What Shall" 598). And Mona Caird is *still* lamenting the challenge at the end of the century, "To man, the gods give both sides of the apple of life, a woman is sometimes permitted the choice of the halves, – either, but not both" (171). Fork or pencil, books or children, one side or the other: according to the narrative, women are permitted a choice of marriage *or* work.

In literature, the choice between marriage or work takes the form of a plot choice – either the familiar marriage plot *or* what I call the plot of vocational singleness. George Eliot's Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* (1856) demonstrates this choice of plots when refusing Seth Bede to devote herself to her ministry as a traveling Methodist preacher, and later accepting Seth's brother Adam's proposal and giving up her work for motherhood. In Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen* (1890), the heroine refuses the proposal of an older man and earns her reputation as a mantua-maker before returning to save the family estate from financial ruin and continue to live independently. In each case, the vocational plot is perpetuated by the heroine's choice of work over marriage. In the case of *Adam Bede,* the plot ends with the reversal of that choice. Nineteenth-century scholarship has focused on one side of this story – the marriage plot – a category so capacious as to engulf every novel that ends in marriage, in the case of works like *Adam Bede,* and to relegate to the fringes those nineteenth-century novels about women that exclude marriage, like *Kirsteen.* This project follows the other

choice of work over marriage, arguing that the plot of vocational singleness emerged at the mid-century for single heroines.

Reading for this counter-narrative has cultural and formal import. By making visible the plots of single women in nineteenth-century literature, we expand our conception of Victorian womanhood and question the prominence of the marriage plot as a nineteenth-century ideology and a critical assumption. Single women like Harriet Martineau or Jane Austen are considered rare and remarkable, while the modal single woman is imagined to be a Miss Bates, making our current view of nineteenth-century singleness narrower than the models available in fiction.[1] Further, in order to locate vocational plots before, besides, and against marriage plots, we need to change the way we read. I propose a method called analeptic reading, or reading for the middle, which I outline in more detail later. Analeptic reading entails becoming newly attentive to moments of female discernment at the center of the text, and giving them as much weight as the marriage that may or may not happen in the final pages. By requiring us to read analeptically, the study of the vocational plot offers formal lessons: reading for the vocational plot prompts us to question how we classify plots and the weight we give to endings in so doing. The vocational plot also suggests that formal resistance to the dominant narrative can be detached from ideological progressiveness; even when it resolves in a conventional moral, the plot of vocational singleness deviates from established structures in radical ways.

The plot of vocational singleness is defined by the moment of choice that occurs at its metaphorical center, in which the heroine renounces marriage and is faced with a question: to quote Brontë's Caroline Helstone in *Shirley* (1849), "What am I to do to fill the interval of time which

[1] For accounts of Jane Austen and Harriet Martineau's remarkable singleness, see D.A. Miller's *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (2002) and Deborah Anna Logan's *The Hour and the Woman: Harriet Martineau's "Somewhat Remarkable" Life* (2002).

spreads between me and the grave?" (190). The answer often requires a phase of research or experimentation before committing to caring for aging parents or orphaned siblings; serving as a "maiden mother" for another's children; participating in or running a business; working as an artist, intellectual, or writer; or participating in local or national philanthropy.[2]

Although the narrative of the marriage plot is strong, single women are prevalent in nineteenth-century literature. Works throughout the century, from sketches in Mitford's *Our Village* (1824-1832), to Tennyson's poems including "Mariana" (1830) and "The Lady of Shalott" (1832, 1842) and novels including Gaskell's *Cranford* (1851-1853), Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856), Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1864), and Oliphant's *Hester* (1883) and *Kirsteen* (1890) all prominently feature a female character who does not marry. A handful of minor characters who remain unmarried are hiding in plain sight in major works: consider Rosa Dartle in *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White* (1859-1860), Miss Clack in *The Moonstone* (1868), and Ann Dorset in *Phoebe Junior* (1876). Periodical reviews record the prevalence of stories about single women in now lesser-known works. A review in *The Metropolitan* writes of *Aunt Martha; Or, the Spinster* (1843), that it aims "to show the [unmarried] state to be sometimes one of voluntary choice; and to display how truly amiable and useful a woman in this position of life may prove" ("Aunt Martha" 45). Another reviewer in *The Athenaeum* writes of *The Spinsters of Sandham, a Tale for Women* (1868) that its purpose is to "warn

[2] When it comes to the vocational familial caretaker, one periodical reviewer suggests a category, the "monster-of-self-sacrifice" old maid story, which describes one tone for this apparently tiresome version of the plot ("New Novels" 404). In *Ann Judge, Spinster,* the heroine fits this description as she continues to refuse proposals owing to "some imaginary sense of duty" including caring for her father and another elderly relative ("Anne Judge, Spinster" 462). Oliphant coins the term "maiden mother" to describe Ann Dorset in *Phoebe Junior* (69). Reviews are especially attuned to this variation on the plot. In *Passages in the Life of an Old Maid* (1864), an unmarried woman raises an orphan after a train wreck ("Passages in the Life of an Old Maid"). Charlotte Yonge's *Hopes and Fears* (1860) also features a maiden mother heroine. A reviewer of *Heriot's Choice* (1880), writes that is it modeled on Yonge's *Hopes and Fears:* an unmarried woman cares for her widowed brother's children (Davies).

young ladies that, in the present state of society, there are not husbands enough for all, and that those who draw blanks in the general matrimonial lottery ought not to pass their lives in vain regrets" (124). Titles gleaned from such reviews – *My Life and What Shall I Do With It?* (1861), *Olive Blake's Good Work* (1862) – tellingly pair the character of the single woman and her choice of occupation. Within this body of literature, a distinct plot emerged around the single woman and the process of discerning how she should pass her time.

Over the course of the century, the stories told about single women develop from narrowly constrained plotlessness to a well-developed vocational plot. While in the early century, the activities of the old maid or spinster were limited to gossip (Mitford's "The Talking Lady" in *Our Village* [1824-1832]), annoyance (Miss Bates in *Emma* [1816]) or simply waiting (Tennyson's "Mariana" [1830]), by mid-century, writers worked to create additional narrative possibilities for women who did not marry: sending them out as philanthropists (Ethel May in *The Daisy Chain* [1856]), placing them in business (Catherine Vernon in *Hester* [1888]), and modeling characters after themselves, devoted writers and artists rather than mothers and wives (the title heroine in *Aurora Leigh* [1856]).

Dinah Morris in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* illustrates the plot of vocational singleness. The vocational plots already mentioned include literal religious vocations, work that would be considered worthy and fulfilling, and also work that may be considered "vocational" in the sense of a trade or profession.[3] Dinah Morris provides an illustration of each of these three valences of vocation. Dinah's unconventional role as a Methodist preacher is a somewhat rare example of a literal vocation for a woman. Dinah's literal vocation to preach is antithetical, in her own mind as well in the eyes of other characters, to marriage. Dinah tells would-be suitor Seth Bede, "But my heart is

[3] For more on the definition of vocation and its ideological implications, see Bruce Robbins's *Secular Vocations* (1993). Robbins considers the stakes of vocation versus profession in academia, and his introduction suggests useful ways for thinking about both of these terms.

not free to marry. That is good for other women, and it is a great and a blessed thing to be a wife and mother; but 'as God has distributed to every man, as the Lord hath called every man, so let him walk'" (Eliot 32). Dinah's ministry is vocational, too, in the sense of being work. She is not content to pray at her ease, but labors at all hours (consoling Lisbeth Bede and preparing breakfast in the wee hours of the morning after Mathias's death), travels to where her ministry is most necessary (leaving the "comforts" of her aunt's home for the "great need" of Snowfield), and works in uncomfortable settings (going into prison to counsel Hetty) (Eliot 424). Dinah's decision to quit preaching in order to marry Adam illustrates the third, and for my project primary, meaning of vocational. In the epilogue to the novel, Dinah is wife and mother of two, but no longer a preacher, fulfilling the expectations of other characters who previously admitted the incompatibility of her vocation with marriage. Adam says that Dinah has quit preaching because new Methodist laws forbid female preachers, but as Carol A. Martin points out, this is not precisely the case; exceptions were made for women of singular skill, which even Adam would admit includes his wife (Eliot ed. Martin 541). Regardless of historical accuracy, the plot of vocational singleness in *Adam Bede* dictates that if Adam and Dinah marry, she cannot preach, and the language of Dinah and Adam's romantic coupling reflects the singular nature of female vocation. The two commit, in the narrator's words "to strengthen each other in all labour, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting" (Eliot 475). Words like "minister" and events including sorrow and death reflect the language and circumstances of Dinah's former ministry. Romantic union takes the place vocation formerly held, reinforcing the sense of vocational singleness as a truly *singular* plot. The range of meanings attached to vocation in *Adam Bede* illustrates the necessarily exclusive nature, and thus vocationality, of any occupation other than marriage for heroines of nineteenth-century literature. In

this final and broadest sense, the adjective "vocational" applies to singleness itself, even more than the occupation chosen to fill the time of single women.

WHO IS "SINGLE"?

As the example of Dinah Morris shows, while the plot of vocational singleness always includes the renunciation of marriage and a process of discernment, for many heroines, including some already mentioned, the plot concludes in marriage.[4] In this variation, when a heroine marries, she often simultaneously renounces her vocational aspirations. For heroines including Aurora Leigh, Dinah Morris, Rachel Curtis in *The Clever Woman of the Family*, and Lucilla Marjoribanks in *Miss Marjoribanks*, marriage is delayed, serving as the (often belated, cursory, unconvincing) conclusion to their vocational plots.[5] A delay, even if it is not an outright refusal of marriage is still a significant formal choice, and especially important in a plot-focused study. How is the delay achieved, narratively? What events fill the interval? While the marriage plot is also predicated on delay, readers

[4] In fact, this version of the plot was so prevalent, that a reviewer of the 1880 novel *Miss Bouverie,* writes, "We are so accustomed to find, whenever a young lady announces her intention of never liking a young gentleman, that she is within a few days of accepting him, and a few weeks of marrying him" ("Miss Bouverie" 88). Miss Bouverie defies the reviewer's expectations by remaining single, and is positively reviewed for this less typical turn in the plot.

[5] Nearly all of these plots that do end in marriage fall into the category that Talia Schaffer has recently termed the "familiar marriage" plot in her book *Romance's Rival* (2016). Schaffer posits an alternate version of the romantic marriage plot (motivated by love or passion) in which the marriage is motivated by the heroine's wish for community, security, or an occupation. When Aurora Leigh finally marries her cousin Romney, who proposed in the first book of the poem, the marriage consolidates their family and allows her to continue pursuing her career to some extent. When Lucilla Marjoribanks marries her cousin Tom (a familiar suitor who similarly re-emerges after the heroine has pursued an independent career, in Lucilla's case on an election campaign), Lucilla is able to keep her own last name and find a new occupation on the family estate, a plot I discuss in Chapter Three. In other words, Schaffer's formulation suggests that there are two ways of pursuing a vocational plot: to reject marriage in favor of a career or to compromise with a familiar marriage and a small career.

of marriage plots enjoy the delay with proleptic anticipation. In the marriage plot, all events in between the initial meeting and the eventual wedding point toward and contribute to the marriage. In the vocational plot, the delay becomes its own plot entirely. The delay of marriage in the vocational plot has a radical impact on the form of the novel and represents a departure from convention.

Given that I include some heroines who eventually marry as part of the category of vocational singles, it makes sense to clarify the term "single women," which I define, as a category that includes women who never marry (like Miss Matty, Miss Havisham, and Lily Dale) and women who make a claim that they will never marry (like Emma Woodhouse, Aurora Leigh, and Dinah Morris) *even if* they subsequently do. The category of single women excludes married women, eligible bachelorettes who are on the marriage market during the duration of a novel (like Elizabeth Bennett, Estella Havisham, and Molly Gibson), widows (like Eleanor Harding, Dorothea Brooke, or Romola di'Bardi), and fallen women (like Ruth Hilton, Little Em'ly, and Maggie Tulliver).[6] Widows enjoyed a less restrictive social and economic position than either single women or married women and thus have less restrictive plots; they are often eligible for remarriage.[7] The fallen woman may very well be single, nonetheless, I exclude these heroines because fallenness has its own plot that dictates a specific narrative. Nineteenth-century census reports separate spinsters from widows and women with "natural children" suggesting that my definition of singleness aligns with nineteenth-century distinctions.

[6] George Eliot's widows including Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch,* Romola di'Bardi in *Romola,* Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* and Janet Dempster in "Janet's Repentance" all get a second chance at the vocational plot as widows.

[7] Amy Froide has written about the distinction between widows and single women in the early modern era. See her chapter "Marital Status as a Category of Difference: Single Women and Widows" in *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (2005).

My examples focus on heroines: women whose vocational plots are central to the novel, in the sense of the novel being *about* the vocational heroine and her search for fulfillment. This means that I exclude some eighteenth-century single women characters, like the widow Lady Catherine de Bourgh of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) or the nuns of Gothic novels like Laurentini in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) or Sister Olivia in *The Italian* (1797), not only because they are widowed and despite their important power as plot-motivating minor characters, but *because* they are minor characters.[8] Narrative centrality is one indicator of cultural importance, and I track the value accorded to the single woman by thinking about her place in the hierarchy. In the course of this project, I explore the ways that plot and cultural history interact. The single heroine ascends to plot as her increasingly visible presence in the society sparks debate. Once the vocational plot contributes to working out her vocation in society, she recedes back to plotlessness, a shift I discuss in the Coda.

The single woman as a marginalized figure intersects with a number of other cultural categories. Age, a factor always included in the definition of spinsterhood, is relevant and important to understanding why old maids are marginalized.

[8] Alex Woloch defines two types of minor characters, the worker and the eccentric: "the flat character who is reduced to a single functional use within the narrative, and the fragmentary character who plays a disruptive, oppositional role within the plot" (25). Both categories describe the roles available to old maids and widows before the mid nineteenth-century. As an example of the former, Bridget Allworthy in *Tom Jones* provides comedy and is important as Tom's mother. However, her marriage quickly removes her from the plot once she has served her role. As an example of the latter, Lady Catherine de Bourgh attempts to keep Darcy and Elizabeth apart and is ejected from the narrative once the plot moves toward resolution. For more on the eighteenth-century single woman, see Susan Lanser, "Singular Politics: The Rise of the Nation and the Production of the Old Maid" in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800* (1999) and Devoney Looser "What is Old in Jane Austen?" in *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750-1850* (2008).

CLASS—OLD MAIDS.

Ladies who have passed their thirty-fifth year, calculated either from the parish register, or, if that be wanting, from the family bible, and who remain in a state of unimpeachable maidenhood, without any appearance of a matrimonial alliance,—unless such an appearance has been of ten years standing.

GENERIC DIVISIONS.

Genus I, Voluntary Old Maids.—Genus II, Involuntary Old Maids.—Genus III, Old Maids by Accident.—Genus IV, Inexplicable Old Maids,—Genus V, Literary Old Maids.

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Figure One: Age is primary to the definition of the old maid. In his sociological work, *Old Maids; Their Varieties, Characters, and Conditions*, Peter Gaskill begins his definition of the old maid with age, including "Ladies who have passed their thirty-fifth year" as part of the group. Gaskill, Peter. *Old Maids; Their Varieties, Characters, and Condition.* Smith, Elder and Co., 1835.

Is it because they are unmarried, or because they are (in some cases) no longer young? Jacob Jewusiak writes of Dickens's old women (grouping old maid Miss Havisham with widow Mrs. Skewton) that they try to stop time once outside the marriage plot: "For these women, to be outside the marriage plot is to shift from an existence where time's passage seems to matter to one where stasis and preservation become meaningful" (211). In Jewusiak's analysis, elderly women are marginalized because they are no longer on the marriage market. While this study focuses on marital status, scholars including Karen Chase and Devoney Looser have considered old age; Chase's book *The Victorians and Old Age* (2009)*,* uses many of the same examples as my project, including *Cranford* and *Hester,* suggesting just how close the two considerations – age and marital status – are. Working class women are largely absent from this study. While my argument hinges on choice, the choice to pursue meaningful work is not available to all – working women including cooks and maids (like Miss Matty's maid Martha in *Cranford)*, seamstresses (like Marian Erle in *Aurora Leigh*), and the street vendors of Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* have *always* had a double duty; Alex Woloch writes, "minor characters are the proletariat of the novel" and the converse is also true, the proletariat are often consigned to minorness (27). In addition, this study does not venture beyond the borders of England, where it would have encountered cultural and racial differences in the depictions of single women.[9]

My work approaches single women from the lens of narrative theory rather than queer theory. While many of the single women I write about could be defined as queer in the sense of eccentric, such an approach sees vocation as the consolation prize for an unfulfilled erotic desire. Instead, I approach vocation as *equally desirable* to marriage. When vocation and marriage are

[9] For more information on Irish singlewomen, see Anne Byrne's essay "Single Women in Ireland" in *Women on Their Own* (2008) and James Murphy's chapter "Grania and Her Sisters: New Women Abroad and at Home" in *Irish Novelists and the Victorian Age* (2011).

antagonists (as is the case during the years the vocational plot flourished) to choose to be single is to actively choose to pursue a desire for vocation, a desire that is as strong as erotic desire.[10] Terry Castle has argued persuasively for the "ghosting" of lesbians in literature in *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993) and I do not intend to perpetuate the problem she elucidates. While my project is not a queer reading of single women, these readings – queer and vocational – can coexist.

WHY PLOT? ON METHODOLOGY

The following cartoon "Litera Scripta," printed in *Punch* in 1889, mocks the idea that a woman would voluntarily choose singleness over marriage, even as the cartoon depicts a "spinster" who has received an offer and *chosen* to reject it in order to remain unmarried. She delivers her answer with apparent conviction and contentment: hands crossed calmly, eyes looking forward rather than at the suitor, a small smile on her face. The depiction of this scenario as comically inconceivable suggests the strong pull of the marriage plot even as women in literature and life were making the choice of other plots.

[10] Talia Schaffer makes this point in her essay entitled "Why You Can't Forgive Her: Vocational Women and the Suppressive Hypothesis," when discussing the vocational romance between John Grey and Plantagenet Palliser, which "we should not read …as an encoded enactment of homoerotic desires, because that would be treating vocation merely as a cover story for sex" (30).

"LITERA SCRIPTA."

Wooer. "OH, MISS—OH, LAVINIA! MAY I NOT STILL HOPE?—OR IS YOUR CRUEL REJECTION OF MY SUIT FINAL AND IRREVOC——"
Spinster (*firmly*). "YES, MR. BROWN, I SERIOUSLY DESIRE YOU WILL REGARD IT SO."
Wooer. "THEN, DEAREST, MAY I ASK YOU"—(*producing the materials from adjacent writing table*)—"TO—AH—PUT IT ON PA-PAR! I SHALL FEEL SAFER!"

Figure Two: Charles Keene. "Litera Scripta." *Punch*, 21 December 1889.

Further, the cartoonist's characterization of an improbable choice hints at some of the many senses in which the vocational plot is "singular." First and most simply, the plot is the purview of single women. The plot is also exceptional, imagining both atypical and extraordinary narrative possibilities among a glut of courtship plots. Lastly, the plot is singular in the sense of being exclusive, requiring its heroines to make a "voluntary choice" between vocation and marriage. This choice is the central event of the plot of vocational singleness in terms of importance, and often position as well. To either refuse or delay marriage creates a narrative interval, a middle, in which *something else* aside from courtship must happen to fill the remaining pages. A plot-focused analysis, rather than a primarily historical, cultural studies, or character-focused analysis, attends to what happens (or does not happen) when a narrative is derailed from the teleological gravity of the marriage plot.

This project emerged from questions like: What is the shape of a plot for an unmarried woman? What shape does a female plot take without marriage? When searching for examples of such plots, I found myself lingering in the middle of novels we though we knew, seeing them differently. Read with the epilogue as the final, definitive word on Dinah and Adam's future, *Adam Bede* is a measured and obligation-driven love story; read through Dinah's ministry at the center of the novel, *Adam Bede* is the story of a woman's struggle (and failure) to declare her vocation to a calling other than marriage. Read from the ending, Lucilla Marjoribanks's marriage to Tom signals her maturation in a Victorian version of Austen's *Emma;* read through her sequential occupations, Tom represents yet *another* career in a plot focused on Lucilla's work. Reorienting to read these novels through the middle in order to see the vocational plot is a method I call analeptic reading, outlined fully in Chapter Two. I borrow the term analepsis, which Gérard Genette uses to refer to a type of fictional flashback, to characterize a process of reading. The reader pivots from the final pages back toward the center of the text to look for moments of discernment, inflection, or nodal points. Where these nodal points disagree with what happens in the final pages, they are accorded

the same importance. Of course, reading the middle of a novel is hardly a critical intervention. Nor is returning to the middle for evidence. What I propose is both simple and distinctly different. I propose to treat middles with the gravity, sustained attention, weight, and seriousness we reserve for endings; to treat middles *like* endings. While the theory is simple, the practice goes against our longstanding theoretical underpinnings and reading practices, and results in different readings.

The elements of plot (event, subplot, character) are both elementary – the first type of criticism taught to children is plot summary – and *deep*, a review of plot analysis inevitably starts with Aristotle's *Poetics*. The strong tradition of plot analysis remains intractably faithful in the linearity of plot and the superiority of endings. In his *Poetics,* Aristotle makes foundational observations on the now-ingrained beginning, middle, and ending structure of plot in which connection and linear order are of paramount importance. Vladimir Propp's morphology proposes to break down a delimited number of fairy tales into their "component parts" of which "the sequence of functions is always identical" (22). In his emphasis on linear order, Propp makes a case for the linearity of plot and the linearity of reading. After sharing four definitions of plot corresponding to a section of land, a plan or diagram, a series of narrative events and a covert scheme, Peter Brooks goes on to gloss the meaning of these plots:

> From the organized space, plot becomes the organizing line, demarcating and diagramming that which was previously undifferentiated. We might think here of the geometrical expression, plotting points, or curves, on a graph by means of coordinates, as a way of locating something, perhaps oneself. The fourth sense of the word, the scheme or conspiracy … always attaches itself to the others: the organizing line of plot is more often than not some scheme or machination, a concerted plan for the accomplishment of some purpose which goes against the ostensible and dominant legalities of the fictional world, the realization of a blocked and resisted

> desire. Plots are not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving. (11-12)

For Brooks, plot is not only an organizing feature, but has directionality toward the end. The momentum with which plot evolved in Brooks's description from a demarcated space to a line with direction mirrors the momentum with which events proceed to endings in our analysis. For critics from Aristotle to Vladimir Propp to Peter Brooks, the act of literary criticism, of making meaning from events, is an act of reverence to endings. Middle-oriented, non-linear reading practices go against this seemingly elementary and foundational understanding of plot.

If middles are important and potentially revelatory, how do we read for them? How do we learn to treat middles with sustained, lingering attention? Like a new historicist who builds a rich literary and historical reading from "the anecdote" – an otherwise un-noteworthy detail like the India rubber bands Mary Smith saves in *Cranford* –I propose we de-familiarize ourselves with the trappings and progress of plot. This practice that Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt call "foveation" in *Practicing New Historicism,* asks readers to keep a particular object in sharp focus. In the case of analeptic reading, this means keeping a central event in sharp focus for the duration of the novel. What I propose is not simply increased attention to middles, but treating them as a crux, a reorientation from our guttural end-oriented ways of reading is both deceptively simple and productive. [11]

[11] The linearity of plot has met with both feminist and formal challenges. Feminist critic Susan Winnett has pointed out the male bias of Brooks's definition of plot. Winnett argues that Brooks's description of narrative, even his language, equates narrative pleasure (the reason we keep reading), with a specifically male narrative of sexual pleasure. According to Winnett, Brooks and the "gender biased" history of narrative theory writ large give such importance to endings in literature because they follow a male pattern of anticipation to climax (507). "Female pleasure," Winnett writes, "might have a different plot" (507). Winnett goes on to use the examples of *Frankenstein* and *Romola* as narratives that are circular or "proleptic," and not strictly driven toward an ending (509). In *Narrative and Its Discontents* (1981), D.A. Miller interrogates the problem of closure that he argues has been taken for granted in narrative theory:

Even when plots are thought of as composed of discrete events, it is an unfamiliar practice to accord each event equal interpretive weight. In order to define plot in a way that is friendly to analeptic reading, I turn to E.M. Forster. Forster writes of the distinction between story and plot that, ""The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it" (86). In other words, plot emphasizes connection over sequence. For Forster, some plots go so far as to "suspend the time-sequence" ("The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king") (86). Rather than connecting through addition (this happens and then this happens), plot connects events through causality in order to answer questions or resolve a mystery (*Why* does this happen?). Answering the "why" often requires readers to abandon the sequential logic of story to recover the causal logic of plot. The plot of vocational singleness, in particular, raises questions that require a logic of causality (plot) to supersede a logic of sequence

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> Once the ending is enshrined as an all-embracing cause in which the elements of a narrative find their ultimate justification, it is difficult for analysis to assert anything short of total coherence. One is barred even from suspecting possible discontinuities between closure and the narrative movement preceding it, not to mention possible contradictions and ambiguities within closure itself. (xiii)

While Miller still acknowledges that novels "build toward closure" he does not give conclusions principal importance (xiv). Using the term "non-narratable," Miller thinks about how narrative begins in and returns to plotlessness in the hypothetical space before and after the story. Using *Emma* as an example, Miller writes that the only way Knightley and Emma's marriage would *not* constitute the end of the novel is if the marriage resulted in other narrative-generating problems. Laurie Langbauer approaches the formal question of endings from a different angle in *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction 1850-1930* (1999). Langbauer writes that series fiction, like Trollope's Barchester and Palliser series as well as Oliphant's Carlingford Chronicles, is "messily intermixed, ongoing, and open-ended" (8). Such major works disrupt a traditional sense of ending with "a climax resolved through its denouement into regular closure, a closure which is then breached at the start of the next story" (Langbauer 8). Miller's "non-narratable," Winnett's cyclic female plot, and Langbauer's "everyday" all suggest that narratives can generate their own material, prompting me to ask how narratives are *sustained*, rather than how they conclude. By moving attention away from endings, these critics provide a precedent for seeing vocational plots in the center of plots that have previously been classified as marriage plots.

(story): The heroine remained single [refused marriage], no one knew why, until it was discovered that she discerned a vocation to build a church. The "why" is prior to both events that it explains; uncovering such connections places more importance on causality and less on sequence, allowing an event in the middle to take interpretive precedence.

The proof is in the proverbial pudding. Analeptic reading, reading for the middle, seems a simple and obvious practice, and yet, in this project, uncovers the existence of a specific plot for single women that impacts our views on marriage, work and gender in the nineteenth century. To return to my previous example, the epilogue to *Adam Bede* shows Adam and Dinah married with two children. This image of Dinah serving her family rather than the wider community is at odds with her desires earlier in the novel right up until the epilogue. After Adam has proposed, Dinah cautions him to wait, noting that she feels a "division in [her] heart" between her ministry and her love for him, and also that, "I know marriage is a holy state for those who are called to it and have no other drawing, but from my childhood upward I have been led toward another path" (Eliot 456, 454) The "Marriage Bells" that conclude the main narrative are not triumphant, but met with "with lips trembling under the weight of solemn feelings" and "sadness in [Adam's] deep joy" (Eliot 477). Are we meant to accept this marital ending as the unquestioned vocation of Adam and Dinah? Eliot's choice to conclude the story in an epilogue makes it almost a paratext, separated from Dinah's vocational work by narrative time (eight years), and textual markers, allowing readers to return to nodal points that conflict with this domestic ending and imagine alternatives to it.

This study joins a number of recent works bent on unseating the dominance of the marriage plot formulation in scholarship of the nineteenth-century novel including Sharon Marcus's *Between Women* (2005), Mary Jean Corbett's *Family Likeness* (2010), Elsie B. Michie's *The Vulgar Question of Money* (2011), Kelly Hager's *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* (2013), Maia McAleavey's *The Bigamy Plot*

(2015), Claire Jarvis's *Exquisite Masochism* (2016) and Talia Schaffer's *Romance's Rival* (2016).[12] Each of these works emphasizes the various concerns that are too easily subsumed under a single designation to arrive at a more nuanced perception of culture and form.

Throughout, I rely on contemporary periodical book reviews to provide a sense of reader reaction. How does the vocational plot fit into generic expectations? How do reactions change over time? Did nineteenth-century reviewers consider the works I study to be highly plotted or not, and on what basis? My examples tend toward better-known texts – one aim of this project is to show how analeptic reading can uncover previously neglected strains in familiar and well-studied works. There are many additional examples of the vocational plot that have been lost to the canon, which I was able to locate by searching the British Periodicals database for mentions of "old maid," "spinster," "unmarried," "single," or "never married" in nineteenth-century book reviews. Novels including *Passages in the Life of an Old Maid* (1864), in which an unmarried woman raises a child orphaned in a train wreck, and *Charity Helstone* (1865), an example of juvenile literature in which a young orphan chooses to remain celibate and dedicate her life to service, can be included alongside my better-known mid-century examples including *Adam Bede, The Daisy Chain,* and *Villette.*

WHY SINGLE WOMEN THEN? ON HISTORY

The nineteenth-century is the uncontested domain of the marriage plot, and thus an obvious choice for a study that seeks to dismantle that dominance. As Kathy Psomiades puts it, "marriage is the material of nineteenth-century British fiction" (53). Yet the strength of this critical narrative abuts a stark demographic reality. As will become apparent, my examples are concentrated in the

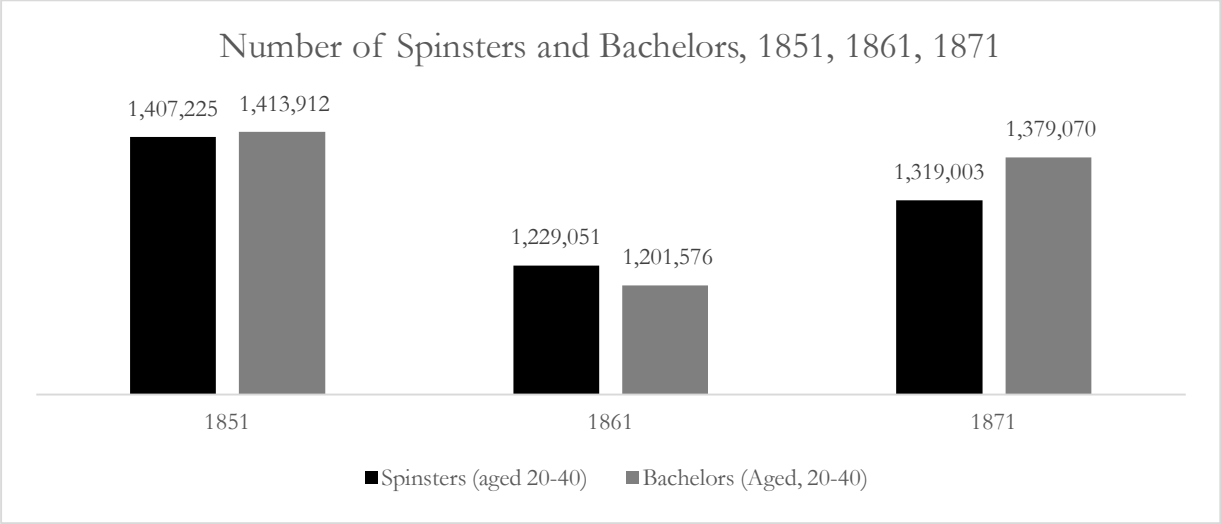
[12] Kathy Psomiades's forthcoming study on anthropological theory and the marriage plot is summarized in her essay, "The Marriage Plot in Theory."

years 1850-1870; the mid-century, in particular, is a historical linchpin for thinking about singleness both because it is the formal crucible for the marriage plot and because it is one historical moment in which unmarried women were an especially visible contingent of the population. The 1851 census revealed a significant population of unmarried women, the sort of population change that is called, in demographic measurement terms, a "dramatic reversal" (Traister 6). How do these pieces of information coexist?[13]

The chart below shows a comparison of the percentage of the female and male population that remained unmarried between 1851 and 1871. The chart shows the sizable population of never-married people of both sexes; for Victorians, the problem was one of absolute numbers. The imbalance, according to the 1851 census report issued by the British government is attributed to longer life expectancy for females and the larger emigration rate among males. How could one explain the existence of one-and-a-half million single women in a culture that valued marriage?

[13]Curiously, both historical and literary studies of single women have neglected the mid-nineteenth century, likely because the importance of the marriage plot is such a strong assumption. In notable literary studies, Martha Vicinus's *Independent Women* (1985) views the single woman through her work, by looking at various residential communities (Anglican sisterhoods, hospitals, women's colleges, and settlement houses). Emma Liggins devotes the first chapter of her book *Odd Women: Spinsters, Lesbians and Widows in British Women's Fiction, 1850s-1930s* (2014) to fiction before the 1890s with an emphasis on queer readings. The collection *Old Maids to Radical Spinsters* includes essays on literary old maids in the twentieth century, from E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf to Barbara Pym and Muriel Spark. From a historical perspective, *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800* provides an overview of singlewomen (including widows) in Britain, America, and on the European continent. In *Never Married* (2005), Amy Froide provides a history of single women (including widows, lifelong singlewomen and lifecycle singlewomen) up to 1750. She focuses on historical evidence (including parish records, charity records, court records, and property records). Bridget Hill's *Women Alone,* ends in 1850, noting that "in the 200 years covered by this book, the position of spinsters changed relatively little," but that in 1850, the feminist movement started to open up opportunities for unmarried women (11). Her book is organized by professions including agriculture, manufacturing, and teaching.

Concern about the growing population of unmarried women increased as the proportion of females to males increased over the course of the century.



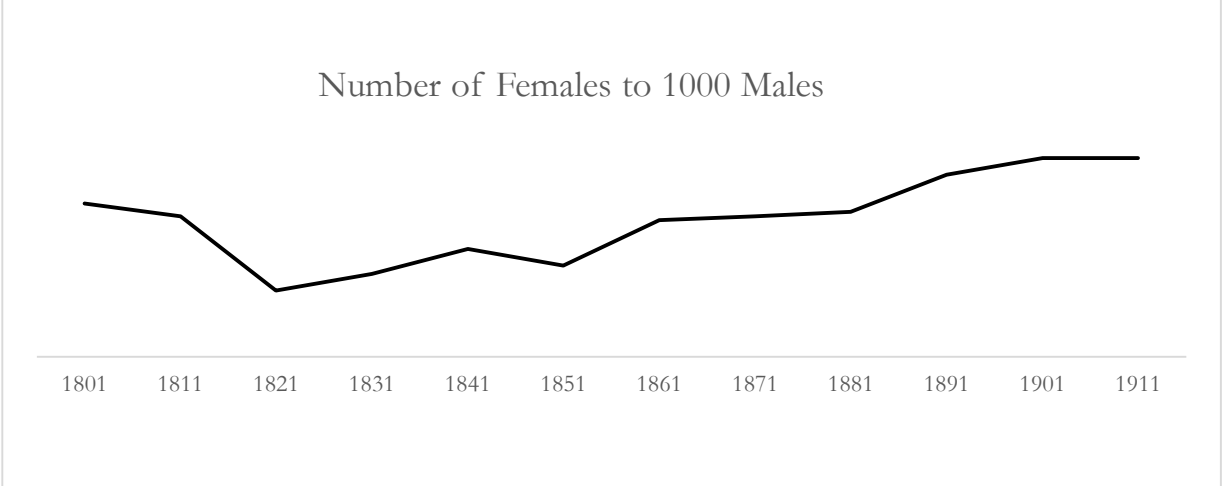


Figure Three: While there was much alarm about the number of unmarried women in the mid-nineteenth century, the number of bachelors was comparable. The second graph shows that the proportion of females to males increased during much of the nineteenth century, from 1821 – 1911.

The 1851 census states, at the beginning of the section on the "Civil or Conjugal Condition of the People" that "Marriage is therefore generally the origin of the elementary community of which larger communities, in various degrees of subordination, and ultimately the nation, are constituted; and on the conjugal state of the population, its existence, increase and diffusion, as well as manners, character, happiness, and freedom, intimately depend" (Census of Great Britain, 1851 xviii). In light of this statement on the primary importance of marriage to the happiness and success of the population, the numbers of single people recorded in the same document become an implied problem. The census report describes the population of women over 20 years old in relation to men as "unnatural," noting that the balance is the opposite in the colonies and in the United States (Census of Great Britain, 1851 xxvi). This language would be echoed about single women for decades. Notably, according to the 1861 census report, 1851 was the first census in which conjugal status was recorded. While people reacted to what seemed an imbalance, there was no precedent, and no prior data (Census of England and Wales, 1861 19).[14]

Journalists and demographers were concerned about the significant and persistent population of single women. The census and subsequent responses opened a debate on the association of female vocation with a narrowly defined role as wife and mother. Were some women providentially single? How many? What was their role? And importantly, how was it possible to tell which women were vocationally single versus those women who remained single merely due to demographic circumstance? Who had a mission, and who was merely occupying her time?

[14] The 1861 census reports that, proportionally, bachelors and spinsters are fewer, husbands and wives greater (Census of England and Wales, 1861 21). The census summary notes that the situation is a win-win: for those concerned about decreasing population, look at the reserves ready to procreate! To those economists of the Malthusian persuasion, look at the numbers of those who are not procreating (Census of England and Wales, 1861 21).

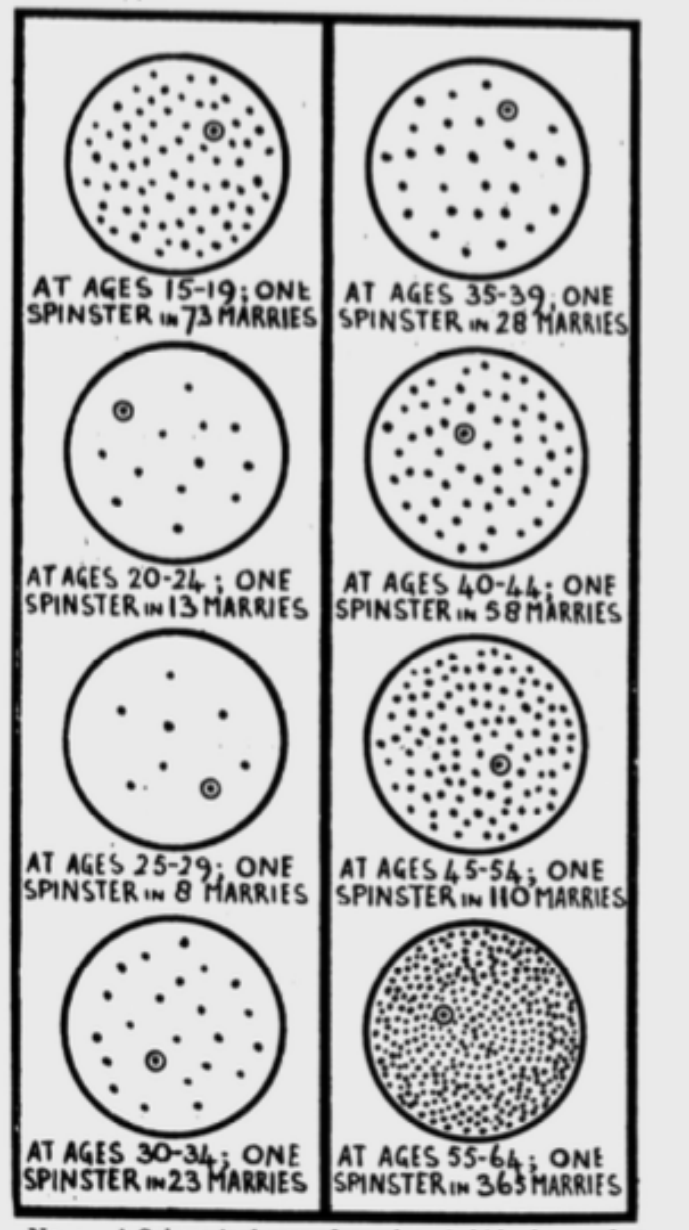
An oft-cited response to the problem, W.R. Greg's 1862 essay "Why are Women Redundant?" is illuminating here. Greg writes that marriage is a "natural duty," opposed to the "incomplete" existence available to single women; marriage is a vocation, and any other female occupation is merely an "artificial" attempt to disguise the contingency of singleness (436). However, even for Greg, not all single women belong to the same category. Greg notes that universally the female population exceeds the male by two to five percent, guaranteeing a group of "natural celibates" comprised by women of genius, women devoted to philanthropy, or women who are too spiritual to marry (439). The problem of unmarried women lies not with this relatively small portion of "natural celibates," but with the remainder of single women who arrive at the state by happenstance. According to Greg: "of those who fancy that this [natural celibacy] is their vocation, the vast majority commit a fearful and a fatal error" (439). Permitting women to define *themselves* as vocationally single would threaten the primacy of marriage. This definitional question – is a woman a vocational celibate or accidentally single? – is one that literature takes up through the plot of vocational singleness.[15]

[15] Another response to the population imbalance is the bigamy novel, an opposite to the plot of vocational singleness in the sensational genre, but the partner to the vocational plot as a demographic solution. A superfluity of women can be met with multiple spouses (though bigamy also resulted in multiple husbands as in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* [1862]) or unattached women, as in the vocational plot.

A LAMENT.

Dowager. "IT 'S BEEN THE WORST SEASON I CAN REMEMBER, SIR JAMES! ALL THE MEN SEEM TO HAVE GOT MARRIED, AND NONE OF THE GIRLS!"

Figure Four: "It's been the worst season I can remember, Sir James! All the men seem to have got married, and none of the girls!" "A Lament." *Punch,* 1884.



No. 1.—A Spinster's chance of marriage [within the year] at eight groups of ages from 15 to 64. The best chance is at ages 25—29, when one spinster marries [within the year] out of every eight spinsters aged 25—29.

Figure Five: "A Spinster's chance of marriage [within the year] at eight groups of age from 15 to 64. The best chance is at ages 25-29 when one spinster marries [within the year] out of every eight spinsters aged 25-29." Schooling, John Holt. "A Woman's Chance of Marriage." *Strand Magazine* vol. 15, 1898.

While first discovered at the mid-century, the population imbalance had a long legacy into the twentieth century.[16] As evident from the images above, the unmarried woman occupied imaginations beyond 1851. An 1884 cartoon (Figure Four) shows an old woman, trailed by many young, unaccompanied women, lamenting that so many have completed the season without an offer of marriage, while all the men seem to be taken. An 1898 graphic representation shows visually "a Spinster's chance of marriage" by age. In the image, the larger dot represents the spinster who marries among all spinsters in that age group; the less crowded the circle, the more likely marriage is. For example, at ages 20-24, one spinster in 13 marries. The cartoon and scientific representation suggest alternately the levity and seriousness with which the problem was regarded.

The 1851 census represents one particular moment of demographic imbalance of which there have been many such moments, including between the wars in Britain (a moment I turn to in the Coda), and nearly concurrently in the United States. The Civil War created a large population of single women (mostly in New England) and lifelong singles like Louisa May Alcott and Sarah Orne Jewett wrote about single women, like Jo March in *Little Women* (1868) or the narrator in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896). This moment of the single girl matters because it concurs with the reign of the mid-century Victorian novel, so obsessed with the marriage plot, and raises questions, like what is the role or place of the single woman in the novel? How does she impact its form?

CHAPTERS

The first chapter focuses on the emergence of the plot of vocational singleness, arguing that the stories told about single women develop from narrowly constrained plotlessness to a well-

[16] *Marriage or Celibacy: Daily Telegraph on a Victorian Dilemma* (1995) contains a series of letters and articles on the question of marital status, all published in 1868.

developed plot. Chapter One constructs a genealogy of the single woman in less plotted prose from Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) to Mitford's *Our Village* (1824-1832) to Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1833-1836). I use this context to inform a reassessment of *Cranford* as a carefully plotted novel, arguing that Elizabeth Gaskell deliberately transforms the plotlessness of "Our Society at Cranford" to a plot for her emerging heroine Miss Matty, especially in the installment that includes the failure of the Town and Country Bank and its repercussions. Through Miss Matty, Gaskell suggests that an unmarried woman, long confined to plotlessness, can become a heroine.

The second chapter illustrates the plot of vocational singleness in *Villette* and *The Clever Woman of the Family*. These texts serve as case studies for analeptic reading, a method of reading that affords sustained interpretive attention to moments of discernment at the center of the text as crucial, rather than favoring the events in the final pages as definitive. Each of the heroines refuse marriage and then undergo a climacteric in the middle of the text. Lucy Snowe of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) is perpetually lonely and isolated, separated from her love interest Paul Emmanuel first by an unsympathetic community and finally by his implied death in a shipwreck. I argue that reading analeptically allows us to take seriously her claims to celibacy as her true calling, and her measured satisfaction as a teacher. Rachel Curtis of Charlotte Mary Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865) is outspoken about her disdain for marriage and her high estimation of her own abilities as a reformer, philanthropist, child disciplinarian, writer, and allopath. After the fantastic failure of her efforts, resulting in the death of a child and a bout of diphtheria, Rachel marries. What, for a modern reader, initially seems like a progressive, feminist plot shifts to a conservative conclusion in which the heroine's spirit is routinely crushed, leading Talia Schaffer to characterize the present-day reader of Yonge as stuck in a double bind: "if we read Yonge's narratives against the grain as a realist author, we misrepresent her central motive; yet if we read her as a pious pedagogue (as she would prefer), we can find nothing to say" ("Magnum Bonum" 245). Given Yonge's

conservative ideology, it is curious that marriages solves none of Rachel's problems. Read analeptically, *Clever Woman* becomes a novel of vocation in which marriage is an event, not the defining plot.

Both the third and fourth chapter pair a work by Anthony Trollope with a work by Margaret Oliphant. In the third chapter, I show how the vocational plot is taken to extremes in *Miss Mackenzie* (1865) and *Miss Marjoribanks* (1865). While the vocational plot is defined by the refusal of marriage for another vocation, the heroines of these novels instead delay marriage, challenging the emphasis on choice – marriage *or* mission – by embracing sequential and multiple plots. *Miss Mackenzie* follows a pattern in which rather than providing a marriage plot, Trollope uses suitors to create other plots for Margaret: as a bluestocking in Littlebath, a disinheritance plot, an investment plot, and a periodical scandal. In dedicating herself to ten years caring for her father and society in Carlingford before marrying, Lucilla Marjoribanks attempts to engineer sequential vocational and marriage plots. Trollope and Oliphant take the vocational plot to extremes with plots that start, restart, and alternate.

In the fourth chapter, I investigate the end of the vocational plot in Trollope's *The Small House at Allington* (1864) and Oliphant's *Hester* (1883). Both of these novels seem to renege on the promise of the vocational plot. Lily Dale refuses marriage, but also refuses to select another vocation. Her intractableness makes her an ever-useful narrative generator for Trollope. In *Hester,* vocational spinster Catherine Vernon curiously discourages her protégée Hester from following in her path. This choice is interpretable through Lily Dale. Both Oliphant and Trollope register the burden, narratively and ideologically, that has fallen to the vocational heroine.

A project that argues against the importance of endings in plot can hardly argue for pat endings or simple progress narratives in history. This project begins and ends with plotlessness. In the Coda, I turn to another "drastic reversal" in population that resulted in many single women, the

years after World War I. Pairing Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1924) and F.M. Mayor's *The Rector's Daughter* (1927) shows the twentieth-century spinster returned to plotlessness, not as an indicator of narrative disfavor, but to suggest that vocation is banal, plotless, and available to every woman.

WHY SINGLE WOMEN NOW?

The spinster as a cultural figure is *still* haunted by the marriage plot and the nineteenth-century. Two recent studies on single women bemoan the fact that stories of fellow singletons are few and far between. Kate Bolick's *Spinster* (2016) is a memoir of her own journey to "think beyond the marriage plot" bolstered by brief biographies of historical women writers with ambivalent relationships to marriage – Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Edith Wharton among them (160). Bolick claims that the spinster has not gained status since the Victorian era. Rebecca Traister starts her study of how single women have changed American politics, *All the Single Ladies* (2016), with similar frustrations with the pesky and persistent marriage plot, noting her childhood disappointment when favorite, independent heroines including Laura Ingalls, Jo March and Anne Shirley married: "the tale that was worth telling about her was finished once she married" (1). Stories about vocational single women are not absent, but invisible because of our reading practices and strong critical narratives. The first step in recovering narratives of single women and correcting our critical discourse is locating and making singular plots visible. In a letter of 1846, Charlotte Brontë writes to Miss Wooler, "I speculate much on the existence of unmarried and never-to-be married women nowadays" (Brontë *Letters* 448). It is time that we do, too.

CHAPTER ONE:

UNMARRIED AND PLOTLESS, 1760-1850

When attempting to describe *Cranford*, one contemporary reviewer writes in 1853, "we cannot do better than call it a companion volume to Miss Mitford's *Our Village*" ("Mary Barton's New Work" 645). While both Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* and Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village* represent unmarried women and other marginal characters in behind-the-times rural locales, there is little consensus among nineteenth-century reviewers as to which features make these works similar, or, as the *Leader's* review acknowledges, whether this comparison is apt. Is it the form, the descriptions, or the content that makes these works seem related? Reviewers cannot agree; one writes that *Cranford* is "very *unlike* Miss Mitford's pictures of country-town life, owing nothing to description" ("Miscellaneous Reviews" 493, emphasis mine).[17] In fact, the similarity between *Our Village* and *Cranford* is deceptive. *Cranford* develops a concise and deliberately constructed plot after the first installment, while *Our Village* remains detached description through five volumes and subsequent editions. The popularity of the literary sketch in the early to mid-nineteenth century, and its association with the difficult-to-define concept of plotlessness, occludes the powerful work of plot in *Cranford* for nineteenth-century reviewers as well as for scholars today. Constructing a genealogy of the single woman in plotless prose from Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) to Mitford's *Our Village* (1824-1832) to Dickens's *Sketches by Boz* (1833-1836) reveals a distinction between these prior works and *Cranford* (1851-1853). Only by recognizing the role of plot in Gaskell's novel can we begin to see the underlying ideological claim of *Cranford* – that an unmarried woman, long confined to plotlessness as in *Our Village* and other works, can become a heroine. In

[17] *Cranford* publishing historian Thomas Recchio calls *Cranford* an "accidental novel," echoing contemporary reviewers' sense of its spontaneity and sketch-like quality (31).

Cranford, Gaskell transforms the contingency of surplus women in history and plotless characters in narrative into the vocation of plot.

WHAT IS PLOTLESSNESS?

The development of a vocational plot is one part of my argument that starts in plotlessness. Where plot is characterized by connection, plotlessness is characterized by detachment. Sequence may be the *only* logic of structure in a plotless work, which is built from disconnected incidents (this happened, this also happened). A lack of causal connection does not mean that plotlessness is without incident, but rather that those incidents are disconnected. As a result, the individual sketches of *Sketches by Boz* or *Our Village* can be read out of order and the volumes need not be read in their entirety (in fact some reviewers claim that each sketch is best encountered alone.) Plotlessness has long been associated with unmarried women. Virginia Nicholson sums up the nineteenth-century literary spinster, from Miss Matty to Rhoda Nunn to Miss Havisham as, "shabby, sallow, petty, sour, and queer. Their lives are dominated by hopeless longing and hard struggle. They knit, read improving books and drink cocoa. They are content with little" (33).

Discussing the distinction between plotless and plotted prose, a reviewer of *Our Village* considers the largely plotless collection of sketches to constitute its own genre in opposition to fantastically plotted works:

> There are two kinds of modern novels, constructed on opposite plans, yet both are often favourites with the same class of readers – one, the heroic, the romantic, the marvelous, written in ornamental style, portraying noble, illustrious, or chivalric characters, and leading such characters through perilous incidents, to the conclusion of the story wound up by some unexpected circumstance – the other, simple,

> unimportant with little or no involution of circumstances, a sort of every-day tale, chiefly of common, unpretending characters, running through the ordinary course of things, suffering distress with patience, or enjoying good fortune, with modesty and moderation. ("Our Village" 196)

The reviewer's description helps to illustrate distinctions between plot and plotlessness recognized in the early nineteenth-century. As in Forster's definition, plot is characterized by causal connections: characters are "led through" events "to the conclusion," implying a plot progression based on a plan; plot is "marvelous" or fantastic, including coincidental events and a story that is "wound up" in a conclusion arrived at through causal connections. On the other hand, plotlessness is detached and merely sequential, with "little or no involution of circumstances" to explain the sequence. Plotlessness is banal, ordinary, *patient*. Where plot is opulent, plotlessness is modest. While the review illustrates the distinction well, it leaves pressing questions unanswered. While the subject of "the heroic, the romantic, the marvelous" seems self-evident (think of the exceptional Juliet in Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814) or Emily St. Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*), what or who is the subject of the "every-day tale"?

PLOTLESSNESS AND SINGLENESS

Single women are surprisingly prevalent in plotless literature because single women were consistently considered plotless – in both literature and life. Looking back from the mid-century, Frances Power Cobbe writes that, "until lately, the condition of an unmarried woman of the upper classes was so shackled by social prejudices that it was inevitably a dreary and monotonous one" ("Celibacy vs. Marriage" 232). Cobbe's "dreary and monotonous" extends the idea of plotlessness from literature to biography; up until the mid-century, she claims, single women had little to *do,* their

lives resembling the "common," "unpretending" and "ordinary" description of plotless literature. When reviewing the booming class of novels and conduct books about old maids in 1861, Anne Thackeray Ritchie mocks the "little literature" of unmarried women, describing a typical plot in the voice of its heroine:

> what a sad, dull, solitary, useless, unhappy, unoccupied life is mine! I can only see a tombstone at the end of my path, and willows and cypresses on either side, and flowers, all dead and faded, crumbling beneath my feet; and my only companions are memories, and hair ornaments, and ghosts, prosy, stupid old ghosts, who go on saying the same things over and over and over again, and twaddling about all the years that are gone away for ever. (318)

Ritchie's description of the typical literary single woman's life as "dull," "useless" and "unoccupied" lacks both the interest of events and the purposefulness of connected events that characterize plot. This "little literature" is not "little" in magnitude (Ritchie has, to her annoyance, read many works in the same vein), but in events, and thus, interest. While Ritchie's hypothetical old maid sees death at the end of her plot (the most common event to conclude a plot beside marriage) and implies sorrow and even tragedy in a past populated by memories and ghosts, she chooses to narrate the interminable and eventless chasm between the sorrow of her past and her inevitable death. The "little literature" *chooses* to create plotlessness, which is the crux of Ritchie's complaint.

The early nineteenth-century commonplace that unmarried women are plotless – as in Cobbe and Ritchie's assessments – did not exclude single women from literature, but it did confine them to minor roles and descriptive prose. In Austen's *Emma,* Emma Woodhouse contemplates and rejects the idea of singleness against the backdrop of Miss Bates, a minor character accused of being tiresome. Emma ungenerously states, "Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid; and it's poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman, with a very

narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid!" (Austen 55-56). Miss Bates illustrates the "narrow" celibate life, a fate Emma won't succumb to, and her story is thus dismissed by Emma as "contemptible," worthy of an occasional laugh, but not of significant narrative space.[18]

[18] In *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style,* D.A. Miller writes that Austen makes the old maid, like Miss Bates, a "dreadful" laughing-stock, even though Austen's situation was in some ways comparable: "The unendurable garrulity typical of these characters, by stimulating our impatience to *get on with the story,* confirms our assent to the old maid's representational limits" (Miller 37). Miller goes on to argue that Emma cannot remain single, because single women, like Austen, are not capable of being represented in fiction (Miller 55). Devoney Looser writes of Miss Bates that she conforms to the (negative) stereotypes of spinsters; while Austen's younger heroines can be read as feminist, that progressive treatment, according to Looser, does not extend to Miss Bates.

Figure Six: Austen is always in on the joke, allowing Miss Bates to say, "I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan't I?" Illustration by C.E. Brock. Austen, Jane. *Emma.* J. M. Dent & sons, ltd., 1922.

In another example of the plotless single woman, Tennyson's "Mariana" describes a woman who waits for her lover, voicing her distress and boredom, but taking no action. While Mariana is privileged as the only character in a seven-stanza poem (besides the implied, absent "he" who "cometh not"), "Mariana" is nevertheless an image of descriptive *inaction.* Her lover will not come, despite her laments, and Mariana may repeatedly *wish* she was dead, but this wish never becomes event:

> She only said, "My life is dreary, /
> He cometh not," she said;
> She said, "I am aweary, aweary, /
> I would that I were dead." (Tennyson, lines 8-12) [19]

There is movement in the landscape around Mariana as mosses creep, the clock ticks, and the sun moves through the day, but Mariana neglects her role in the scene, "Unlifted was the clinking latch;\ Weeded and worn the ancient thatch" (Tennyson, lines 5-6). The image Tennyson presents of Mariana is stubbornly static.

[19] An instructive comparison is Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott," who also pines from afar, but who, unlike Mariana, *chooses* to leave her tower studio (where she is a prolific weaver) and sails to Lancelot – an action that precipitates her death.


1894
W.E.F. Britten

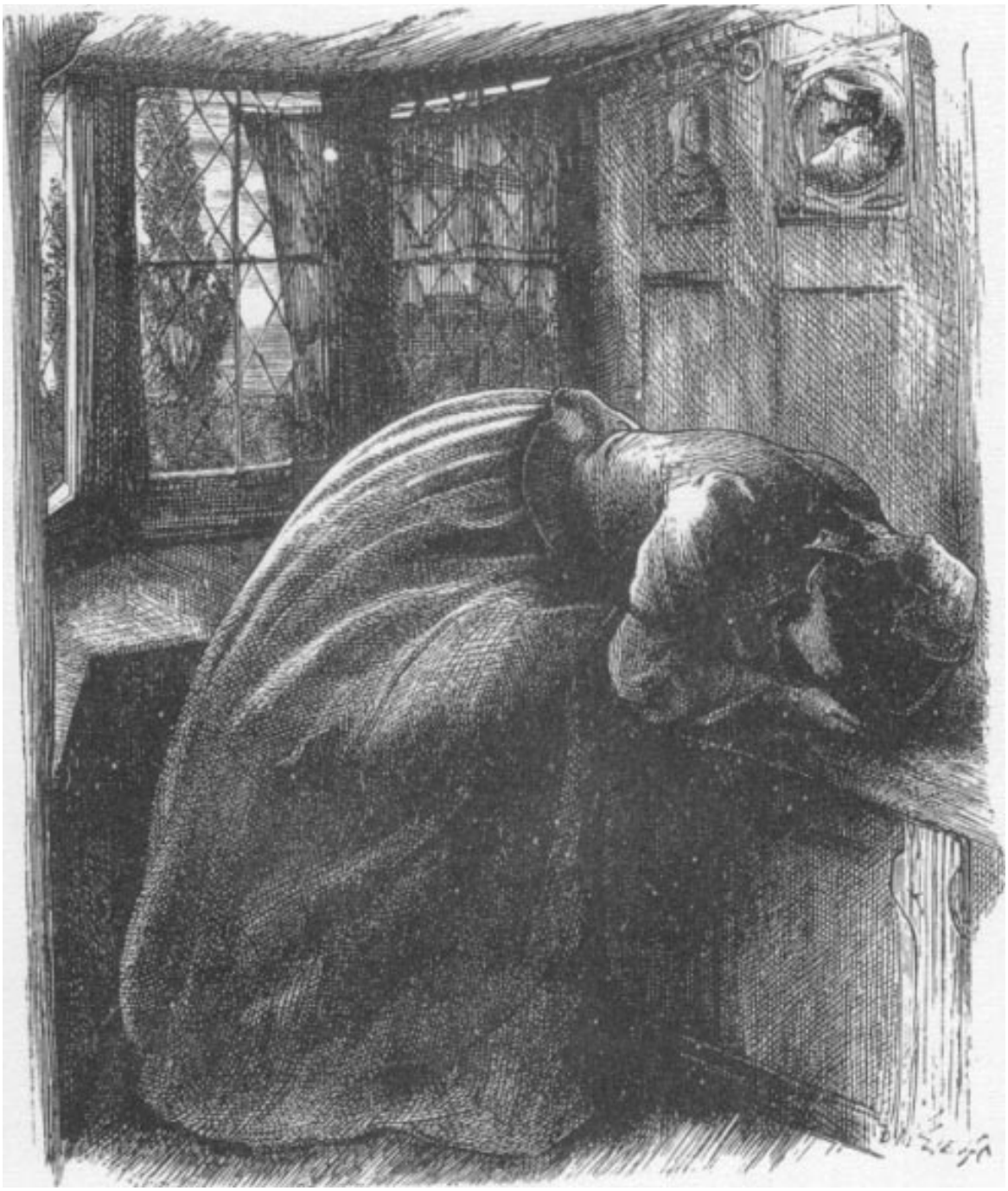


Figure Seven: Two illustrations of Mariana which both depict her slumped and inert suggest the static nature of her plot. W.E. F. Britten. "Mariana." Restoration, Adam Cuerden. *The Early Poems of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Edited with a Critical Introduction, Commentaries and Notes, together with the Various Readings, a Transcript of the Poems Temporarily and Finally Suppressed and a Bibliography by John Churton Collins*, Methuen & Co., 1901. John Everett Millais. "Mariana." Wood engraving, 1857. Courtesy of Victorian Web and George P. Landow.

Though plotlessness may have been an accepted feature of the literary sketch, poem or minor character, reviewers often complained about the lack of plot in novels featuring old maids. After all, without a marriage plot, narrative trajectories for female characters appear limited. A review of "Cousin Simon" in *The Examiner* expresses frustration with the plotless old maid story; the plot is dismissed as, "everything endures and nothing done" ("Four New Novels" 1254). In another example, the reviewer complains that *The Old Engagement* has a plot "so flimsy that it will scarcely bear touching," while another writes, "story there is absolutely none!" ("The Old Engagement" 61; "The Old Engagement" 1252). A reviewer describes *The House of Archendaroch,* in which the heroine is jilted after a lengthy courtship plot, as "dull," and another describes *Aunt Martha* as "without tale or any distinct purpose" ("The House of Archendaroch" 544, "Book Review" 132). Among nineteenth-century reviewers, it is a commonplace that single women cannot carry a compelling narrative, specifically as the heroine of lengthier prose.

SENTIMENTAL HISTORIES AND EVERYDAY ROUTINE AT MILLENIUM HALL

In the classic novel of an all-female utopian society *Herland* (1915), Charlotte Perkins Gilman describes the routines, lifestyle and social structure of the community. The arrival of male visitors creates a disruption, raising questions of marriage and procreation, interrupting routines and providing the central conflict of the plot. While Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* also records the daily routines, maintenance and charitable projects of an all-female community, male visitors Sir George Ellison and his travel companion Lamont merely pass through. In Scott's novel, a male traveler waylaid by a carriage accident spends the morning wandering the grounds of an estate near his lodgings. He discovers that one of the inhabitants is his distant cousin, and over the next few days tours the society of unmarried women who live on the estate and hears the history of its five founders from his relative. As narrator, Ellison confines his role to "spectator and auditor" (Scott

54). Notably, while the men profess to be changed by the experience, their visit creates no change in the society of Millenium Hall.[20] In other words, the arrival of men is entirely plotless. Ellison and Lamont's arrival at Millenium Hall does not constitute an "event" because it is neither connected to other events at Millenium Hall (no subsequent events are caused by their arrival) nor alters the course of the narrative (the women continue life as before after they depart). Ellison records the eventless, everyday routine and conventions of the society, rather than providing a source of narrative conflict. There are, however, portions of *Millenium Hall* that are plotted and are presented in inset histories of the founders – all women who suffered in love in one way or another and arrive at Millenium Hall with intricate backstories explaining their trajectory. The full title of Scott's novel, *A Description of Millenium Hall, and the Country Adjacent: Together with the Characters of the Inhabitants, And such Historical Anecdotes and Reflections, As May Excite in the Reader proper Sentiments of Humanity, and lead the Mind to the Love of Virtue,* promises both of these elements: plotless description of locations and characters and didactic reflections as well as plotted historical anecdotes that inspire those reflections.[21] The sentimental and often scandalous histories inset in the plotless record of a female society serve as a strategy for creating narrative interest, but also seem to capitulate to the prevalent belief that in their current state as committed celibates, the inhabitants of Millenium Hall are not capable of supplying a plot.[22]

[20] While nearly always described as a community of single women, the residents of Millenium Hall are lifecycle singles, rather than dedicated celibates. Each of the founders arrived at Millenium Hall after a marriage or other romantic relationship ended. While the founders remain committed to celibacy for the rest of their lives, the residents often go on to get married, and the women encourage this cycle.

[21] While didactic gloss may follow (or justify, notably in the eighteenth-century novel) an intricately plotted story, it is neither part of the plot nor must it follow from a plot. Conduct books often provide lessons with little or no narrative illustration.

[22] Scholarship on *Millenium Hall* most often addresses the unique economy and society of the all-female community in essays on gifting and philanthropy or disability studies; see Elliott and Reeves.

Over 70 percent of *Millenium Hall* is dedicated to Mrs. Maynard, a founder and distant relative of Ellison, giving the histories of her five fellow leaders. These inset stories are interspersed between description of the location and discourse on the community's principles and routines, which comprise the remaining 30 percent of the narrative.[23] For a book often described as a female utopian novel, the scandalous and tragic histories are surprisingly prolix. The histories of the women include unwanted and forced marriages, separation from friends, illegitimacy, and financial ruin. Dorice Williams Elliott describes each of the histories of the founders as "a miniature sentimental novel; each of the women has been a woman in distress whose virtue has been tried" ("Sarah" 538). George Haggerty treats these inset histories as the "centerpiece" of the novel, a reading that emphasizes the radical suggestions of the inset stories – that female bonds can take the place of male-female bonds, that marriage can be unhappy, and that marriage is not the only option for women (93). Critical attention to the inset histories neglects other elements of the narrative, a choice that implies that once these women have escaped the threat of the male world, the narrative is over. Without denying the power of such radical inset stories, I suggest that Scott's decision to prioritize each founder's journey to Millenium Hall and not their lives at Millenium Hall and scholars' decision to analyze inset histories and not present-day narration imply that there is no narrative without the possibility of a marriage plot.

Even if the inset histories are remarkably prolix, the other elements of the novel deserve some treatment, too. While Ellison's narration is often referred to as a frame, as the narrator he not only opens and closes the narrative, but also reappears for large stretches to narrate routines, defying

[23] My calculations are based on page numbers. Both Vincent Carretta and Ana Acosta describe this strange structure. Carretta writes, "Within the large box of the letter, we find smaller boxes re-inscribed by the narrator" (310). Acosta describes the novel as a "frame ... and the area enclosed by that frame" (114).

a conventional frame structure.[24] The unconventional construction of *Millenium Hall* reflects the tension between plot and plotlessness in a narrative about single women. The portion of the novel devoted to present-day narration comprises a record and description of daily occurrences, with no events and no plot. In one example of the present day-narration, a woman repeats to the narrator the rules of society, reprinted below (116, Figure Eight). These rules are presented as a numbered list, a document of the society, that does not propel the narrative. Such a list would be more characteristic of a legal document or travelogue, and not a novel.[25]

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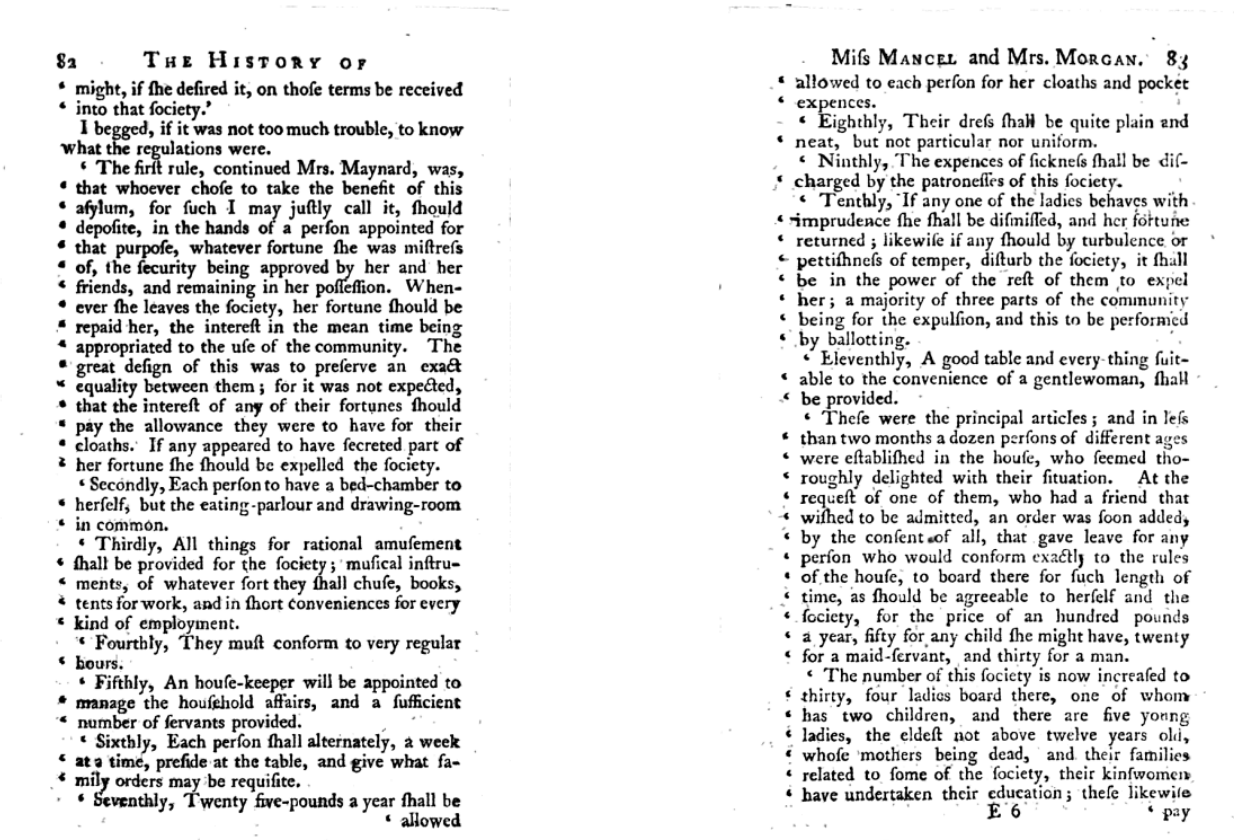
[24] Scholars including Acosta (114), Cruise (554), Elliott (538), and Reeves (231) all refer to Ellison's role as a frame narrator. Two examples serve to contextualize that role. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria* (1798) also includes inset sentimental histories of both the title character and Jemima, her maid. Like many of the founders of Millenium Hall, both Jemima and Maria have suffered from forced marriages, sexual assault, and financial disenfranchisement. With a similar didactic aim, stated by William Godwin in the preface as "exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society" and told as reflections within the main narrative (in a letter to Maria's daughter and a story told in prison by Jemima to Maria), the structure of the plot is, nevertheless, remarkably different (Wollstonecraft 67). Once Jemima and Maria exchange stories, the two embark on action to rectify their situation by restoring Maria's daughter to her. In other words, the sentimental histories are enclosed within another plot that responds to them, as opposed to *Millenium Hall* where the sentimental histories are enclosed within a static utopian world in which the women are happily exempt from plot. The emphasis on plot in *Maria* is also related to her status as a woman on the marriage market. Maria has been formerly married and estranged from her husband, but also has a new love interest, Darnford, and the plot works to resolve her relationship with these men. In an example from the nineteenth-century, Lockwood in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) serves as a comparable "frame" narrator to Ellison. While he is often referred to in criticism as merely a narrator, he contemplates a larger involvement in the plot – at one time imagining he may marry Cathy. Critics note the uncertain association of Lockwood with the frame story. For Gideon Shunami, Lockwood merely, "transmits verbatim to the reader the information he has heard from [Nelly]," but also functions, with Nelly, as "integral characters in the plot only in order to demonstrate paradoxically that they are in fact no part of it" (459-460, 462). Terence McCarthy also notes that critics accept Lockwood's role as narrator at face value ("for the bulk of the novel, he is invisible. He merely passes on what Nelly Dean has told him"), before arguing that "he is not merely a narrative device" (48, 49). John T. Matthews argues that "When Ellen Dean and Lockwood are discussed at all, their effects are largely confined to their stature as characters *in* their story, not as its confabulators" (27). In the case of Lockwood as in the case of Ellison, the narrators trouble the border between frame and story, interacting with those who populate the main narrative.

[25] Mangano, however, refers to *Millenium Hall* as an "epistolary travelogue" (464).



82 THE HISTORY OF

'might, if ſhe deſired it, on thoſe terms be received 'into that ſociety.'

I begged, if it was not too much trouble, to know what the regulations were.

'The firſt rule, continued Mrs. Maynard, was, 'that whoever choſe to take the benefit of this 'aſylum, for ſuch I may juſtly call it, ſhould 'depoſite, in the hands of a perſon appointed for 'that purpoſe, whatever fortune ſhe was miſtreſs 'of, the ſecurity being approved by her and her 'friends, and remaining in her poſſeſſion. Whenever ſhe leaves the ſociety, her fortune ſhould be 'repaid her, the intereſt in the mean time being 'appropriated to the uſe of the community. The 'great deſign of this was to preſerve an exact 'equality between them; for it was not expected, 'that the intereſt of any of their fortunes ſhould 'pay the allowance they were to have for their 'cloaths. If any appeared to have ſecreted part of 'her fortune ſhe ſhould be expelled the ſociety.

'Secondly, Each perſon to have a bed-chamber to 'herſelf, but the eating-parlour and drawing-room 'in common.

'Thirdly, All things for rational amuſement 'ſhall be provided for the ſociety; muſical inſtruments, of whatever ſort they ſhall chuſe, books, 'tents for work, and in ſhort conveniences for every 'kind of employment.

'Fourthly, They muſt conform to very regular 'hours.

'Fifthly, An houſe-keeper will be appointed to 'manage the houſehold affairs, and a ſufficient 'number of ſervants provided.

'Sixthly, Each perſon ſhall alternately, a week 'at a time, preſide at the table, and give what fa'mily orders may be requiſite.

'Seventhly, Twenty five-pounds a year ſhall be 'allowed

Miſs MANCEL and Mrs. MORGAN. 83

'allowed to each perſon for her cloaths and pocket 'expences.

'Eighthly, Their dreſs ſhall be quite plain and 'neat, but not particular nor uniform.

'Ninthly, The expences of ſickneſs ſhall be diſ'charged by the patroneſſes of this ſociety.

'Tenthly, If any one of the ladies behaves with 'imprudence ſhe ſhall be diſmiſſed, and her fortune 'returned; likewiſe if any ſhould by turbulence or 'pettiſhneſs of temper, diſturb the ſociety, it ſhall 'be in the power of the reſt of them to expel 'her; a majority of three parts of the community 'being for the expulſion, and this to be performed 'by ballotting.

'Eleventhly, A good table and every thing ſuit'able to the convenience of a gentlewoman, ſhall 'be provided.

'Theſe were the principal articles; and in leſs 'than two months a dozen perſons of different ages 'were eſtabliſhed in the houſe, who ſeemed tho'roughly delighted with their ſituation. At the 'requeſt of one of them, who had a friend that 'wiſhed to be admitted, an order was ſoon added, 'by the conſent of all, that gave leave for any 'perſon who would conform exactly to the rules 'of the houſe, to board there for ſuch length of 'time, as ſhould be agreeable to herſelf and the 'ſociety, for the price of an hundred pounds 'a year, fifty for any child ſhe might have, twenty 'for a maid-ſervant, and thirty for a man.

'The number of this ſociety is now increaſed to 'thirty, four ladies board there, one of whom 'has two children, and there are five young 'ladies, the eldeſt not above twelve years old, 'whoſe mothers being dead, and their families 'related to ſome of the ſociety, their kinſwomen 'have undertaken their education; theſe likewiſe

E 6 'pay

Figure Eight: The "principle articles" of Millenium Hall's society, printed first to "eleventhly." ***A Description of Millenium Hall, and the Country Adjacent: Together with the Characters of the Inhabitants, And such Historical Anecdotes and Reflections, As May Excite in the Reader proper Sentiments of Humanity, and lead the Mind to the Love of Virtue.*** **London: J. Newbery, 1762.**

In fact, the moments of present-day information between the histories, though comprising a significant portion of the novel, are given rather cursory narration. Ellison includes mundane activities such as eating three meals a day, going on walks, and touring a farm. Take for instance one transition from Miss Maynard's narration to present-day Millenium Hall: "Our subject ended with our walk. Supper was served as soon as we entered the house, and general conversation concluded the evening" (Scott 121). These routine activities about which no details are given align with what Franco Moretti refers to as "filler" ("Serious Century" 368). Such "narration: but of the everyday" becomes, according to Moretti, a fixture of the nineteenth century from Austen to Flaubert and James ("Serious Century" 368). Not only does such narration defy expectations of a plotted narrative, it seems unnecessary to interrupt the compelling histories, as is routinely done, for such cursory description of everyday events with little interest and which readers assume occur without including them in the narrative. William Wandless proposes that such "sporadic interruptions [serve to] simulate the contextual realities of the visit" (263). As reviewers would later suggest of Mitford, attention to the everyday bolsters the reality of the text. Given that one stated aim of *Millenium Hall* is to provide for the creation of similar communities, frequent, though brief, interruptions serve a further purpose in suggesting the virtue of plotlessness. If the founders have individual and interesting stories before they were confirmed celibates, they now have a laudable routine, not worthy of much narrative space; a decrease in plot corresponds with a decrease in conflict and the arrival of virtuous stability.

Despite the association of plotlessness with virtue, the narrator expresses concern during the segments recording daily life at Millenium Hall that readers will lose interest, a concern he does not express during the inset stories. When narrating his time spent on the property, Ellison is moved to

interject an apology – even though these scenes are brief and spread throughout the text, he expresses a concern that readers will not find the same interest in them:

> Had I not been led by several facts to repeat already so many conversations, I should be induced not to bury all that passed at this time in silence; but though I have taken the liberty, when the relation of facts naturally led to it, to communicate such discourses as were pertinent to the subject, it would be presuming too far on your time, to repeat conversations which did not serve to illustrate any particular actions, however worthy they may be of recollection. I shall therefore only say, that it was not with less reluctance I retired to my chamber, at the hour of bed-time, than the night before. (Scott 122)

The narrator declines to elaborate on "worthy" conversations with residents because they lack *action* or do not provide a didactic gloss on action (as the inset stories do). In other words, the narrator's concern equates interest with plot and benefit with didacticism. Curiously, this sentence, apologizing for providing too much information, is long and meandering. Scott acknowledges the reader's expectations for plot at the same time that she resists excising the plotless portions of the novel that detail the routine of Millenium Hall. The novel concludes on a note of apology as well: "You, perhaps, wish we had done it sooner, and may think I have been too prolix in my account of this society; but the pleasure I find in recollection is such, that I could not restrain my pen within moderate bounds" (Scott 249). By asserting his own interest, the narrator suggests the proper focus for readers. Routine is the opposite of story. As Moretti puts it, a story is only considered "worth telling if a rule is broken" ("Serious" 380). Scott's choice to juxtapose routine and sentiment, insists that those who have no plot (like celibate women) are as worthy of narrative space as those who do have adventures. Looking beyond the feminist message of sentimental inset histories to the plotless account of routine in a celibate community paradoxically leads to a progressive conclusion: Scott

suggests, by carefully weaving together plot and plotlessness, that celibate women have a place in narrative, too.

THE SKETCH AND MITFORD'S CHARACTERS

The literary sketch, popular in the 1830s, focuses on style and description instead of plot. Alison Byerly defines the sketch as "a rapidly drawn picture that sacrifices aesthetic finish for a sense of spontaneity" (349). The form prizes first impressions rather than careful construction, making it particularly well suited to characters who were considered plotless and unsuitable as subjects for a more sustained form. In *From Sketch to Novel* (2009), Amanpal Garcha argues that the sketch form is opposed to plot: "the sketch, by its origin, history and form is … opposed to plottedness: not only does its stasis stand against narrative movement, but the conception of time that produces this stasis is one in which truly meaningful progression is impossible" (40). The sketch is a form defined by the detachment of plotlessness.

In contemporary reviews of *Sketches by Boz* and *Our Village*, reviewers attempt to classify the genre of the literary sketch, and those descriptions invoke plotlessness as a defining feature of the sketch, even if reviews do not use that term. One reviewer classifies Dickens's *Sketches* as "detached tales, and descriptive sketches of familiar scenes and humble life" ("ART. III. 1. Sketches by Boz" 76). "Detached" distinguishes the sketches from later, more highly plotted works; rather than providing the continuous momentum and ordered events of plot, the sketch is a contained narrative unit. A reviewer in the *Westminster Review* also notes the detached nature of "mere descriptive sketches," of which "there is hardly one of the papers in these three volumes which will not separately please," but which as a whole are "somewhat monotonous" ("ART. IX. Sketches by Boz" 198). The implied mode of consumption (fragmentary rather than entire) negates the possibility of a

plot. As a volume, the reviewer goes on to write, *Sketches by Boz* lacks the "incident and narrative [that] are required, to vary and sustain the interest" ("ART. IX Sketches by Boz" 198).

Contemporary scholars account for Mitford's plotlessness by categorizing *Our Village* as nature sketches. The tradition of thinking of Mitford as writer of rural idyll, pastoral, or provincial scene, rather than character or story, is a commonplace. In her introduction to the 1893 edition with illustrations by Hugh Thompson, Anne Thackeray Ritchie writes that for people of Mitford's generation re-encountering the sketches in this new edition, they are familiar for the "people we remember" (viii). Ritchie moves the critical conversation *toward* nature, "I cannot help thinking that what is admirable in her book, are not her actual descriptions and pictures of intelligent villagers and greyhounds, but the more imaginative things; the sense of space and nature and progress which she knows how to convey…take at hazard her description of the sunset" (xxv-xxvi). Following Ritchie's lead the sketches most often discussed by critics, including "Country Pictures" (renamed "Our Village" in 1839) and the seasonally repeated "Walks in the Country" series focus on description of landscape and setting.[26] In "Violeting," one often-quoted example from the "Walks in the Country" sequence, the narrator speaks in present tense about her March 27 outing alone to "plunge into the remotest labyrinths of the country" (Mitford "Works" 31). She describes the sights on her walk:

> Now a few yards farther, and I reach the bank. Ah! I smell [the violets] already — their exquisite perfume steams and lingers in this moist heavy air. — Through this little gate, and along the green south bank of this green wheat field, and they burst upon me, the lovely violets, in tenfold loveliness! — The ground is covered with them, white and purple, enameling the short dewy grass, looking but the more vividly

[26] See Deirdre Lynch, Amy King, Alison Booth, Justine McDonagh, and Franco Moretti for examples of recent scholarship focusing on Mitford's nature scenes. In an early example of Mitford scholarship, J. C. Owen deviates from this trend, including general impressions of Mitford's character portraits.

> coloured under the dull, leaden sky. There they lie by hundreds, by thousands. […] How beautiful they are placed too, on this sloping bank, with the palm branches waving over them, full of early bees, and mixing their honeyed scent with the more delicate violet odour! How transparent and smooth and lusty are the branches, full of sap and life! And there, just by the old mossy root, is a superb tuft of primroses, with a yellow butterfly hovering over them, like a flower floating on the air. What happiness to sit on this turfy knoll, and fill my basket with the blossoms! What a renewal of heart and mind! ("Works" 32)

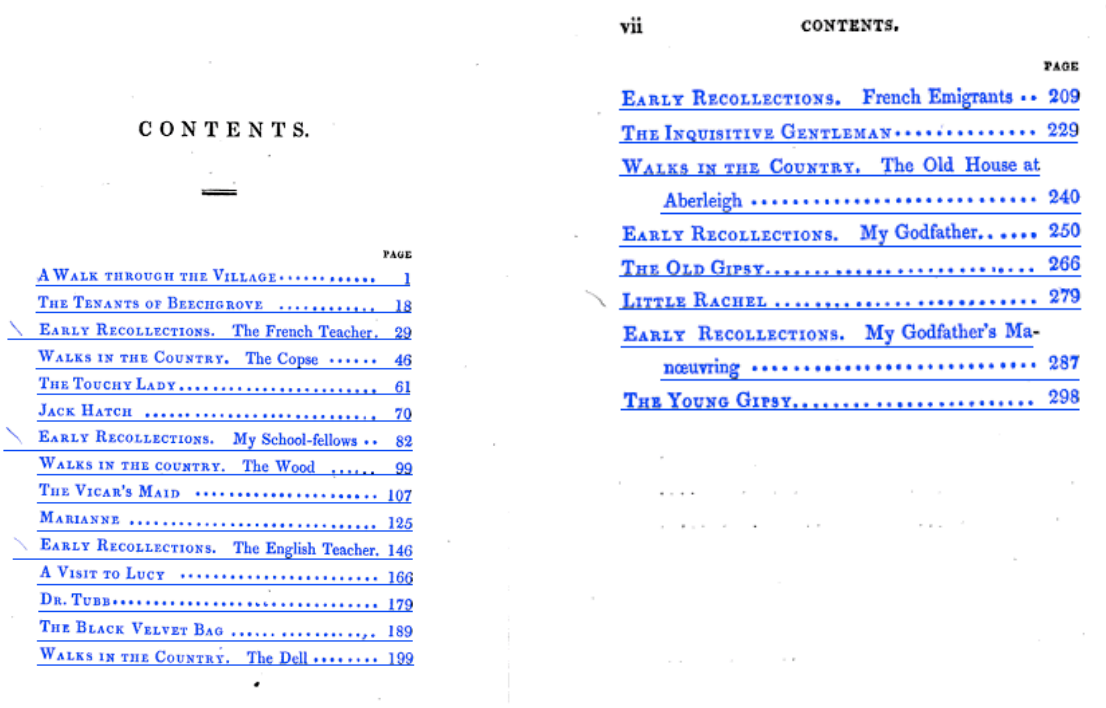
Representative of Mitford's landscape descriptions throughout *Our Village,* the present tense observations in "Violeting," strung together with dashes and exclamation points, invite Mitford's reader to experience the fields slowly, simultaneously with the narrator. Critics from Amy King to Deirdre Lynch to Allison Booth refer to "Violeting" as emblematic of *Our Village.* Moretti writes that Mitford's "most typical episode" is "the country walk": "for each page devoted to agricultural labour, there must be twenty on flowers and trees" (*Graphs* 39).[27]

Alongside nature description, both "Country Pictures" and "Violeting" contain hints of the less tranquil realities of the rural 1820s, including a revolutionary publican and the parish work-house, that lead critics including Moretti and Elizabeth K. Helsinger to argue that Mitford purposefully elides the socio-economic changes in her rural village. Helsinger notes the irony of the "serenities" of *Our Village* written at such a "turbulent" time, writing of two nature sketches, "The First Primrose" and "Violeting," that "Mitford's most characteristic strategy involves both displacement and storytelling: fears which cannot be resolved are replaced by stories for which she can imagine a

[27] For Tim Killick and Shelagh Hunter, "Walks in the Country" provide structure – they are characterized by the "immediacy" of nature description and separate and string together sketches that approach story or include references to heavier topics.

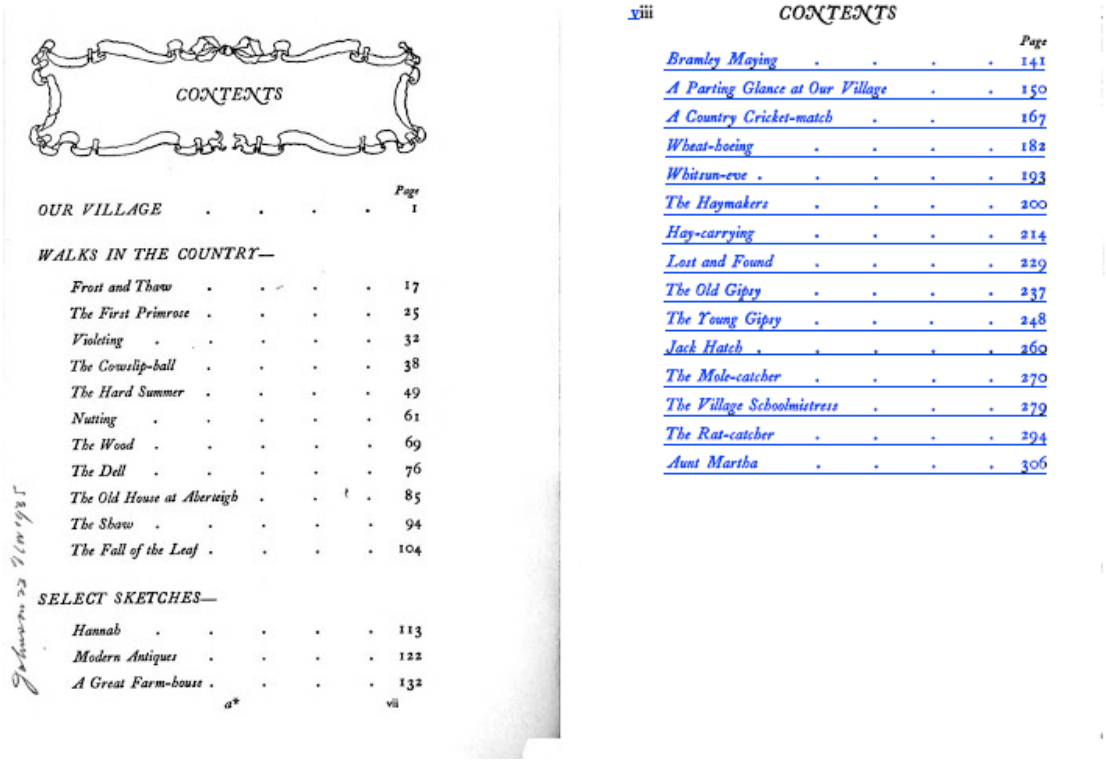
happy ending" (8, 129). Kevin Morrison points out that these views of Mitford as promoting a nostalgic, nationalist agenda are based on editions of her work published later in the nineteenth-century that include only a selection of the total volume of sketches that comprised *Our Village* from the years 1824-1832 and the periodical appearances prior. Morrison goes on to detail the rich and complicated publication history of *Our Village* which includes, "original sketches published in periodical format;" five "biennial volumes;" several "two-volume editions," some illustrated; and "later one-volume selections" (276).[28] A comparison of the table of contents from the second volume of the original five, published in 1826, and a 1904 American edition demonstrates the changes Morrison observes. In collections of nearly the same length, the 1826 volume includes four "Walks in the Country" out of twenty-four total sketches, while the 1904 version includes eleven "Walks in the Country" among a total of twenty-nine sketches. While there is only one character sketch that appears in both editions ("Jack Hatch"), three of the "Walks" in Volume II are also reprinted in the 1904 edition ("The Wood," "The Dell," and "The Old House at Aberleigh"). Greater consistency in reprints of landscape-focused sketches leads to a familiar "canon" of Mitford's nature sketches accompanied by a rotating, unfamiliar selection of her other sketches.

[28] Morrison goes on to point out that the nationalist character becomes increasingly evident in selective and more heavily illustrated editions later in the century (in which Mitford was minimally or uninvolved). The 1893 edition introduced by Anne Thackeray Ritchie and containing almost ten times as many illustrations as sketches is the version of *Our Village* most familiar to readers now: "Ritchie and [illustrator] Thompson "fixed readers' idea of *Our Village* for generations to come"; the former established the model which continues today of publishing selections from the original five-volume work, overwhelmingly emphasizing the country walks, while the latter's illustrations provided a visual template for subsequent designs (94)" (283).



CONTENTS.

Figure Nine: This table of contents from volume II of *Our Village* (1826) contains four examples from the "Walks in the Country" sequence alongside reflections and sketches named for characters.



CONTENTS

Figure Ten: This table of contents, from a 1904 American edition, foregrounds and favors the "Walks in the Country" sequence, taking examples from all five volumes, and adding "Select Sketches" afterward.

As a consequence of this publication history, rarely do Mitford scholars analyze her character sketches, left out of the selection process that trimmed *Lady's Magazine* sketches and the original five volumes into the sleek editions more readily available today. These character sketches are paradoxically notable for using some of the *same* techniques Mitford uses as a naturalist. In fact, Mitford creates this parallel between nature and character in the opening sketch "Our Village":

> How pleasant it is to slide into these true-hearted feelings from the kindly and unconscious influence of habit, and to learn to know and to love the people about us, with all their peculiarities, just as we learn to know and to love the nooks and turns of the shady lanes and sunny commons that we pass every day. Even in books I like a confined locality, and so do the critics when they talk of the unities. Nothing is so tiresome as to be whirled half over Europe at the chariot wheels of a hero, to go to sleep at Vienna, and awaken at Madrid; it produces a real fatigue, a weariness of spirit. On the other hand, nothing is so delightful as to sit down in a country village in one of Miss Austen's delicious novels, quite sure before we leave it to become intimate with every spot and every person it contains. (Mitford "Works" 7)

Habit, according to Mitford, is as comforting in landscape and setting as it is in people and literature. Observing that Mitford uses the same strategies for representing nature scenes and old maids implies single women are worthy of description and not plot.

"THE TALKING LADY": INCIDENT WITHOUT PLOT

In "The Talking Lady," Mitford emphasizes observation over narrative momentum, both because the titular old maid's role is that of an observer and recorder (rather than an actor) and because the narrator observes and records "The Talking Lady" the same way she does nature scenes.

Mitford writes of the talking lady, "talking, sheer talking, is meat and drink and sleep to her. She likes nothing else" and does nothing else: not walking, not dancing, not singing, not listening, not reading, not chess ("Works" 33). In the four days the narrator spends listening to her companion, the talking lady covers such mundane topics as recipes, common knowledge health advice, gossip, and history:

> Her memory is a perpetual register of hard frosts, and long droughts, and high winds, and terrible storms, with all the evils that followed in their train, and all the personal events connected with them, so that if you happen to remark that clouds are come up, and you fear it may rain, she replies, "Aye it is just such a morning as three-and-thirty years ago, when my poor cousin was married – you remember my cousin Barbara – she married so and so, the son of so and so;" and then comes the whole pedigree of the bridegroom; the amount of the settlements, and the reading and signing them over night; a description of the wedding-dresses, in the style of Sir Charles Grandison, and how much the bride's gown cost per yard; the names, residences, and a short subsequent history of the bridesmaids and men, the gentleman who gave the bride away, and the clergyman who performed the ceremony. (Mitford "Works" 33-34)

The talking lady is a register of "personal events," but none of the events are her own; she serves as a repository for history, none of which she has lived. In fact, "The Talking Lady" records a hypothetical conversation. Apt to be repeated whenever the conditions are met, the conversation is not a singular event. Mitford is able to record the talking lady and "Violeting," with the same dilatory style because they are equivalent, static bulwarks of the community.

While the talking lady is considered tiresome, Mitford's "Aunt Martha," depicts a beloved aunt to the whole village and "The most delightful of old maids!" but is also plotless (Mitford

"Works" 66).[29] Despite her plotlessness, Aunt Martha has an occupation: "Her real vocation there, and every where, seems to be comforting, cheering, welcoming, and spoiling every thing that comes in her way; and, above all, nursing and taking care" (Mitford "Works" 66). Martha manages to be useful: "I suppose she has undergone the ceremony of dandling the baby, sitting up with the new mama, and dispensing the caudle, twenty times at least" (Mitford "Works" 66). Yet, even if Aunt Martha is constantly busy caring for Three Mile Cross residents, Mitford has no one particular event to relate. What *appears* as action is actually a description of habits. Mitford's use of present participles implies a static state and not a completed action: Aunt Martha is always comforting, rather than having discretely comforted someone in a noteworthy instance. Even in her action, her perpetual usefulness, Aunt Martha is plotless.

While *Our Village* as a whole includes more description than events, many of Mitford's other character sketches do include discrete events: "A Country Cricket Match" records a challenge between two parishes, "The English Teacher" describes a school theater production, and "The School Mistress" is about the three successive leaders of a charity school. In a "A Quiet Gentlewoman," a widow who seems as socially marginal as the talking lady is afflicted by unexitability rather than talkativeness and is described as: "the most tiresome person under the sun, without an idea, without a word, a mere inert mass of matter" (Mitford "Works" 164). Yet even she

[29] In "Olive Hathaway," another example of a character sketch featuring a single woman, the lame and orphaned niece of a laundress works as a seamstress and is predicted by the narrator to become an old maid: "Such she is likely to continue… [because there are no men suited to her] Olive will be an old maid. There are certain indications of character, too, which point to her destiny; a particularity respecting her tools of office, which renders the misplacing a needle, the loss of a pin, or the unwinding half an inch of cotton, an evil of no small magnitude; a fidgety exactness as to plaits and gathers; a counting of threads and comparing of patterns, which our notable housewives, who must complain of something, grumble at as waste of time; a horror of shreds and litter, … and lastly a love of animals" (Mitford "Works" 160). Mitford goes on to write that animals' fondness for Olive is one of the surest signs. "Yes, Olive will certainly be an old maid, and a happy one, – content and humble, and cheerful and beloved! What can woman desire more?" (Mitford "Works" 161)

goes from stasis to action when her son's marriage is announced. She makes "a tessellated quilt; the only wedding present by which she could sufficiently compliment her son, or adequately convey her sense of the merits and excellence of his fair bride! Her pleasure in this union was so great, that she actually talked about it, presented the cake herself, and poured out with her own hands the wine to be drunk to the health of the new-married couple" (Mitford "Works" 167). In this example, Mitford's verb tense changes to record one discrete, remarkable event. The widow "talked," "presented," and "poured" on one specific occasion.

Mitford's sketches are notable for featuring single women, even if those characters do not break from their plotlessness.[30] By comparing Mitford and Austen, Alison Booth suggests the formal challenge of the sketch: "Austen wrote impeccable novels of the gentry, contending with the ideological rifts that the marriage plot seeks to repair. Instead, Mitford's rural sketches assemble a coherent subjectivity for a sensible Miss Bates. If a poor old maid must be an object of pity or ridicule in Emma's world, in *Our Village* everybody loves Miss Mitford" (55). Booth's assessment, which intends to account for Mitford's consistent drop in popularity even as Austen's increases, also points out a question of form. In Austen's novels Miss Bates is a minor character, someone plucked out of Mitford's sketches to decorate the background of Emma's story. Mitford's sketches, however, can afford to make a character like Miss Bates take center stage, even if she never ascends to the prominence or plot of a heroine.

[30] Alison Booth's claim that "Mitford seemed innovative, even a bit risqué, in diverting the realistic topographical and social descriptions found in some Romantic and earlier writings into prose sketches that pay close attention to unexotic low-life" applies well to her work on single women – who are at once, "unexotic" and a "risqué" choice for narrative space (Booth 41).

"THE FOUR SISTERS": ONE BRIDE, THREE SPINSTERS

Dickens's sketch "The Four Sisters" explicitly takes on the plotlessness of the single woman, exploring the ability of an incident to transform a minor character into a heroine. In "The Four Sisters," the four unmarried Miss Willises take up residence in a nosy parish. They live an entirely eventless life for three years until one of them becomes engaged to be married. However, none of the neighbors can tell which of the sisters is the bride. Even on the wedding day the groom, Mr. Robinson, hands all of the sisters into the carriage, they all kneel at the church altar and all audibly repeat the marriage vows, and then they all continue to live together in their former abode. It is not until nine months later that the birth of a child distinguishes the youngest Miss Willis as Mrs. Robinson.

Dickens's sketch of four maiden sisters can be read as a metaphor for the plotlessness of the unmarried woman. Before the arrival of Mr. Robinson, both the women and their home exist in a perfect state of homeostasis: "The house was the perfection of neatness – so were the four Miss Willises. Everything was formal, stiff, and cold – so were the four Miss Willises. Not a single chair of the whole set was ever seen out of its place – not a single Miss Willis of the whole four was ever seen out of hers. There they always sat, in the same places, doing precisely the same things at the same hour" (Dickens *Sketches* 17). Dickens goes on, "and thus they vegetated" (*Sketches* 17).

When their vegetation is interrupted by an "unlooked-for and extraordinary phenomenon" – the outbreak of a marriage plot – the maiden sisters cling to the lucky bride in an attempt to develop a plot through her (Dickens *Sketches* 17). In the same way, the sisters "seemed to have no separate existence, but to have made up their minds just to winter through life together" during their stasis, they cling to each other during the events of the marriage plot (Dickens *Sketches* 17). When the eldest Miss Willis quips, "*We* are going to marry Mr. Robinson," the Miss Willises become the *subject* of

gossip, some even speculating that the marriage is polygamous (Dickens *Sketches* 17). Dickens's sketch mocks the convention of the plotless single woman by hyperbolizing the desperation of the bride's sisters who cling to Mrs. Robinson.

"The Four Sisters" notably starts with old age, a marginal social category bound up with spinsterhood. Dickens opens by saying that the Miss Willises have lived in the same house for 13 years, and were considered hopeless old maids even then: "The authorities in matrimonial cases, considered the youngest Miss Willis in a very precarious state, while the eldest was given over, as being far beyond all human hope" (*Sketches* 16). In his essay "No Plots for Old Men," Jacob Jewusiak notes that while most critics focus on the *bildungsroman* plots that privilege maturation of youth, Dickens's work including *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841)*, A Christmas Carol* (1843)*,* and *Martin Chuzzelwitt* (1844) records the plotlessness of old men as a resistance to modernity and maturity, and that such resistance, "create[s] the conflicts that enable developmental narrative to successfully unfold" (195). Jewusiak's work suggests that the plotlessness of Dickens's old maids is attributable to both maidenhood and age. The youngest Willis sister has hope of getting a plot yet, but the eldest is resigned.

"The Mistaken Milliner," also a sketch about an unmarried woman, notably opens with a description of Amelia Martin that includes her 32 years alongside her plainness. Martin is a successful business woman – a milliner and dressmaker particularly adept at befriending and flattering a loyal clientele of young domestic servants. Amelia who is convinced by a newly married friend (who presumably becomes a bride during middle age) and her husband to pursue a career in singing. Given that Miss Martin's talents are confined to "treble chirruping" and she cannot "Sing out" her singing career falters after her successful career as a milliner has already "fallen off, from neglect" (Dickens *Sketches* 250, 251). Miss Martin's case is that of an old maid who, beguiled by the optimism of the newly married, mistakenly thinks she can alter her course and change her plot in

middle age, only to become a cautionary tale about ambition. While before she was happily and successfully static as a milliner, she concludes the story in a state of less productive inaction: "to this day, neither has Miss Amelia Martin's good humour been restored, nor the dresses made for and presented to Mrs. Jennings Rodolph, nor the vocal abilities which Mr. Jennings Rodolph once staked his professional reputation that Miss Martin possessed" (Dickens *Sketches* 252). More than a cautionary tale about career ambition, Dickens writes a cautionary tale about plot ambition. For three of the four Miss Willises and Miss Amelia Martin, developing a plot as a middle-aged, unmarried woman is beyond the scope of the sketch. In *Cranford*, Elizabeth Gaskell challenges this convention.

CONTINGENCY AND VOCATION IN *CRANFORD*

Representations of the single woman in the sketch provide an important context for reading *Cranford.* As I have already indicated, *Cranford,* too, was thought of as a sketch initially rather than as a novel. Generic indecision is evident in reviews – *The Athenaeum* calls *Cranford* a "collection of sketches" while *The Gentleman's Magazine* refers to it as "continuous and collected papers"– and also in criticism – Hillary Schor has emphasized the picaresque in *Cranford* by calling it the female version of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* ("Cranford" 765, "Miscellaneous Reviews" 494). Such generic confusion has clouded our ability to see Gaskell's deliberate use of plot after the first installment of *Cranford.*[31] A survey of literary representations of single women shows how the transformation from plotlessness to plot for the single woman does the ideological work of bringing marginal figures into narrative and sets the stage for the emerging plot of vocational singleness. As Gaskell transforms her

[31] In another instance of generic indecision, contemporary scholars refer to *Cranford* in italics and quotes in equal measure in published essays; some treat it as a story and others as a novel.

sketch into a novel, she also creates a plot for the latent heroine, Miss Matty, particularly in the installment which includes the Town and Country Bank failure and its repercussions. *Cranford's* move from sketch to novel and plotlessness to plot sets a precedent for other single heroines, including Ethel May in Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* (1856), Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), and Catherine Vernon in Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883) and expands the scope of action for nineteenth-century single women outside of literature as well.

Cranford was noted by contemporary reviewers for its perplexing form. A reviewer writes in *The Athenaeum* of the aimlessness of the narrative, "Possibly, it was commenced by accident, rather than by any settled plan" ("Cranford" 765). While this "collection of sketches" garnered overwhelmingly positive attention, reviewers often noted that the pleasure of *Cranford* comes from character and description, not plot ("Cranford" 765). According to reviewers, *Cranford* does not contain those elements readers expect from an engrossing work. After instructing his audience to read *Cranford,* a reviewer in *The Examiner* writes, "If we told you it contained a story, that would be hardly true – yet read only a dozen pages, and you are among real people, getting interested about them, affected by what affects them, and as curious to know what will come of it all as if it were an affair of your own" ("Cranford" 467). Interestingly, *Cranford* is also agreed to be devoid of the description that filled the pages of Mitford's sketches: "Cranford contains hardly a bit of formal description from first to last, that not a single person in it is thought worth a page of the regular drawing and colouring which is the novelist's stock and trade" and for "variety" only old maids and "for its disaster, the failure of a country bank" ("Cranford" 467). Without description or plot, various character or true "disaster," it is easy to fall into the interpretive trap of viewing *Cranford* as a "charming" and "delicate" story of women "ever held by the details of a room's arrangement or a bonnet's trimming" (Dodsworth 132). In fact, I will go on to show that everyday events, not classed

as plot by *Cranford*'s reviewers, are orchestrated into a deliberate plot, with causal, rather than merely sequential connections, around the heroine, Miss Matty.[32]

Cranford begins with a series of seemingly disconnected incidents resembling the sketches of earlier in the century. The first installment of *Cranford* introduces Matty's sister Deborah, the elder Miss Jenkyns and central character initially, who is engaged in a battle of literary taste with male new-comer Captain Brown. The installment concludes with Captain Brown's death, his elder, invalid daughter's death and his younger daughter's marriage, creating a sense of conclusion. *Cranford* resumes with Deborah's death and seemingly disconnected vignettes in which Matty plays an increasingly central role. The ladies of Cranford burn old letters, tell long-ago tales, visit each other for tea, and see a conjurer perform, all before these detached events become a causally-related plot. The plot emerges when Lady Jamison marries Mr. Hoggins, creating confusion about the rules, both societal and narrative, established earlier and causing Matty to reflect on her romance with Mr. Holbrook. Is *Cranford* the territory of the Amazons or romance? Is this a plotless sketch or a plotted novel? The Town and Country Bank failure which follows requires Matty's friends to act upon her behalf at the same time that Signor Brunoni's Indian connections bring Matty's long-lost brother Peter home. Though almost always described as light on plot, contemporary reviewers and modern critics agree that the bank failure is the most "plot-like" event in *Cranford.*[33]

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[32] By contrast to *Cranford,* its predecessor "The Last Generation in England" (1849), starts and concludes in the tone of a sketch. At the outset, the narrator promises, to "relate strictly and truthfully without exaggeration," emphasizing details of setting and description over story and claims "I must write them [details] down as they arise in my memory" echoing sketch reviewers and the claims of sketch writers like Mitford and Dickens (159). The rules of elegant economy, more fully stated in *Cranford* are introduced in this sketch. What is *not* included is anything resembling a plot: general habits and anecdotes are recounted in paragraphs next to each other, without much connection by way of story or character to weave it together. Yet, the resemblance to *Cranford* is so near, including such anecdotes as Miss Betsy Barker's Alderney cow's coat and Mrs. Forrester's cat eating her lace collar, that it is no wonder that *Cranford* is interpreted alongside its predecessor.

[33] As Amanpal Garcha puts it, the events in Cranford "reach a kind of climax in the Cranfordians' response to Matty's bankruptcy" (Garcha 18).

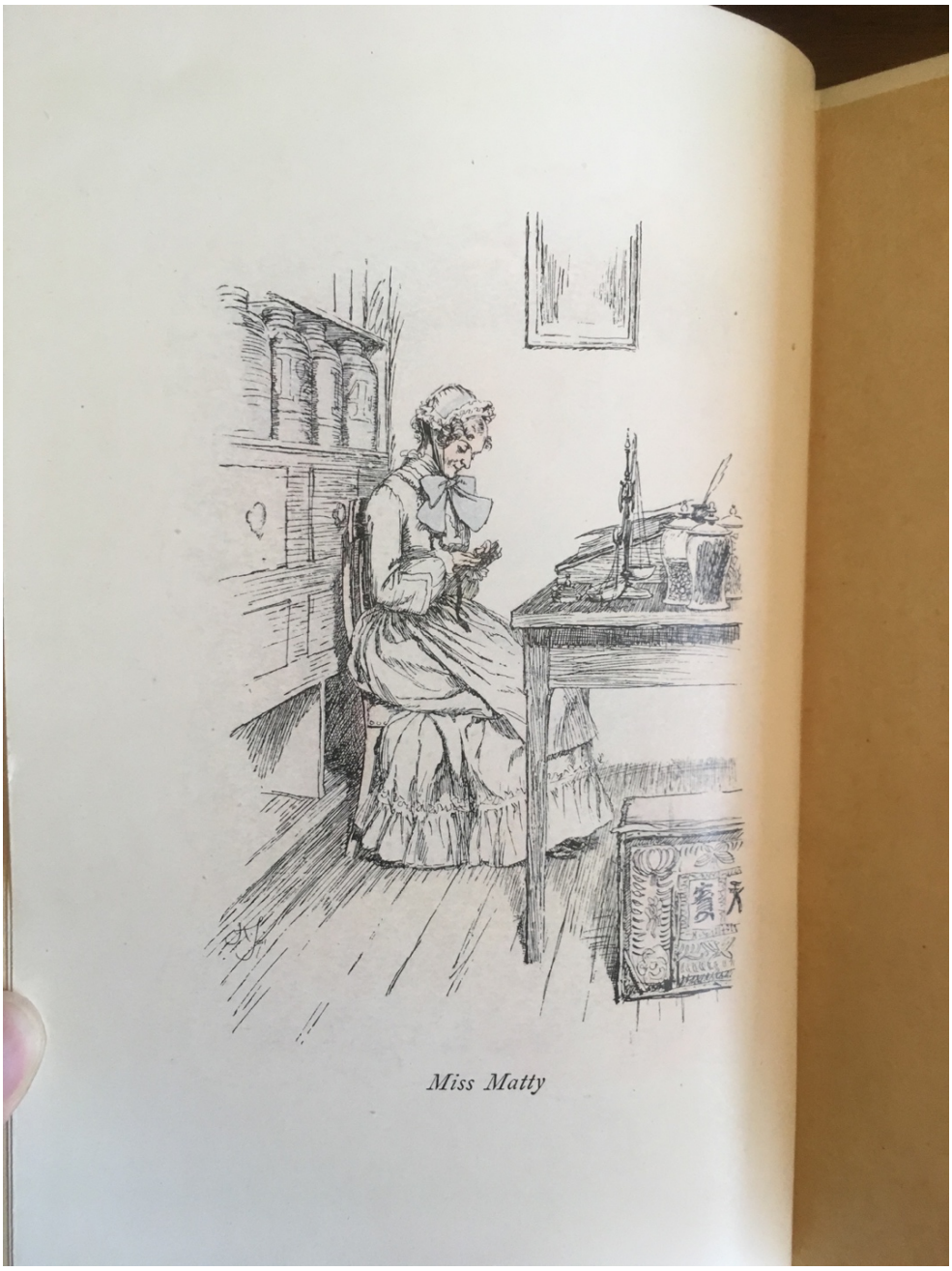

Figure Eleven: Hugh Thompson's frontispiece to his 1907 illustrated *Cranford* leaves no doubt about the heroine of the novel. Hugh Thompson. "Miss Matty." *Cranford,* with an introduction by Anne Thackeray Ritchie. Macmillan, 1935. Image courtesy of John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

The development of a plot and a heroine for *Cranford* is significant not only to the form of the novel but for its ideology. Against a tradition of plotless single women from *Millenium Hall* to *Sketches by Boz, Cranford* was written at a historical moment when the question of vocation for single women was especially heated. At the time Gaskell was writing *Cranford,* the most recent census had revealed a surplus of women in the British population.[34] The large population of unmarried women threatened the primacy of marriage as *the* female vocation given that so many women could never marry. Victorians debated the boundary between vocational singleness, which claimed a vocation in occupations like charity or religious devotion, and contingent singleness, which was the result of accidental demographics, like the fate of the three unmarried Miss Willises, Austen's Miss Bates, or Tennyson's Mariana. These terms are significantly not perfect antonyms. In the culture as well as the discourse, there was a privileged version of singleness and a marginal version: vocational singles were seen as called to fill societal needs beyond motherhood, the remainder of single women were dismissed as the victims of an undesirable contingency. A central tenant of *Cranford*'s "elegant economy," conservation is thematically and narratively relevant to the ways Victorian society negotiated the boundary between vocational and contingent singleness among women in the wake of the 1851 census.[35] Narratively, concerns about accidental rather than purposeful singleness and

[34] Essays that consider the significance of single women in *Cranford* include Lisa Niles's argument that *Cranford* is a "Malthusian love plot" concerned with the productive capacity of surplus women after the onset of menopause (296). Niles unites the political discourse on population control with the idea that the *Cranford* Amazons are both redundant and non-reproductive, guaranteeing population homeostasis. In "'Strange and Rare Visitants': Spinsters and Domestic Space in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford,*" Anna Lepine literalizes her enquiry into "the place of single women in society" by arguing that Gaskell's spinsters are able to "manipulate space," making the entire town of Cranford into a domestic arena (123).

[35] Talia Schaffer and Jill Rappoport also use that novel's emphasis on conversation as a cultural and a narrative context in recent work on *Cranford* takes a materialist approach. In *Giving Women* (2011), Rappoport uses gift theory to look at the ways that sympathy and secrets are conserved in *Cranford*, arguing that while gifts are often used to create new affective ties, in Cranford, sympathy and secrets are shared within a closed community, reinforcing pre-existing relationships. Schaffer writes in *Novel Craft* (2011) that *Cranford* is full of handicrafts (like Miss Matty's paper spills) and is itself constructed

use rather than waste are replicated in Gaskell's construction of a plot that carefully, even economically, refutes contingency in history and narrative. Overcoming strict distinctions between vocation and contingency by incorporating contingency into plot, sketch into novel. Gaskell's interest in the boundary between contingency and vocation for her spinster heroine has both formal and ideological significance as part of the development of the plot of vocational singleness.

"ELEGANT ECONOMY"

The "elegant economy" of Elizabeth Gaskell's fictional town of Cranford is attentive to the proper use or preservation of small remnants of butter, fallen rose leaves, and envelopes (42). Narrator Mary Smith's own peculiar economy is saving string. She fills her pockets with "little hanks of [string], picked up and twisted together, ready for uses that never come" and keeps a rubber band for six years, claiming, "I have really tried to use it; but my heart failed me, and I could not commit the extravagance" (Gaskell 83). The town maxim of elegant economy defines men and money as "vulgar and ostentatious" because they are scarce (Gaskell 42). However, Mary Smith's practice tells a story of things that are deliberately conserved because they are too "precious" to consume (Gaskell 83). The single women of Cranford use elegant economy to justify their conservation of material objects.

Elegant economy does the emotional work of providing a story that redefines contingencies

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like a craft, pieced together in *Household Words*. Schaffer asks how the novel memorializes Victorian craft culture, and what its commitment to craft allows it to do formally (61). Thinking about paper, from the candlelighters Miss Matty makes to the pages of the novel, allows Schaffer to think about the ephemerality of the medium as well as well as paper's role in narrative preservation. While these materialist arguments focus on what is conserved in Cranford – including the tangible, like paper, and the intangible, like secrets – I will discuss an underexplored aspect of such analysis, the particular significance of conservation in a novel populated by women.

like poverty as desirable; James Mulvihill suggests the emotional valence of this tool for Miss Matty and her female community: "Real or nominal in their utility, such economies serve certain emotional needs beyond any concrete necessities they might originally have been conceived to meet" (346). The emotional aspects of frugality draw our attention not only to the scarcities elegant economy excuses, but the way it transforms lack into positive terms. Mary Smith observes a particular way that waste is transformed into abundance:

> I had often occasion to notice the use that was made of fragments and small opportunities in Cranford; the rose-leaves that were gathered ere they fell, to make into a pot-pourri for some one who had no garden; the little bundles of lavender-flowers sent to strew the drawers of some town-dweller, or to burn in the chamber of some invalid. Things that many would despise, and actions which it seemed scarcely worthwhile to perform, were all attended to in Cranford. (Gaskell 54)

In this example, elegant economy manifests itself in the reuse and recycling of spent petals. In addition to material preservation, this action testifies that what others would not consider "worth while," has value. The reframing power of elegant economy via storytelling redefines an action from despised waste to worthwhile kindness, what is gained rather than what is scarce. This example both suppresses the fact that no one can afford new gifts and elevates the fragments that *are* available. What Mulvihill calls the "psychic satisfaction" of elegant economy reframes conservation, rather than consumption, as a pleasure in itself (346).

As the preceding examples have shown, frugality in *Cranford* is not one-dimensional. In fact, Mary Smith opens the chapter "Old Letters" by detailing "small economies" that highlight quite different aspects of the practice, namely, preventing waste and even preventing *use* as another form

of conservation (Gaskell 83).[36] In "Old Letters," Mary Smith describes four examples of small economies, all of which serve an emotional purpose, but through different methods. Mary details the annoyance some experience when seeing butter left untouched on the rim of a plate:

> They cannot attend to conversation, because of the annoyance occasioned by the habit which some people have of invariably taking more butter than they want. Have you not seen the anxious look (almost mesmeric) which such persons fix on the article? They would feel it a relief if they might bury it out of their sight by popping it into their own mouths, and swallowing it down: and they are really made happy if the person on whose plate it lies unused, suddenly breaks off a piece of toast (which he does not want at all) and eats up his butter. They think that this is not waste. (Gaskell 83-84)

While this passage surely highlights the emotional importance of frugality (as Mulvihill, who also quotes this passage, points out, consuming the butter is anxiety-relieving), this is different from, and even a contradictory impulse to, Mary's preservation of rubber bands. In the first example, the cause of annoyance is unconsumed butter, which is "unused," and hence wasted. Mary Smith instead conserves string without ever using it, suggesting that some things are too "precious" to use. Mary Smith's other examples of economy, including the economizing of paper (specifically bank-books and envelopes) and Miss Matty's economy of candles can also be categorized as either concern over

[36] In "Rubber Bands and Old Ladies," Adela Pinch makes a similar claim, writing that, "in its discussion of 'small economies,' this passage actually describes several different kinds of objects, and different investments in objects. Most notably, while the paper envelopes at the beginning of the passage, and the small bits of butter at the end, are to be *used up,* the narrator's own instances of a 'private economy,' the string and the rubber band, consist of taking things out of use" (159-160). Pinch uses this observation to focus on the material significance of rubber in Mary Smith's India-rubber ring. I want to linger on the dynamics of both types of economy, arguing that together these distinct practices create a redefining narrative for the material and sexual economy.

insufficient use or concern for total conservation. The unnamed man who is economical with paper is anxious to see that each page of his bankbook is used to its full extent and that envelopes are turned inside out to maximize their use. By contrast, Matty conserves candles, burning them carefully, one at a time, but also keeping them at the same length in order to be always presentable for company. She does not prevent waste by consuming the last bit, she conserves, resisting consumption altogether. Even within Miss Matty's conservation of candles lies a contradiction. In *Novel Craft*, Schaffer points out the oddity of Miss Matty's habit: "perhaps it is not that she is 'chary of candles' [84] but that she is prodigal of candlelighters. Every time Miss Matty blows out a candle, relights a candle, or darts back and forth to keep both candles burnt down to the same level, she is using another of those candlelighters. In each act of 'elegant economy' is encoded a moment of sheer willful waste" (72-73). Given the two distinct practices of elegant economy – preservation or thorough consumption – perhaps Miss Matty is not willfully wasting candlelighters, but deliberately using them. (A subtle distinction, yes.) They are, after all, made of last week's bills and correspondence (as Schaffer points out). Repurposed as candlelighters, these paper materials are recycled for another purpose and more fully used.

This is all to say that in both cases, elegant economy proposes to eradicate the idea of surplus by assigning purposes to items others would consider worthless and that the emotional work of this redefinition is particular to a town full of unmarried and widowed women.[37] Whether elegant economy resists waste or prevents use, both have a parallel with the surplus of women in *Cranford.* It is possible to extend the "psychic satisfaction" of elegant economy and redefining narratives of conservation in *Cranford* to the emotional importance of conserving women. Gaskell writes of such narrative redefinition in the material economy, "If we wore prints, instead of summer silks, it was

[37] The Cranford emphasis on conservation rather than production can be extended to the women's status as non-reproductive women. For more on this connection, see Lisa Niles.

because we preferred a washing material; and so on" (Gaskell 42). This "and so on," invites the extension of such logic to the sexual economy, suggesting the parallel, "If we remained unmarried it was because we preferred to." In the same way that the women of Cranford need a narrative to explain their preference for the conservation of material objects, they need a narrative to explain why they remain unmarried, a narrative of the conservation of women.

When read in light of Cranford's sexual economy, a practice that asserts the worth and satisfaction available in surplus butter or more fully used paper also suggests the worth and satisfaction of unmarried women. A practice to promote the full use of things provides the emotional assurance that nothing has been carelessly wasted or considered worthless. It follows that if women remain single, it is not because they have been neglected. With Miss Matty's candles and Mary Smith's rubber band, elegant economy tells a story of creating such purpose, by imaginatively transforming surplus into not-surplus. Matty's practice asserts that deliberate conservation has its own pleasure. Mary Smith's rubber band is so precious that she cannot use it. In this case, for something to remain unused is both deliberate and pleasurable, providing surplus with a purpose. These two different practices of elegant economy both support a narrative surrounding the deliberateness, or, as I will proceed to argue, the vocationality, of singleness. As single women, the Amazons of Cranford have not been carelessly forgotten, but purposefully left untouched. This redefinition allows the Cranford women to be "peaceful and satisfied" in the material *and* the sexual economy (Gaskell 42). Part of the emotional function of elegant economy, then, is to rehabilitate waste and conservation in the service of reframing singleness. Elevating conservation as intentional does the emotional work of elevating singleness from the contingency of neglected or redundant objects to the vocation of conservation.

A LITTLE PLOT

Admittedly, actions like conserving bits of rubber band or recycling candle lighters may seem too trivial to support a sense of purpose equivalent to a vocation. The import of such actions is either mundanely banal or ineffective; this "weak tea" version of vocation risks returning to the mode of *Cranford* scholarship that condescended to the story as, in Nina Auerbach's characterization of prior *Cranford* criticism, a "pocket of fluttering, card-playing redundant women" (276). However, by reframing "small opportunities" – unproductive and insufficient as they may seem – Gaskell provides the foundation for reframing singleness.

If Miss Matty has a plot and Miss Martha does not, how much plot counts as plot? Garcha writes that the plot of *Cranford* is "slight but unmistakable":

> In *Cranford,* Gaskell combines this fantasy of stasis with plot elements that show structured temporal progress. While Gaskell emphasizes the Cranfordians' rigid culture and unchanging rituals by representing characters through richly detailed descriptions that pay special attention to the women's outdated fashions, she also, through the course of the volume, narrates large and small transformations in Cranford which reach a kind of climax in the Cranfordians' response to Matty's bankruptcy. (18)

In other words, the sketch qualities of *Cranford* like "stasis," "ritual," and "description," are paired with plot elements like "climax" and "progress." Moreover, the smallness of the plot is arguably intentional. Gaskell began publishing short stories in 1847, but had written *Mary Barton* (1848) and part of *Ruth* (1853) before beginning *Cranford,* suggesting that her return to shorter and more fragmentary forms than the novel was a choice rather than a given.

The short story, "Libbie Marsh's Three Eras" (1847), published four years before the first installment of *Cranford,* makes a case for the power of even small plots for single women. The first

"Era," opens "Last November but one, there was a flitting in our neighbourhood; hardly a flitting, after all, for it was only a single person changing her place of abode from one lodging to another" (310). Gaskell asks what constitutes as plot (this flitting?) to make the case that what seems "less than plot" or only a small plot, is still significant, especially when it concerns that marginalized single women who are seemingly excluded from the plot of marriage and, thus, its vocational purpose.

In the first of three connected stories, the unmarried Libbie moves into lodgings where she has a view out her window of the sick chamber of young Frank Hall. She decides to save her money to buy him a canary, a gift that cements the affection of Frank and his mother Margaret. In the next story, Libbie and Margaret take Frank on a daytrip down a river at Durham. The final sketch, "Michaelmas," opens with Frank's funeral after which Libbie offers comfort to his mother. She is asked to stand as bridesmaid for her landlord's daughter, Anne Dixon, but declines, noting that her higher duty is to comfort Margaret. When Anne petulantly exclaims that Libbie is "as born an old maid as ever I saw," Libbie responds:

> 'I know that as well as you can tell me; and more reason, therefore, as God has seen fit to keep me out of woman's natural work, I should try and find work for myself. I mean,' seeing Anne Dixon's puzzled look, 'that as I know I'm never likely to have a home of my own, or a husband that would look to me to make all straight, or children to watch over or care for, all which I take to be woman's natural work, I must not lose time in fretting and fidgeting after marriage, but just look about me for somewhat else to do. I can see many a one misses it in this. They will hanker after what is ne'r likely to be theirs, instead of facing it out, and setting down to be old maids; and, as old maids, just looking round for the odd jobs God leaves in the world for such as old maids to do. There's plenty such work, and there's the blessing of God on them as does it.' (346)

Libbie expresses a strong belief in the availability of vocations for single women *and* that these vocations may be seemingly small, "odd jobs God leaves in the world for such as old maids to do." Libbie associates odd jobs with vocation, making a claim that even small work can be divinely inspired. The story ends on an explicit moral: "I believe to be the secret to Libbie's peace of mind, the real reason why she no longer feels oppressed at her loneliness in the world, – She has a purpose in life; and that purpose is a holy one" (Gaskell 347). To return to *Cranford,* repurposing candle lighters is not a revolutionary action, but using the same logic to reframe singleness is. In fact, Gaskell's ability to suggest that purpose can be created from the humblest and least-promising of remnants constitutes a radical claim about the application of terms like remainder, surplus and redundant to single women. These terms need not be a sentence to uselessness, but the foundation for purpose.

THE "NATURAL CELIBATE"

The 1851 census and the debates surrounding it provide one context for *Cranford's* attempt to reframe singleness. The census revealed a gender imbalance resulting in disproportionate numbers of single women. An 1854 summary of results published in *Household Words* describes the situation:

> Of 'old maids' over forty (we may be ungallant, but we must be truthful), there were three hundred and fifty-nine thousand nine hundred and sixty-nine, and of old bachelors (shame on them!) two hundred and seventy-five thousand two hundred and four. […] Of all the females in Great Britain between twenty and forty, forty-two percent are spinsters, and of the males of the corresponding periods of life, thirty-one percent. ("Numbers of People" 227)

Even the merely parenthetical editorial commentary is useful in suggesting a contemporary

perspective on demographic reality. The summary implies the embarrassment of single women over 40 (it is "ungallant" to even refer to their existence), and blames bachelors for the large population of unmarried women, implying that no woman would choose to be an old maid, though presumably over three-hundred thousand men have chosen bachelorhood. However, given that single women outnumber bachelors by over eighty-four thousand, the imbalance exceeds the lack of male initiative to which the author attributes it. Other journalistic assessments acknowledge the way this imbalance calls Victorian ideologies of marriage into question. Another summary of the census from the same year remarks, "under no circumstances that can be conceived will the whole of the people marry. Certain duties of the most exalted as well as of the humblest kind in the world are most efficiently performed by these classes" (Cheshire 42). By referring to the exalted duties specific to single people (among them philanthropic work in missions, charity, education, and nursing) the author reveals an anxiety about defining vocational or contingent singleness. With the revelation of a significant unmarried population, Victorians had to account for the purpose of single people, and especially women, outside of the strict ideological commitment to marriage and motherhood. Harriet Martineau, who in her article "Female Industry" (1859) records a robust population of working women, earlier emphasizes the need to account for the significant population of single people in the *Westminster Review*:

> Never, when the island swarmed with monks and nuns, was there so much celibacy as of late years. Before the nineteenth century, a bachelor was an object of observation, a man supposed to have a history; and an old maid was an object of compassionate contempt. Our laws show that every woman was supposed to be represented by her father first, and then by her husband – the position of a large class of women as independent workers and tax-payers not having entered the imagination of law-makers. Yet, see what the Census of 1851 reveals! ("Results" 349)

Martineau underscores the waning presumption that old maids and bachelors are the exception and the present reality that single people will need to be accounted for in society, writing that former conceptions of singleness are already evolving in step with changing demographics.

In fact, the language of "redundancy" and "surplus" was prevalent in journalism on the topic, despite Martineau's optimism that single women fill valuable roles as "independent workers." Article titles considering the Woman Question often refer to the demographic situation in terms of "surplus" or "redundancy" – the language of "useless" extra. In addition to W.R. Greg's famous reference to "Redundant Women" in his *National Review* article of 1862, the *Saturday Review* printed an article entitled, "The Redundancy of Women" (1869) and *The Scottish Review* still used the term at the close of the century, in an article entitled "The Redundancy of Spinster Gentlewomen" (1900). The language used to characterize the activities of old maids similarly emphasizes uselessness, as old maids are associated with "want of employment," "pining away" and the "waste of misdirected" efforts to wed (Gaskill 1, Ritchie 318, Schooling 266).

In the early 1860s, with new census results due soon, the conversation about how to manage the surplus of women and its implication for Victorian ideologies of marriage and gender escalated. If woman's vocation was to marry, many women would never fulfill that vocation. Yet, as W. R. Greg would argue in "Why Are Women Redundant?" encouraging women to pursue careers seems to accord marriage less importance, and has the potential to codify vocational singleness as an option for women even if the gender balance of the population restores itself. Essential to Greg's argument is a conviction in the naturalness of the female vocation to marriage and motherhood and the contingency of any other way of life. He writes that those unmarried women:

> who have to earn their own living, instead of spending and husbanding the earnings of men; who, not having the natural duties and labors of wives and mothers, have to carve out artificial and painfully-sought occupations for themselves; who, in place of

> completing, sweetening, and embellishing the existence of others, are compelled to lead an independent and incomplete existence of their own. (Greg 436)

Greg's proposed solutions, including exporting single women to the colonies where there was a surplus of men, do not attempt to normalize or destigmatize what he considers to be an "abnormal" and "unwholesome" situation by providing unmarried women with an occupation (Greg 436). According to Greg, marriage "is *the* rule" to which singleness is the implied aberration (438).

Greg's position is important for highlighting the anxiety with which Victorians policed the attribution of vocation to singleness. Even more progressive responses, like Frances Power Cobbe's of the same year, borrow from Greg's language. Cobbe, who contests Greg's notion that women should not be encouraged to pursue other occupations, accepts his claim about natural and contingent singleness. She writes that the percentage that Greg designates as "natural celibates" "might be assumed to be the limits within which female celibacy was normal and inevitable" implying that singleness in the population exceeding two to five percent is both abnormal and contingent (Cobbe 594). However, Cobbe does argue for providing even these contingent spinsters with occupations that provide a compensatory sense of purpose:

> It appears that from every point of view in which we regard the subject, it is desirable that women should have other aims, pursuits, and interests in life beside matrimony, and that by possessing them they are guaranteed against being driven into unloving marriages, and rendered more fitted for loving ones; while their single life, whether in maidenhood or widowhood, is made useful and happy. (598)

Even while she argues for other occupations as a temporary solution to the surplus of women, Cobbe insists that doing so will not make marriage less attractive to women when the population does rebalance, but will prevent women from making unhappy marriages because it is their only option. Cobbe's response admits that not all women who are single are vocationally so, but that

society can provide them with other "aims" for a "useful and happy" life without lessening the primacy of marriage as a vocation.

Gaskell's letters suggest that she held a compatible position on female vocation. In a letter of February 1850, Gaskell writes:

> One thing is pretty clear, *Women,* must give up living an artist's life, if home duties are to be paramount. It is different with men, whose home duties are so small a part of their life. However, we are talking of women. I am sure it is healthy for [women] to have the refuge of the hidden world of Art to shelter themselves in when too much pressed upon by daily small Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares; […] I have no doubt that the cultivation of each tends to keep the other in a healthy state. (*Letters* 106)

While Gaskell's thoughts here are confined to women who do have pressing duties in the home, she implies that fulfillment is available *beyond* those duties, and further that it is necessary to cultivate other interests beyond the domestic. Though Greg insists on the naturalness of vocational and contingent singleness, Cobbe, and to some extent Gaskell, seem to admit the ability to create vocations, even for women beyond the "natural celibates," calling into question the "naturalness" of that designation. Narratives reframing the contingency of singleness as purposeful clearly have a cultural purpose, but there is also a narrative parallel. Gaskell reframes the contingency of incident into the purpose of plot, a project that becomes particularly evident during the installment entitled, "Stopped Payment."

"MARRY! MADNESS!": APPARENT CONTINGENCY

The installment of *Cranford* entitled "Stopped Payment" that appeared in *Household Words* on 2 April 1853 raises the question of contingency in Cranford's material and sexual economy, and also its form. With the announcement of Lady Glenmire's engagement to Mr. Hoggins and the failure of the Town and Country Bank, Miss Matty's life and plot seem plagued by accident rather than purpose: Lady Glenmire is able to wed, making Matty's singleness appear accidental rather than fated. The bank failure posits her financial situation, too, as the result of chance. These contingencies provide the groundwork for plot, as Gaskell recuperates contingency into purpose; seemingly detached events, organized only by sequence, are causally connected, providing *Cranford* with a plot and a heroine.

The "astounding piece of news" that provides most of the content for the chapter "Engaged to be Married" disrupts the normal rules of Cranford gentility (Gaskell 165). Miss Pole visits before the regular calling hours begin at noon (a sure sign of the unexpected) and then flouts social convention again by telling Miss Smith and Miss Matty not to mind about their dresses. The latter is twice a transgression: Miss Smith and Miss Matty are not to be seen wearing shabby clothing and Miss Pole is not supposed to let on that she knows they have not spent the entire morning attired to receive company: "for, of course, we did not like to have it supposed that we had any old clothes that it was convenient to wear out in the 'sanctuary of home'" (Gaskell 165). The revelation of Lady Glenmire's marriage to Mr. Hoggins is followed by much speculation: "You and I, Miss Matty, would have been ashamed to have known that our marriage was spoken of in a grocer's shop, in the hearing of shopmen!" (Gaskell 166). In her lament for "feminine delicacy," Miss Pole forgets that neither she nor Miss Matty have ever been or are likely to be in such a situation (Gaskell 166). From the disregard for the rules of society (visiting hours and attire) to temporary forgetfulness

regarding the scarcity of men in Cranford, Lady Glenmire's unexpected engagement disrupts the elegant economy of the novel. Tools that have long justified scarcity – of material objects and men – seem to fail.

As a reminder of Miss Matty and Miss Pole's failure to marry when they were younger and the refreshed failure of hopes to marry now, Lady Glenmire's marriage calls into question the vocationality of Miss Matty's singleness. Miss Pole remarks that marriage has come: "So near that my heart stopped beating, when I heard of it, while you might have counted to twelve" (Gaskell 166). Miss Pole's heart does not only stop with the impropriety of having such news bandied about in the butcher shop, but with the renewed, vague hope that even a middle-aged woman in Cranford need not despair of finding love. Even in her shock and disapproval, Miss Matty entertains the possibility of a shift in Cranford demographics, musing "One does not know whose turn may come next. Here, in Cranford, poor Lady Glenmire might have thought herself safe," (Gaskell 166). The word "safe" is a rather ungenerous choice, which could be replaced by lucky or fortunate – Lady Glenmire has found a wealthy man to support her so she need no longer abide by elegant economies. Miss Matty's choice of "safe" conveys a hint of jealousy as she incredulously, "reckoned it up, and it was more than fifteen years since she had heard of any of her acquaintance going to be married, with the one exception of Miss Jessie Brown; and, as she said, it gave her quite a shock, and made her feel as if she could not think what would happen next" (Gaskell 168). It is curious for Miss Matty to compare Jessie Brown's marriage to Lady Glenmire's: the former is a young woman and the latter a middle-aged widow, yet Jessie and Lady Glenmire's motivations are surprisingly similar. Miss Pole, Mary, and Miss Matty further their ungenerous interpretation of the event by speculating that Lady Glenmire has married for "an establishment" and emphasize Mr. Hoggins's vulgarity, "not merely on account of his name, but because of his voice, his complexion, his boots, smelling of the stable, and himself, smelling of drugs" (Gaskell 167). In fact, the unprecedented union results in a

"flush of youth" for Lady Glenmire and Mr. Hoggins looking "broad and radiant," not unlike the observation that Jessie's "early bloom returned" making her appear a couple of years younger after her marriage (Gaskell 169, 61). Despite speculation to the contrary, Lady Glenmire and Mr. Hoggins's marriage looks like a love match.

When Miss Matty entertains the possibility that there could be yet *another* marriage in Cranford ("One does not know whose turn may come next," "she could not think what would happen next"), she questions the ordained nature of singleness. Miss Matty's speculation on what will happen after Lady Glenmire and Mrs. Hoggins marry (will there be another marriage?) is further a speculation about plot. Matty wonders what event will follow this one and whether the narrative of elegant economy can account for this new event or if Miss Matty's fate will appear contingent after all. Elegant economy states that marriages do not happen in Cranford not simply because there are no men, but because men are vulgar and unnecessary. For a marriage to infiltrate Cranford, and for the widow Lady Glenmire to be the bride, reprises hope that spinsters can find love during middle age and acts as a reminder that Lady Glenmire, who has already been married and widowed, has received another offer while Miss Matty has received (as far as we know) only one offer that she was encouraged to decline. When Lady Glenmire marries, Miss Matty and Mary struggle to assert the principle of elegant economy that men are vulgar (""Marry!' said we. 'Marry! Madness!'" [Gaskell 166]), but they also entertain hope that perhaps marriages are no longer scarce. In response to the engagement, Mary observes:

> just after the announcement of any engagement in any set, the unmarried ladies in that set flutter out in an unusual gaiety and newness of dress, as much as to say, in a tacit and unconscious manner, 'We are also spinsters.' Miss Matty and Miss Pole talked and thought more about bonnets, gowns, caps, and shawls, during the

fortnight that succeeded this call, than I had known them do for years before.

(Gaskell 169)

These new bonnets and caps that announce the two single women as available for marriage are to no avail. (Mary notes that, "it had not been Lady Glenmire's dress that had won Mr. Hoggins's heart" [Gaskell 169]). Even if Lady Glenmire's marriage appears to challenge the application of elegant economy to spinsterhood – where previously it was accepted that there are no marriages in Cranford and men are not desirable anyway, there is at least *one* eligible bachelor and *one* woman who prefers marriage to singleness – the lapse does not lead to more marriages, as Miss Matty seems to predict. Lady Glenmire and Jessie Brown are the exceptions, but Miss Pole and Miss Matty remain the rule.

Reading "Engaged to be Married" and "Stopped Payment" as companions provides an explanation for Miss Matty's emotional response to the failure of the Town and Country Bank. "Stopped Payment" redoubles the sense of contingency introduced in "Engaged to be Married" by pairing Matty's (repeated) failure to marry and her failure in business. While shopping for fabric at Mr. Johnson's store, Miss Matty and Mary Smith overhear the shopkeeper decline to accept another customer's bank note from the Town and Country Bank. After objecting to the rejection, Miss Matty offers to buy the bank note, considered to be worthless tender by its owner and the shopkeeper. Mary Smith and Mr. Johnson both consider Miss Matty's behavior strange – as an investor in the bank she, too, has lost money and is in no position to bail out this other man – and certainly unsavvy given that the bank note is worth nothing. Even Miss Matty struggles to explain her emotional investment in the bank: "I only know that if it is going to fail, and if honest people are to lose their money because they have taken our notes – I can't explain myself" (Gaskell 177). Matty's actions are both emotional and characterological; she feels personally responsible for the bad investment (which Deborah made for both of them). Yet, even as there is an economic explanation for her actions, Schaffer points out that the episode stresses the materiality of the bank note, which

is both a legal contract to which Matty feels bound and a now-useless piece of paper, like the paper spills and old letters Matty has conserved before.[38] In this material sense, the saved bank note resembles the "small opportunities" that would elsewhere be "worthless," as Miss Matty clings to the idea that "the note will be as good as gold again," reflecting Cranford's value on conservation (Gaskell 177). While, economically, the note will *not* have such value again, when seen as another type of paper, the act of conserving invests it with value (if it is worth saving, it is worth something) relating the bank failure and its consequences to the practices of elegant economy that support a narrative of the conservation of women. As companions, "Engaged to be Married" and "Stopped Payment" emphasize the connection between the material and the sexual economies of Cranford, allowing a reading of the bank failure as a redoubling of Miss Matty's failure to marry.

The installment concludes with a return to Lady Glenmire's transformation into Mrs. Hoggins, which Miss Matty reevaluates as a direct result of the banking failure. After the episode of the "unlucky bank," Miss Matty begins to think of Lady Glenmire's engagement as "good fortune" rather than merely "safe": "a man has a sort of knowledge of what should be done in difficulties, that it is very pleasant to have one at hand ready to lean upon. No, Lady Glenmire, instead of being tossed about, and wondering where she is to settle, will be certain of a home among pleasant and kind people, such as our good Miss Pole and Mrs Forrester" (Gaskell 180). Miss Matty can now see some of the merits of marriage because where she has been unlucky, Lady Glenmire is fortunate, where she has been tossed about, Lady Glenmire found security.

The 1869 article "Queen Bees or Working Bees?" reinforces the connection between business and marriage for women. The writer is in staunch opposition to the expansion of work for

[38] For more on the characterological implications of Matty's business sense, she Andrew H. Miller, "Subjectivity LTD: The Discourse of Liability in the Joint Stock Companies Act of 1856 and Gaskell's *Cranford.*"

women as a response to the population surplus. Discouraging the preparation of women for careers, the author frames marriage as the central business transaction for women: "Married life is a woman's profession […]. Of course by not getting a husband, or losing him, she may find that she is without resources. All that can be said of her is, she has failed in business; and no social reform can prevent such failures" (576). In the author's admittedly "old-fashioned view," women should not be taught a profession, "and so be rendered independent of the chances of life" ("Queen Bees or Working Bees?" 576). "Stopped Payment" seems to conclude with Miss Matty as the victim of chance, socially and economically. If to fail to marry is to fail at the entire business of womanhood, the failure of the Town and Country Bank can be reread as an especially personal reminder of Miss Matty's ignorance of such business. The installment concludes with Miss Matty's "soft reverie" on former suitor Mr. Holbrook suggesting an analogy between the bank failure and Miss Matty's failure to marry (Gaskell 180). This installment builds up contingency to an oppressive degree with Lady Glenmire's marriage, the failure of the Town and Country Bank, and reminders of Mr. Holbrook's proposal that Matty declined. If Matty succumbs to contingency in the social and economic realms, narratively, Gaskell unites the seemingly detached and contingent progression of Matty's story in the triumph of plot over plotlessness.

"GOD ORDAINS IT ALL": THE TRIUMPH OF PLOT

In a novel constructed from seeming contingencies – apparently disconnected events that seem more characteristic of plotlessness than of plot – from Captain Brown's death to the failure of the Town and Country Bank, the narrative deployment of elegant economy makes possible the deliberate integration of the contingent into the realm of the ordained, plotlessness into plot. I have already argued that elegant economy elevates conservation over consumption, redefining

contingency as deliberate and pleasurable. The ability to reframe chance is especially important to recuperating singleness. Miss Matty admits to Mary Smith what Peter later confirms, that Matty always imagined she would marry, making her present situation "so very different to what I expected" (Gaskell 158). Many years later, Matty tells a different story: that she can no longer imagine marrying, and that "God ordains it all" (Gaskell 158). Elegant economy turns Miss Matty's unexpected spinsterhood into her ordained situation. Matty claims that her sister Deborah's singleness was purposefully dedicated to taking care of their father "if she had a hundred offers, she never would marry and leave my father. It was not likely she would have so many – I don't know that she had one; but it was not less to her credit to say so" (Gaskell 102). Saying so recovers a contingency (Deborah did not have a hundred offers, she did not have any) into purpose. Similarly, Deborah objected to Matty's marriage to Mr. Holbrook, potentially because she did not want to be left alone caring for her father, or envied the proposal. Even if there are mundane explanations for Matty and Deborah's singleness, Matty reflects that it was ordained. The novel asserts, for Deborah and for Matty, that that there is nothing natural about defining singleness as vocational or contingent. Rather, that definition is created in the stories we tell, and elegant economy is *Cranford's* tool for such narrative redefinition. In *Cranford,* another way of saying that "God ordains it all" is that "Gaskell ordains it all." Gaskell recuperates contingency into providence, providing Miss Matty with a purpose and a plot.

Seeing the plan of the novel as deliberately connected, causal and not accidental, has an ideological relevance for the anxious distinction between vocational and contingent singleness. In *Cranford,* Miss Matty can *find* purpose within contingency through the narrative redefinition of elegant economy. If, at the close of "Stopped Payment," Matty seems to despair that she is one of those victims of happenstance dependent on chance, an accidental spinster rather than a "natural celibate," the elegant economy of Gaskell's narrative goes to work to recuperate the contingency of

Miss Matty's failure in marriage and business into the providence of plot. Miss Matty's ruin is met with staunch adherence to the rules of elegant economy. No one talks of Miss Matty's poverty as the community gathers to discreetly find solutions to her problems. Martha and Jem marry in order to provide Matty with a place to live (and Matty finally has a baby in her arms). Miss Matty opens a tea shop (which no men visit), finding fulfillment (at least temporarily) in dispensing treats to little ones. While Matty does not have a marriage plot, she finds purpose in caring for the children of others. Finally, the banking accident motivates Mary to write a letter to Aga Jenkyns, resulting in Peter's return which assures readers that Matty will be "tossed about" no more, even if she is unmarried.

Narrative deployment of elegant economy means transforming what seems like contingency into plot. Seemingly disconnected vignettes, like the story of Peter in "Poor Peter," or the arrival of a conjurer and the repercussions of his visit in "Signor Brunoni" and "The Panic" are integrated into the plot later.[39] Signor Brunoni had lived in India and provides information about Peter's whereabouts in "Samuel Brown," and Peter returns in "Peace to Cranford." In fact, Mary determines to "make further inquiry" into Peter's whereabouts in the chapter before "Engaged to be Married" and the results of her efforts are revealed after "Stopped Payment" (Gaskell 109). The connection between earlier stories and later, and the importance of earlier context to interpreting later events, helps us reinterpret *Cranford* as a deliberately plotted novel, rather than a set of detached stories.

As the plot develops, Miss Matty emerges as the heroine. While she is considered by reviewers to be, "quite the heroine of the book," Miss Matty is no more than introduced in the first installment as the younger sister of Miss Deborah Jenkyns ("Cranford" 467). In the first installment,

[39] As Garcha puts it, "Gaskell repeatedly emphasizes Cranford's stillness. In terms of the book's form, though, the stasis that dominates many of the individual sketches competes with narrative elements that put *Cranford* within the tradition of plotted novels" (Garcha 18).

"Our Society at Cranford" the story of Captain Brown's daughter Jessie resembles Miss Matty's very nearly. Jessie, too, is the younger sister always acquiescing to the opinions and whims of the elder. The death of her father and sister leave her the only remaining family member, and in such tight financial circumstances that she must consider giving up her house and opening a shop (Gaskell 59). Jessie, too, has an old lover whom she gave up for her sister who reappears, rescuing her from the indignity of shopkeeping. In this instance only Jessie's story diverges from Miss Matty's as Jessie takes her second chance to marry Mr Gordon. Gaskell then elaborates on Jessie's story in the later chapters with Miss Matty, recycling the same plot, but this time allowing Matty to emerge as the heroine *even though* she does not marry.

In contrast to the world of Cranford where Mary observes "neither births, deaths, nor marriages" between one visit and the next, Gaskell's letters during the time she was writing *Cranford* are filled with news of weddings and babies, making her choice to write about the Amazons seem all the more intentional (Gaskell 52). In a letter of 23 May 1852, Gaskell writes to Mary Cowden Clarke about her charitable work on behalf of a Miss Elton. Elton does not appear again in Gaskell's letters, but is presumably a single woman: "I did *not* want money for Miss Elton – I wanted her to have as large a sphere as she could for the exercise of the gifts God has given her" (Gaskell *Letters* 192). Gaskell points out the difference between financial independence and vocation, emphasizing how the fulfillment of the latter is a more desirable outcome. In the same letter, Gaskell laments, "The numbers of people who steadily refuse Mr. Gaskell's entreaties that they will give their time to anything, but will give him or me tens & hundreds, that don't do half the good that individual intercourse, & earnest conscientious thought for others would do!" (Gaskell *Letters* 193). Gaskell's thoughts on philanthropy are important to her recovery of contingency as vocation for Miss Matty. Gaskell finds a narrative tool to recuperate contingency into plot and give Miss Matty what she wished for Miss Elton – "as large a sphere as she could for the exercise of the gifts God has given

her." As the redefining capacity of elegant economy troubles the border between vocational and contingent singleness, authorial ordination makes possible what Victorian society continued to debate.

A decade after the first installment of *Cranford* appeared in *Household Words* in 1861, Frances Power Cobbe sees a widened scope of action for the single woman: "the old maid of 1861 is an exceedingly cheery personage, running about untrammeled by husband or children; now visiting at her relative's country houses, now taking her month in town, now off to her favorite pension on Lake Geneva, now scaling Vesuvius or the Pyramids. And what is better, she had found, not only freedom of locomotion, but a sphere of action peculiarly congenial to her nature" (Cobbe "Celibacy" 233). This industrious old maid in history, owes her expanded sphere of action to the single woman heroine in literature, like Miss Matty, who marks the beginning of the development of the plot of vocational singleness, and serves as a predecessor to such unconventional heroines as Lucy Snowe and Rachel Curtis, the subject of my next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE VOCATIONAL PLOT IN *VILLETTE* AND *THE CLEVER WOMAN OF THE FAMILY*

In *Cranford,* Elizabeth Gaskell made the case for plotted stories about single women, transforming in tandem sketch-like material into a plot for Miss Matty and "surplus" women into carefully conserved singles. This chapter illustrates the plot of vocational singleness, the form that stories about unmarried women took after the mid-century. I take as my examples two novels that fit uncomfortably within the marriage plot designation, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and Charlotte Mary Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865). Pairing these two novels, one canonical, one less so, one by the most famous member of a famous literary family, the other by an Oxford Movement conservative, suggests the wide and deep reach of the previously neglected vocational plot.

While critics often classify *Villette* and *The Clever Woman of the Family* as a failed marriage plot and a marriage plot, respectively, among the difficulties both of these novels present is a central climacteric for its heroine, a change so fraught as to destabilize such classifications. In the case of *Villette,* Lucy prefers isolation to community and considers herself to be a dedicated celibate for much of the novel, stating that, "I might have had companions, and I chose solitude" (Brontë *V* 161). Even after she and M. Paul deepen their friendship, Lucy promises, "I envied no girl her lover, no bride her bridegroom, no wife her husband; I was content with this my voluntary, self-offering friend" (Brontë *V* 541). It is only very late in the third volume (less than 100 pages from the end of the novel), that Lucy wonders, "Could it be that [M. Paul] was becoming more than friend or brother?" (Brontë *V* 586). Though Lucy ends the novel unmarried (with the suggestion of marriage possible only for readers with "sunny imaginations," [Brontë *V* 657]) many critics choose to read Lucy's plot as a failed marriage plot and tragic love story, rather than a plot of vocational singleness:

the plot of a heroine who discerns and then confirms her true vocation to celibacy and work rather than marriage. "Could it be that he was becoming more than friend or brother?" is, after all, a question to which the weight of evidence suggests the answer could be, "no."

In *The Clever Woman of the Family,* Rachel Curtis first vehemently considers herself above the normal fate of women and vocally espouses a "supreme contempt of love and marriage," then in the final six chapters becomes a properly chastened wife and mother, preaching her former faults more loudly than any other character (Yonge *CW* 418). Yet, in the center of the novel as her transformation to obedient wife begins, Rachel expresses doubts about the impending conventional ending. Rachel's immediate reaction to Alick Keith's proposal is confusion, as she remains, "exceedingly depressed, restless," "disturbed and overwhelmed" (Yonge *CW* 417, 418). After accepting Alick's proposal, Rachel expresses regret to friend Ermine, lamenting, "'I did think I should not have been a commonplace woman' and she shed a few tears" (Yonge *CW* 430). Critics including Laurie Langbauer and June Sturrock both observe that marriage neither ends Yonge's novel nor solves Rachel's problems (Langbauer 83, Sturrock 29). In fact, the chapter "The Honeymoon," which picks up after Rachel and Alick's marriage, opens with Rachel experiencing "the *same* weary air of depression" and "bewildered distress" she felt when contemplating her engagement (Yonge *CW* 435, emphasis mine). Presented with a heroine burdened with the *same* doubts and problems as before, we should be skeptical of interpretations that consider marriage to be the linchpin in Rachel's conversion. Yonge's contemporary and her modern critics alike are quick to note Yonge's harsh treatment of Rachel and the conventionally conservative ending of the novel, without crediting the uncertainty the novel expresses about such resolutions and how such uncertainty may reclassify Rachel's plot.

How do we choose, as readers, what to favor in a protean text? Consensus has privileged the end of the novel, in my examples, dismissing the claims Lucy and M. Paul make in the middle to

seek no more than friendship with each other or Rachel's listlessness after surrendering to the ordinary lot of married women. This focus on endings as a tool for classification has led us to overlook other plots that are situated before, alongside, or against the marriage plot. In order to locate and learn from these other plots we must change the way we read, returning to inflection points throughout the text as potentially crucial, rather than favoring the events in the final pages as definitive. This reading method, which I term "analeptic reading," allows readers to pivot from the ending back to a book's center and outward past the final pages, a process that augments our notion of which moments in a plot can be definitive. In this chapter, I will show how a method of analeptic reading, which focuses on "radical middles," provides a new approach to difficult texts by bringing our attention to the presence of a previously neglected plot, in this case, the plot of vocational singleness.[40] This method clarifies the struggle modern readers and contemporary reviewers have with *Villette* and *The Clever Woman of the Family* by reinterpreting these novels not as (failed) marriage plots, but rather as vocational plots, in which emphasis is on the process of discernment at the center of the novel, not the outcome recorded in the final pages.

READING FOR THE ENDING

For many narrative theorists, "reading for the plot" – a method epitomized by Peter Brooks – means reading for the ending. The importance accorded to endings has a long tradition. In his *Poetics,* Aristotle emphasizes the unified nature of plot by reference to beginnings, middles and endings, in which the middle becomes merely the thing between: "A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be.

[40] The term "radical middle," which I discuss in further depth later, is coined by Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles in their introduction to the collection *Narrative Middles* (2011).

An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other follows it" (31). Middles, thus, serve little purpose other than sequencing. In *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), Frank Kermode, when thinking about history and myth as well as literature, writes that, as readers and people, we are always eager to place ourselves *at the end.* We are uncomfortable with being merely in the midst of history and thus always predict that the end is immanent, often mistakenly (Kermode 7-9). Peter Brooks, adding a psychoanalytic element to his analysis of how plots work in *Reading for the Plot* (1984) writes that, "If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning, the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end,* and narrative desire is ultimately, inexplicably, desire *for* the end" (Brooks 52, emphasis original). If, in other words, the meaning of a text is located at the end of the text, then beginning and middle gain meaning or are reinterpreted through the end. Later, Brooks remarks that "The sense of the beginning, then, must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending" (94). Brooks's model of plot is proleptic – always anticipating and looking ahead. In narrative theory, endings are often the destination, the determinant, the anticipated solution, both for readers and for critical interpretation. This theory undergirds our reading practices. While most readers read a text from beginning to middle to end, and many, especially scholars, return to key passages in the middle, rarely do middles hold equal interpretive weight. Middles are used to explain endings rather than vice-versa; the ending subsumes the entire text.

This is not to say there are no skeptics. In *Narrative and Its Discontents* (1981), D. A. Miller writes, "Although most of twentieth-century narratology pivots on the priority of ending, or narrative closure, it also takes nothing so much for granted" (Miller xii). This leads to a problem: "Once the ending is enshrined as an all-embracing cause in which the elements of a narrative find their ultimate justification, it is difficult for analysis to assert anything short of total coherence. One

is barred even from suspecting possible discontinuities between closure and the narrative movement preceding it, not to mention possible contradictions and ambiguities within closure itself" (Miller xiii). Miller points out how prioritizing endings as the ultimate determinant of meaning can create blind spots for interpreting texts, like my examples of *Villette* or *Clever Woman,* in which there are "discontinuities," "contradictions," and "ambiguities" between the middle of the narrative and its conclusion. Critical distance from the ending helps to reveal these discontinuities and their importance.

As my examples suggest, the discontinuities between middle and end are especially prevalent in plots about women.[41] In other words, endings may be not only overvalued, but also *misleading.* In her introduction to the anthology *Famous Last Words,* Alison Booth articulates her distrust of endings from a feminist viewpoint:

> Endings conventionally are the most emphatic and often the most memorable parts of novels, and they are often the most notorious or critically famed parts as well. At the same time, many final passages appear to be uttering famous last words in the jocular sense of declaring intentions immediately contradicted. "'All's well that ends well.' ('Oh yeah?')' – such is the ironic give and take of the endings we read here, many from famous novels. Not only does closure (of which a text's conclusion is one eminent aspect) almost always appear duplicitous, but novelistic endings also

[41] The ubiquity of marital endings is especially well-noted. As E.M. Forster puts it, without "death and marriage I don't know how the average novelist would conclude" (95). In his analysis of the British and continental *bildungsroman* in *The Way of the World* (2000), Franco Moretti writes that there are two prominent nineteenth-century plots: the British marriage plot which moves toward closure, and the continental adultery plot which retains openness, going so far as to say that the British *bildung* "must" conclude with marriage (Moretti 22). Writing about the marriage plot in particular, Joseph Allen Boone agrees that the marital ending is so ubiquitous as to be "'fatal' in more senses than one, protecting the text's ideal vision of unchanging love from interrogation by strangling the possibility of more narrative at the very juncture where novelists… would fain" continue (17).

> have seldom been anything more than double or binary choices for most female characters – seldom as various as the middles of novels. (2)

Given the restrictive nature of narrative conclusions for women, the more various middles better suggest the narrative potential for female heroines. Rather than reading the middle from the resolution of the end, I propose we read the end through the conflict of the middle. A small reorientation of our attention as readers suggests new interpretations.

READING FOR THE MIDDLE: AN ANALEPTIC APPROACH

But what exactly is a "middle"? While Aristotle's definition of plot leaves an amorphous, unimportant middle between a well-defined beginning and end, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, though not a method of plot analysis, provides a useful way for thinking about the importance of middles. The rhizome "is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, *but always a middle*" (Deleuze and Guattari 21, emphasis mine). Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of middles provides a necessary correction to our neglect of narrative middles by acknowledging the potential of "between": "The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. *Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle" (25, emphasis original). For Deleuze and Guattari, the middle is importantly not a *midpoint,* on a line, but a source of (narrative) energy not easily confined. The middle *cannot* be measured by pages (the middle fifty percent of the novel, say), chapters (after the first, before the last) or volumes (Volume II), but by events *at the center*

metaphorically even more than physically. Middles can be usefully reconceived as a nexus of plot or narrative conflict rather than as a location.

In their collection, *Narrative Middles* (2011), Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles, provide a number of ways to conceptualize such events at the center – essential to the connecting function of plot, rather than merely sequence or continuation – under the term, "radical middle," which:

> gestures to a rich and various range of meanings, including continuity, development, center, hub, digression, transition, deviation, disjunction, rupture, crisis, turning point, crossing, intersection, node, meantime, error, wandering, and interruption. The middle points us to such crucial phenomena as changes and processes, ebbs and flows, hubs and brakes. And, most of all, it points us to the tough, imperfect, anxious, exciting experience of having decidedly left our beginnings behind, while never quite knowing what will happen to us in the end (3).

These descriptions nearly all emphasize the possibility of contradiction. A digression, a deviation or a crisis suggest tension with what precedes and follows – a connecting relationship rather than a sequencing relationship. Analeptic reading thinks of the middle not as a location (part of the sequence of the text), but as the center, the source of causality that can help interpret the ending. More importantly, analeptic reading reorients us away from the ending by reminding us that endings rarely provide closure or resolution, but more often a return to the middle. Analeptic reading then is not merely paying attention to middles as we pass through them, but treating middles like endings and endings like middles, by which I mean that a midpoint can become the most crucial or definitive moment, and the ending (especially in a realist novel) is a reminder to think past and beyond the text.

Even once we acknowledge the importance, interest, and potential surprises of novelistic middles, as Miller, Booth, and Levine and Ortiz-Robles do, *how do we read for them?*[42] Analepsis, a narrative feature described by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980) provides a model for non-linear reading. Genette defines analepsis as, "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (40). Genette's definition of analepsis as a narrative feature includes eight sub-classifications, accounting for the different ways analepsis can appear within narrative, from a completing analepsis – which fills in the gaps in the narrative before – to a paralepsis – which similarly fills in gaps, but leaves important information missing. Prolepsis, the inverse of analepsis, is a narrative feature that looks forward and predicts, and which Genette associates with "predestination" (67). I borrow Genette's terms for classifying a narrative feature to refer to a process of narrative interpretation. While Genette explains how analepsis (or prolepsis) may occur in the way a story unfolds, I suggest the ways that readers can approach a text analeptically (or proleptically) in order to interpret it. While prolepsis is, according to Genette, relatively uncommon in Western fiction, it is a common interpretive move among readers who seek to predict the plot (readers of *Villette* may anticipate the possible union of Lucy and M. Paul before it occurs). My focus on a method of analeptic interpretation requires us to perform the less intuitive task of looking backwards, rather than anticipating forwards. Not simply flashback or "retrospection," analepsis places the end in service of the middle (40). To return to Forster's causal definition of plot, which I outlined in the Introduction, "The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king" suggests a causality uncovered by a

[42] Levine's recent work on form moves us in that direction by pointing out a problem with the way we have thought about form and narrative. Narrative is often thought of as spatial, for Propp it can be charted, for Brooks, it is likened to a plot of land or a graph. This spatial sense of narrative and reading is static, bounded. Levine suggests that the concept of rhythm provides one way to think of narrative as temporal rather than spatial.

return to the middle. "Until it was discovered" suggests that the queen's death is an event preceded by its reason, even if the reason is related later. An event that was unexplained or insufficiently explained gains a meaning based on the reader's analeptic reinterpretation. Genette writes that narrative analepses have the "obvious risk of redundancy and collision" (50). The same is true for analeptic methods of interpretation. Analepses disrupt the sequential flow of the story and require interpretation through the causal logic of plot, as is the case for Lucy and Rachel's stark transformations. When the characters change their minds, they create a collision in the plot, where sequence must be abandoned in favor of causality. The analeptic method does not erase the need for an ending, but, in the case of the plot of vocational singleness, analepsis allows readers to pivot from the confusing or unexpected final pages to the cause, placing an emphasis on Lucy and Rachel's process of discernment as much or more than the outcome.

Performing non-linear, analeptic reading is not programmatic, but rather a set of habits meant to de-familiarize us from our ingrained, linear, and end-oriented practices. The habits of a analeptic reading include returning to the middle upon re-reading; holding contradictory statements as interpretively equal regardless of narrative position; noticing formal elements that sustain narrative, prolong conflict, or resist resolution; noticing repetitions; noticing the stops and starts of storylines within the main plot; noticing the positional location of transitional moments; and noticing typical signs of closure in the middle and indications of continuation at the end. These practices are not meant to be exhaustive, but a starting point to hone the habits of non-linear reading.

An analeptic approach to reading is most developed for detective fiction, which can serve as an example. In "The Typology of Detective Fiction" (1966), Tzvetan Todorov explains how each whodunit includes the story of the crime and the story of the investigation; the detective's investigation sends readers back to the truth of the crime, which occurs before the text starts. In

effect, the conclusion of the investigation results in readers going back to the beginning of the story. More recently, Charles Rzepka has shown how the detective genre confounds a "reading for the ending" approach. This position places Rzepka in opposition to Brooks; according to Rzepka, the reader's desire is not for the story to end, but to continue: "the 'end' we desire when reading detection is always the 'starting-point' of the master array of events gradually emerging in the narrative, and that point in the array lies *behind* us as we read even though the 'end' of the narrative always lies *ahead*" (26, emphasis original).[43] Rzepka displaces the "end" of a detective story onto prior events, an observation that is surprisingly applicable to genres beyond the detective story.[44] Promising a union between the two romantic partners, the marriage plot does not have much in common with the detective plot. The question in the marriage plot is not so much will Darcy and Elizabeth marry, but how will they overcome the obstacles to their marriage.[45] The plot of vocational singleness, however, contains a mystery. Will the heroine marry or will she not? And if she does not, what will she do? Prolepsis invites readers to think ahead and anticipate. We are so conditioned to read for the marital ending that prolepsis often leads readers (and nineteenth-century reviewers) to predict romantic pairings that either do not occur (*Villette*) or occur after and amidst other noteworthy plot developments (*The Clever Woman of the Family*). Analeptic reading, by contrast,

[43] Rzepka uses array to refer to the story in the more common story/text distinction. He defines "array" as "events appearing in the text as they are conceived by the reader in the order of the original occurrence, whether that occurrence takes place before or after the story begins" (19).
[44] In fact, Caroline Levine in *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense* (2003) argues that the suspense associated with the detective genre is a central feature of the Victorian realist genre, using *Jane Eyre* as an example: "the suspenseful middle of *Jane Eyre* is not an empty delay, a waiting game, but an active interpretive ground, where the reader enters into a critical relationship with ideological norms and conventions. Brontë expects her audience to generate conventional hypotheses when faced with a mystery but also to become aware that these are, in fact, *only* hypotheses – speculations, guesses, hopes, and desires. The middle of the story is actually intended to throw the operations of culture and convention into relief" (80).
[45] Boone describes the most common courtship plot pattern as a "comedic ending" that "follows upon the systematic removal of those obstacles previously impeding union, obstacles that may range from physical separation and sociological barriers to psychological misunderstanding" (10).

moves away from predicting the conventional ending, looking forward and backward from the middle of the text. The plot of vocational singleness requires the narrator to relate both the events leading up the decision to pursue a vocation, and those events that confirm (or refute) that decision as truly vocational. The ending, then, is often a surprise, whether it is M. Paul's implied death or the stridency of Rachel's transformation to an ordinary married woman. These twists are only clarified by delving backward into the middle of the plot, where the causality of vocational singleness is constructed.

AN UNFAMILIAR PLOT

An isolated heroine moves from one occupation to another: working first as the devoted caretaker of an elderly invalid woman, then traveling abroad where she serves as a governess and later as a teacher. She slowly discerns her vocation, rejecting opportunities that are antithetical to her nature (like becoming a private governess), before finally opening her own successful school.

This plot summary of *Villette*, which emphasizes Lucy's largely successful search for occupation and fulfillment and ignores her "failed" marriage plot with M. Paul Emmanuel as mere subplot may sound selective, faulty, or even unrecognizable. By reading analeptically – looking backwards from Lucy's position as school mistress for the trajectory that led her story to conclude in that place – *Villette*'s plot appears differently. Reframing *Villette* as a plot of vocational singleness, rather than an "unfulfilled" marriage plot, privileges narrative space over position (Lucy spends more pages in the beginning and middle of the novel avowing her celibacy and seeking fulfilling work and only one-hundred or so pages at the end of the novel contemplating romance); Lucy's success, rather than her failure; and pays respect to what reviewers deemed the "original" nature of Brontë's plot ("The Lady Novelists of Great Britain" 18).

If that plot summary sounds unfamiliar, so do many nineteenth-century assessments of *Villette*. One reviewer expresses disappointment that what seems to be the marriage plot of Paulina Home is derailed in the middle of Volume One as Lucy, surprisingly and for this reviewer disappointingly, takes on the role of heroine in addition to the role of narrator, a move characterized by "an inconsequence and abruptness that suggest change of plan after the tale was undertaken" ("Villette" 186). Another reviewer summarizes the end of the novel: "Paul, however, establishes [Lucy] in an independent position as an instructress, departs for the West Indies, without any very manifest necessity, leaving her to the successful prosecution of her labours, returns in three years and marries her" ("Book Review" 317-318). Such a straight-forward synopsis of events does not accord with the elliptic suggestions of the final chapters. The most optimistic reader of *Villette* can conclude only that such a marriage is a possibility, not a certainty, and surely not an event recorded in the novel. Another reviewer, tending in the opposite direction, also insists on a definitive reading, claiming that, "Monsieur Paul really *did* die at sea" ("ART. VI. – "Miss Brontë" 152, emphasis original). A lack of consensus about the basic events in the plot and surprise at the direction of the novel indicate not only an ambiguous and unreliable narrative, but an *unfamiliar* plot. Reviewers' inability to predict the direction of the plot indicates that Brontë is telling a *new* type of plot.

In fact, many nineteenth-century reviewers complain that *Villette* lacks plot. *The Eclectic Review* writes, "It is the plot alone that is defective… the plot itself lacks incident, it contains few of what the dramatists call *situations*" ("Book Review" 320, emphasis original). The *Examiner* agrees, noting, "The plot is very slight" and "nothing can be simpler than the outline of the plot" ("Villette" 84). One reviewer compares the lack of plot in *Villette* to *Jane Eyre,* which, with long-lost relatives, near-bigamy, a fire, a surprise inheritance, and a marriage, can hardly be called plotless ("Villette" 237). Instead, in *Villette,* a lack of *recognizable* plot masquerades as a lack of plot. The plot of *Villette* is not non-existent, it is not an "unfulfilled" marriage plot defined by a lack, but rather a new type of plot

altogether – the plot of vocational singleness – in which Lucy discovers that her true calling is not to marriage. This plot becomes evident when we read analeptically, looking for causality, rather than proleptically, anticipating fulfillment.

As I have already described, in the plot of vocational singleness, a heroine declares she will not marry (even if she subsequently does) and then pursues a vocation to occupy her time. Such vocations range from caring for family to running a business. Lucy's vocational plot (like most) progresses along two separate (simultaneous) lines. In one, she pursues an occupation which grows into a vocation, in another, she renounces love and confirms her commitment to celibacy (through trial and error, and not necessarily by choice). Lucy's vocational plot sees her progress from Miss Marchmont's caretaker (a job she finds engrossing and rewarding, if taxing) to the caretaker of Madame Beck's daughters, to a tutor at Madame Beck's school, and finally to the directress of her own, expanding school. Simultaneously, Lucy renounces a marriage plot. She entertains an unrequited affection for Graham Bretton; Graham marries Polly Home, confirming Lucy's singleness. Lucy develops a friendship with M. Paul based on their shared preference for solitude and commitment to singleness, a commitment that others continue to confirm for Lucy as she learns about M. Paul's past love, the nun Justine Marie. There are points of intersection between the two plot lines. For example, Miss Marchmont, Lucy's first employer, has lived a celibate life after the tragic death of her fiancé, providing an early example of a single woman. A belated bequest from her estate helps Lucy expand her school. This dual structure shows that the negation of a romance plot does not leave a narrative vacuum, but another plot in its place. The analeptic reading method makes the primacy of the vocational plot in *Villette* apparent.

From the beginning of *Villette*, Brontë provides ample clues that her heroine, Lucy, is not the heroine of a marriage plot. Paulina Home is introduced as a romantic heroine, highlighting the difference between Lucy and Paulina's character and narrative roles. Even as a child, Polly is

described as having "no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move and have her being in another… to exist in his existence" (Brontë *V* 29). Given that the "his" the narrator refers to is Polly's future husband Graham Bretton, even her childlike devotion to Graham suggests that Polly is destined for marriage. One reviewer notes an affinity for Polly precisely because she fits the typical mode of the marriage plot heroine. *The Athenaeum* laments that "In [*Villette's*] first chapters interest is excited for a character who disappears during a large part of the story, and who returns merely as a second-rate figure": Paulina Home ("Villette" 186). "We hoped that Currer Bell was going to trace out the girlhood, courtship and matrimony of such a curious, elvish mite. Instead of this, toward the middle of the first volume, the narrator steps into the part of heroine" the reviewer goes on to write that instead of this preferred version of the plot, *Villette* "follow[s] the struggles and sufferings of a solitary woman" ("Villette" 186). In other words, the reviewer in *The Athenaeum* recognizes Paulina as the typical (and, given the penchant for proleptic reading, more satisfying) heroine for a marriage plot, and Lucy as a disappointing substitute. Lucy increases the sense that Polly fills the role of a traditional heroine by narrating Polly's arrival and the development of Polly and Graham's friendship in the first chapters, while neglecting to account for her own history, activities, or feelings, possibly contributing to *The Athenaeum's* confusion in identifying the heroine.

Lucy's course is a solitary one. Where Polly is described as dependent, Lucy, by contrast, is consistently presented as independent and more comfortable alone. When she strikes out in London, she discovers her own solitariness to feel natural: "Elation and pleasure were in my heart; to walk *alone* in London seemed of itself an adventure" (Brontë *V* 59, emphasis mine). Brontë emphasizes both Lucy's joy in being alone and the strangeness of her feelings, going on to write, "To do this [walk around London], and to do it utterly alone, gave me, perhaps an irrational, but a real pleasure" (Brontë *V* 59). Further, Lucy goes on to affirm her affinity for and choice of solitude through the third volume of the novel – maintaining her preference for solitude long after her

friendship with M. Paul develops, saying both "I might have had companions, and I *chose* solitude" and "If life be a war, it seemed my destiny to conduct it single-handed" (Brontë *V* 161, 391, emphasis mine). Lucy frames her singleness as both a choice and a destiny, banishing any thought by readers or other characters that it could be mere chance (or misfortune).

Lucy's physical solitude can be extended to her narrative solitude. Her plot is always acknowledged to be singular, making Lucy formally as well as thematically solitary. Later, when Lucy explores the grounds of the convent where Madame Beck's school is located, Lucy courts solitude: "From the first I was tempted to make an exception to this rule of avoidance: the seclusion, the very gloom of the walk attracted me. For a long time the fear of seeming singular scared me away; but by degrees, as people became accustomed to me and my habits, and to such shades of peculiarity as were ingrained in my nature – shades, certainly not striking enough to interest … I became a frequenter of this strait and narrow path" (Brontë *V* 138). As elsewhere, the physical path Lucy walks corresponds to the metaphorical path of her plot. Just as she makes the "singular" and thus conspicuous choice to wander the garden by herself at night, her plot is singular as well.[46] Brontë indicates through Lucy's comfort with lonely paths that she is *not* mistaken to think of herself as solitary; it is in fact the right choice.

By contrast to Lucy, Polly does marry (though offstage), and her romance with Graham is told alternately with the development of Lucy and M. Paul's friendship, highlighting that these are in

[46] During one of their private tutoring sessions, M. Paul discourses on the "woman of intellect": "a sort of 'lusus naturae,' [freak of nature] a luckless accident, a thing for which there was neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as wife nor worker" (Brontë *V* 471). Paul suggests his own discomfort with the woman who is neither wife *nor* worker, who does not have a plot. Paul suggests that women who are not in a marriage plot or a vocational plot are plotless, "freaks of nature." Lucy is in a liminal space, having declared to readers many times that she will live solitary, but not yet having found meaningful work.

fact *different* plots. Lucy observes when Polly announces her engagement that Polly and Graham are well-suited to one another at the same time that she acknowledges the possibility of other plots:

> You must be united. I knew it the first day I saw you together at La Terrasse. In all that mutually concerns you and Graham there seems to me promise, plan, harmony. I do not think the sunny youth of either will prove the forerunner of stormy age. I think it is deemed good that you two should live in peace and be happy – not as angels, but as few are happy amongst mortals. Some lives *are* thus blessed: it is God's will: it is the attesting trace and lingering evidence of Eden. Other lives run from the first another course. Other travelers encounter weather fitful and gusty, wild and variable – breast adverse winds, are bolted and overtaken by the early closing winter night. Neither can this happen without the sanction of God; and I know that amidst His boundless works, is somewhere stored the secret of this last fate's justice: I know that His treasures contain the proof as the promise of its mercy. (Brontë *V* 500-501, emphasis original)

By contrast to the "promise, plan, and harmony" that define plot in general and Polly and Graham's marriage plot, Lucy acknowledges the existence of other types of plots, like her own, that are characterized by tumult rather than peace and happiness. *Villette* makes room for both the more typical marriage plot of Polly and Graham and the "fitful and gusty, wild and variable" plot that Lucy follows which is also "under the sanction of God." Lucy's invocation of providence, her conviction that her life has followed "from the first another course" assures readers that *Villette* offers *two different plots*, rather than a marriage plot and a failed marriage plot or a marriage plot and contingent plotlessness; *Villette* provides a model of this other course, which becomes evident when we read analeptically.

"HAPPIER IN ANOTHER DEGREE": LUCY'S VOCATIONAL PLOT

Lucy's vocational plot emphasizes the role of providence in the heroine's movement from occupation to occupation until she discerns her vocational fulfillment as a teacher in her own school. In one of her first occupations as a caretaker for Miss Marchmont, Lucy finds purpose in the work: "Her service was my duty – her pain, my suffering – her relief, my hope – her anger, my punishment – her regard, my reward. I forgot that there were fields, woods, rivers, seas, an ever-changing sky outside the steam-dimmed lattice of this sick-chamber; I was almost content to forget it all. All within me became narrowed to my lot" (Brontë *V* 45). While work in the sick chamber may be stifling, Lucy becomes engrossed. Later, when she advances from an informal governess to Mme Beck's children and enters the classroom, teaching provides a break from a formerly stagnant routine. "I felt I was getting on; not lying the stagnant prey of mould and rust, but polishing my faculties and whetting them to a keen edge with constant use" (Brontë *V* 104). Lucy consistently finds fulfillment in her vocational plot that she does not elsewhere.

Even so, Lucy does not take to every occupation equally, suggesting that her journey is accompanied by discernment. She refuses to be Polly's companion because her vocation is to independence: "I had not that vocation. I could teach; I could give lessons; but to be either a private governess or a companion was unnatural to me. Rather than fill the former post in any great house, I would deliberately have taken a housemaid's place, bought a strong pair of gloves, swept bedrooms and staircases, and cleaned stoves and locks, in peace and independence. Rather than be a companion, I would have made shirts, and starved" (Brontë *V* 393). In her vocational plot, Lucy steadily develops a keen sense of the work she finds fulfilling. Notably, Lucy prefers market-oriented jobs (housemaid, shirt maker) rather than pseudo-familial roles (private governess, companion.)

While such a development may go unobserved when reading *Villette* as a marriage plot, it represents an important development when *Villette* is read as a vocational plot.

Lucy's vocational discernment follows a plot from companion to governess to school mistress, all the while the setting suggests the options available for celibate women in the convents of Catholic countries. Catholicism is prevalent in the novel: the figure of a nun appears four times, Madame Beck's school is the former site of a convent, Lucy confesses to a Catholic priest, and M. Paul is rumored to have loved a woman who became a nun.[47] In addition to suggesting anti-Catholicism, as many critics have argued, the figure of the nun calls to mind surplus women and Anglican sisterhoods, just beginning to emerge at the time that Brontë was writing.[48] Anne Longmuir connects the foreign setting to the debates about emigration for single women: "Brontë ostensibly presents the convent as a fate to be dreaded by any right thinking English spinster. Yet despite her avowed distrust and dislike of Catholicism, she is clearly deeply attracted to the religion, and to the figure of the nun in particular. This ambivalence towards Catholicism is played out most explicitly through Lucy herself. While Lucy claims to despise Catholicism, she is clearly fascinated by

[47] Many critics have written about the role of the nun in *Villette*. Rosemarie Clark-Beattie writes that *Villette* diverges from other anti-Catholic literature because the conversion plot represents a subplot and the foreign setting removes the threat from England. More recently Michael Clarke has argued that Brontë's attempted union of a Catholic and Protestant anticipates a secularist stance (969). While Clarke acknowledges the fervent anti-Catholicism in England at the time Brontë was writing and Brontë's own anti-Catholicism, he writes that "These actions in turn signify deeper issues, which include control and suppression of desire, renunciation, surveillance and self-discipline, and the opposition between Catholicism's system of renunciative vocations for priests and nuns versus Protestantism's rejection of these in favor of the sanctification of ordinary life: of work, family, civic engagement, and all that contributes to human flourishing" (Clarke 975-976). Tonya Edgren-Bindas writes that Lucy experiences a "paradoxical attraction to the Catholic faith" (and that she becomes a version of the nun (meant to be a horrifying vision), over the course of their encounters (253, 256).

[48] For more on Anglican Sisterhoods, see Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women* (1985), June Sturrock "Something to Do: Charlotte Yonge, Tractarianism and the Question of Women's Work" (1992) and Livia Arndal Woods, "'What are they to do with their lives?': Anglican Sisterhoods and Useful Angels in Three Novels by Charlotte Mary Yonge" (2015).

it as her trip to the Catholic confessional after the breakdown of the long vacation indicates" (15). As Longmuir argues, Lucy (and Brontë) may disavow Catholicism while finding the nun useful – both as a model for celibacy and as a narrative tool.

Each of Lucy's encounters with the nun comes after she considers a romantic possibility, suggesting that the nun, while a potentially negative image, redirects her thoughts to her celibate plot. When the first letter from Graham arrives, Lucy sneaks away to the attic to read the cherished bit of news, and sees the first apparition (Brontë *V* 322). After she makes the choice to bury these letters (and her romantic hopes for Graham), she sees the nun a second time (Brontë *V* 392). The third time she sees the nun, Lucy and M. Paul are together (Brontë *V* 488). The fourth and final time, Lucy finds only an empty habit in her bed after she mistakenly assumes that M. Paul is intended to marry Justine (Brontë *V* 624). Each sighting comes at a moment of romantic disappointment reminding Lucy and readers of the other vocational plot. The nun works as a symbol of celibacy and vocation in its most literal version. Pere Silas, who implies that Lucy's vocation is to the Catholic sisterhood, stresses the inevitability of her path, "Daughter you *shall* be what you *shall be!"* (Brontë *V* 526, emphasis original). Reading *Villette* as only anti-Catholic obscures all Lucy has in common with the nun.

The last interaction between Lucy and M. Paul, in which he gifts her the space and resources to start a school, expresses certainty about her occupational endeavors even as it retains (hopeful) uncertainty and silence about their romantic future. M. Paul describes his plan: "You shall live here and have a school; you shall employ yourself while I am away; you shall think of me sometimes; you shall mind your health and happiness for my sake, and when I come back –" (Brontë *V* 646). M. Paul can narrate his expectations for Lucy as directress – that plot is clear – but cannot fill in what will happen when he returns. Lucy's response similarly expresses certainty in her teaching endeavors without mentioning marriage: "I will be your faithful steward… I trust at your coming the account

will be ready" (Brontë *V* 646). What Lucy offers him on his return is "an account" of her work as a teacher, not her hand in marriage. John Jellicoe's illustrations to the 1906 Andrew Melrose edition of *Villette* are suggestive of the professional nature of M. Paul and Lucy's relationship. In one of six illustrations, Lucy and M. Paul are depicted meeting for the first time. In an interview setting, Madame Beck asks M. Paul to "read" Lucy for her fitness for the position. Lucy and M. Paul gaze into different planes, suggesting the mischance and disjunction of their relationship. Were they intended as romantic partners, the illustration could suggest their future union by depicting them locking gazes, as Lucy and the nun do in "I saw an image like a nun" (Figure Thirteen). Jellicoe intimates through these two images the unlikeliness of M. Paul and Lucy's relationship and the certainty of Lucy's celibate future.

Figure Twelve: John Jellicoe. "'Mon Cousin,' began Madame Beck, 'I want your opinion. Read that countenance.'" *Villette,* Andrew Melrose, 1906.

I SAW—AN IMAGE LIKE—A NUN!—*Page* 250.

Figure Thirteen: John Jellicoe. "I saw – an image like – a nun!" ***Villette,*** **Andrew Melrose, 1906.**

Lucy admits that her feelings meet only with "inadequate language" that M. Paul counters with physical expressions – a stroke of the hair, a brush of the lips (Brontë *V* 646). As the vocational plot takes form and expression, the romantic plot becomes non-narratable. Earlier in the novel, Lucy suggests that "I might have had companions, and I chose solitude" and the full consequences of such a *choice,* discerned at the novel's center, becomes apparent at the end (Brontë *V* 161). Lucy chooses a solitary commitment to vocation *at the expense of* a marriage plot.[49] Ivan Kreilkamp describes Lucy's plot in positive terms, writing "Instead of lovers united, Brontë depicts Lucy at the end as a successful but partnerless professional: 'I commenced my school; I worked – I worked hard' [614]" (351). Kreilkamp's description of Lucy as a "successful but partnerless professional" goes far toward elevating the importance of work in *Villette*, even as it still cedes a *lack* in her romance plot.[50] What if being a successful professional *necessitates* being partnerless? What if the joy of work takes the place of romantic joy?

"LOVE IS NO ORACLE": LUCY'S SINGULAR PLOT

Lucy affirms her choice of singleness until a turning point which occurs in the middle of Volume III, when it is first suggested that, contrary to what they have claimed so far, M. Paul and

[49] Timothy Carens, who interprets *Villette* as part of the Victorian concern over romantic love becoming an idol in contest with divine love, argues that Lucy, perhaps grudgingly, acknowledges the incompatibility of romantic and vocational plots and the providence of her vocational plot: "Reason, an iconoclastic realist, scratches out these love stories, revising the narrative of Lucy's life into a tale characterized by deprivation and solitude. Lucy herself plays the role of a deeply ambivalent reader of the two conflicting versions of her life, yearning for the pleasures of the former even as she acknowledges the truth of the latter… Brontë offsets her heroine's acquisition of socio-economic independence with events that demonstrate the extent to which mortal desire is tragically circumscribed by a higher power. The extent to which the ending of the novel is shadowed by divine authority makes it difficult to read it as the triumph of Lucy's 'own powers'" (Carens 348-349).

[50] Kreilkamp's term "partnerless" is also a business term that draws attention to Lucy's solitude in society *and* work. Rather than becoming partners with Mme Beck, Lucy starts her *own* school.

Lucy *do* have a romantic relationship. Lucy wonders, "Could it be that he was becoming more than friend or brother? Did his look speak a kindness beyond fraternity or amity?" (Brontë *V* 586). Both Lucy and M. Paul have claimed a dedication to celibacy consistently before this moment. M. Paul prefaces a conversation with Lucy, "If, mademoiselle, I were a marrying man (which I am not; and you may spare yourself the trouble of any sneer you may be contemplating at the thought)" (Brontë *V* 483). Lucy echoes his own claims, saying "I envied no girl her lover, no bride her bridegroom, no wife her husband; I was content with this my voluntary, self-offering friend. If he would but prove reliable… what beyond his friendship could I ever covet?" (Brontë *V* 541). Why disbelieve these central claims?

The belated suggestion of romance has loomed large in readings of *Villette* because of its position at the end of the novel. As we think we are nearing the resolution (for proleptically-minded readers, the proposal elicits a release of familiarity) Lucy and Brontë reorient readers analeptically to a crucial moment in the middle. Reading analeptically reminds us that M. Paul's proposal in the final pages of the novel causes Lucy to reflect on an earlier episode, drawing attention to the discrepancy between this moment and the middle of the text. When M. Paul proposes after giving Lucy the school, she gives no answer to his declaration ("Lucy, take my love. One day share my life. Be my dearest, first on earth" [Brontë *V* 651]) and instead points readers into the middle of the text:

> At this hour, in this house, eighteen months since, had this man at my side, bent before me, looked into my face and eyes, and arbitered my destiny. This very evening he had again stooped, gazed and decreed. How different the looks – how far otherwise the fate!
>
> He deemed me born under his star: he seemed to have spread over me its beam like a banner. Once – unknown and unloved, I held him harsh and strange; the low stature, the wiry make, the angles, the darkness, the manner, displeased me. Now,

> penetrated with his influence, and living by his affection, having his worth by intellect, and his goodness by heart – I preferred him before all humanity (Brontë *V* 652).

Lucy points out an essential conflict in the proposal – eighteen months earlier M. Paul had predicted a celibate fate for her and now he suggests something else. While at this moment Lucy seems to accept the second interpretation, she is mistaken. She references an episode before they saw the nun together and reinterprets it in light of her present happiness. Such a reference reminds readers to return to the middle. The episode Lucy references is one in which M. Paul observes that they are *the same:* "Yes, you were born under my star! Tremble! for where that is the case with mortals, the threads of their destinies are difficult to disentangle; knottings and catching occur – sudden breaks leave damage in the web" (Brontë *V* 487). M. Paul provides a warning, toward the center of the novel, that the nature of their connection is open to misinterpretation; their plots are connected, but difficult to interpret – mired in the discontinuities, contradictions, and ambiguities of middles.

If Lucy is misled by this proposal, so are readers. Brontë warns, "Man cannot prophecy. Love is no oracle" (Brontë *V* 653). In fact, as Lucy will go on to write, the conclusion is incoherent, "M. Emmanuel was away for three years. Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life. Do you scout the paradox?" (Brontë *V* 653). Lucy's happiness comes from two sources: her hope that M. Paul will return (fueled by his faithful letters) and the energy she exerts to make her school a success in the meantime. While one of these hopes will fail, the other will succeed. Lucy's school is successful: she gets more pupils of better rank, she inherits money from her former employer, she expands her grounds and opens a *pensionnat*. As she prepares for M. Paul's return, Lucy notes, "I thought I loved him when he went away; I love him now in another degree; he is more my own" (Brontë *V* 656). The memory and legacy of M. Paul secured her happiness, allowing her to love him

as a benefactor, even when he ceases to be a future husband. To "love him in another degree" admits the possibility of loving the legacy of solitude and independence M. Paul gives Lucy.

Importantly, Lucy's celibate destiny need not negate her love for M. Paul or wash her fate of all cruelty. Writing of vocation in *Jane Eyre,* Maria Lamonaca reminds us that Victorians saw vocation as, "freely discerned, *not* freely chosen," meaning that Jane, or Lucy, could remain dissatisfied at the end of the novel *and* have discovered her ordained calling (258). In particular, "Jane's marriage, framed as a vocation in its own right, cannot then be considered a happy *ending,* but rather an arduous process, leading – like St. John's missionary work – to some yet-deferred state of bliss" (Lamonaca 258-259). Lucy's fate, too, refocuses the heroine and the reader on her successful discovery of a vocation rather than the tragic ending for M. Paul. While it may not be a "happy" ending, Alison Booth writes that Lucy is able to develop a "contented independence" (13).[51]

Brontë's letters and biography also attest to her interest in careers for single women. For much of Brontë's life as recorded in Elizabeth Gaskell's biography and her own letters, she, like

[51] Brontë's interest in vocational plots extends to her other fictional works. Jane Eyre and Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar in *Shirley* (1849) all seek vocations before their plots take a more conventional route. Lamonaca draws our attention to Jane Eyre's active role as caretaker for her maimed husband, writing that "Ultimately, Jane marries Rochester because it is her vocation – the divine call that only she herself can hear" (246). Sharon Marcus offers a reading of *Shirley* as the plot of female amity, in which Shirley and Caroline develop their friendship as a precursor to marriage and Linda Hunt argues that the ending of *Shirley* seems an inadequate capitulation to plot conventions. In "Sustenance and Balm: The Question of Female Friendship in *Shirley* and *Villette*," Hunt goes on to attribute Lucy's lack of female friendship to economic reasons. As a woman who will not marry and will need to secure financial independence, Lucy ultimately has little in common with women like Ginevra Fanshawe and Paulina Home: "One feels that having explored the potentialities of love between women in *Shirley* and having acknowledged the emotional power of this aspect of women's culture, she is free to move beyond it in her next novel in order to show that a redundant woman such as Lucy Snowe must work out a new identity which may place her in a position apart from other women" (Hunt 61). Hunt sees Lucy's fate borne out in history, as women who became professionals in the later nineteenth-century "often condescended to" women who followed more traditional paths (a position Yonge attributes to Rachel Curtis ten years later in *The Clever Woman of the Family*) (65). Hunt concludes that being a self-supporting woman is isolating.

Lucy, thought herself a committed celibate, proclaiming to school friend and frequent correspondent Ellen Nussey in a letter of August 1839, "I am certainly doomed to be an old maid Ellen – I can't expect another change – never mind I made up my mind to that fate ever since I was twelve years old" and in another letter to Nussey from May of the following year, "I am tolerably well convinced that I shall never marry at all. Reason tells me so, and I am not so utterly the slave of feeling but that I can *occasionally hear* her voice" (Brontë *Letters* 198, 217, emphasis mine). When others predict she will marry, Brontë resents that they cannot imagine she would have any other interests. In fact, Brontë sounds like Yonge's Rachel Curtis when she writes (again to Nussey):

> Not that it is a crime to marry – or a crime to wish to be married – but it is an imbecility which I reject with contempt – for women [who] have neither fortune nor beauty – to make marriage the principal object of their wishes & hopes & the aim of all their actions – not to be able to convince themselves that they are unattractive – and that they had better be quiet & think of other things than wedlock. (Brontë *Letters* 315)

While this commentary seems to distract from the role of choice by suggesting that single women remain so because they are "unattractive" (a term that encompasses physical appearance and monetary motivation), Brontë also advises that women develop "wishes and hopes" unrelated to marriage. After receiving three proposals that she rejected (and, in that way, hardly conforming to the story of the redundant woman and resembling instead the purposeful celibate), Brontë accepted a proposal from Arthur Bell Nicholls. In letters from her honeymoon Brontë expresses less certainty or affection than one would expect from a newlywed who finally consented to matrimony. Brontë writes in a lukewarm tone that the choice to wed, "*seems* a right choice" and that she hopes to "repay as I ought the affectionate devotion" of her husband one day (qtd. in Gaskell *Life* 450, emphasis mine). Brontë's letters suggest that she does not abide by perfectly happy endings in life or fiction,

marriage or work. Further, her view of vocation does not necessitate immediate happiness: "The right path is that which necessitates the greatest sacrifice of self-interest – which implies the greatest good to others; and this path, steadily followed, will lead, I believe, in time, to prosperity and to happiness; though it may seem, at the outset, to tend quite in the contrary direction" (Brontë *Letters* 482-483). This path leaves open the possibility of happiness in marriage or mission, but delayed happiness. While Lucy's story leaves off, reading analeptically for the vocational plot allows readers with sunny imaginations of another disposition, to believe that she moves, "in time, to prosperity and to happiness" not as Madame Emmanuel, but in her vocation to teaching. Analeptic reading reminds us that endings for readers are middles for characters who continue to live in their fictional worlds. Jane is at the *beginning* of a "process" of caring for Rochester; Lucy is in *the middle* of an evolving career.[52]

THE CLEVER WOMAN'S "SWEET HYPOCRISY"

Rachel Curtis's central climacteric – in the dual sense of importance and position – is the inverse of Lucy Snowe's: she vehemently, vocally prefers mission to marriage, yet comes to wed and serves as the (unconvincing) mouthpiece for Yonge's conservative values. Even though Rachel ends the novel as Mrs. Alick Keith, the center of the novel comprises Rachel's vocational discernment which marriage does not resolve; *The Clever Woman of the Family,* when read through the middle, provides another version of the vocational plot.

Rachel Curtis is not unique among nineteenth-century heroines for declaring she will never marry before, chapters later, doing precisely that. Even given the predictableness of what Yonge will

[52] Emma Liggins also reads Lucy as satisfied with her singular plot, writing, "it is possible to read the text as an attempt to highlight both the harsh realities and the small freedoms of the single life" (62).

term Rachel's "sweet hypocrisy" – retracting her former rejection of marriage like Emma Woodhouse, Dinah Morris, and Aurora Leigh – Rachel Curtis's story is notable for the stark terms of her choice between marriage and mission. When Rachel thinks she will not marry, she doggedly pursues another vocation to fill her time; when she does eventually marry, Rachel renounces all other pursuits admitting, "I am not fit to be *anything* but an ordinary married woman … but I am glad some people can be what I meant to be" (Yonge *CW* 516, emphasis mine). Rachel's failure delimits the boundaries of the emerging plot of vocational singleness.

The Clever Woman of the Family opens on Rachel's 25th birthday as she declares herself a spinster with a mission, the combination of events that defines the plot of vocational singleness. Rachel desires and creates busyness: "She was always full of occupation, even while her active mind craved for more definite and extended labour," creating a contrast to the plotless single woman of earlier decades (Yonge *CW* 221). Rachel appoints herself the supervisor of her widowed cousin's eight young boys and submits articles to *The Traveler*, but she has little natural talent for either. Undaunted by these first obstacles, Rachel selects a new cause, starting a school (The Female Union for Englishwomen's Employment, F.U.E.E) where a few supported pupils, formerly lacemakers, can learn printmaking under the instruction of a clergyman of recent acquaintance. After reports that the schoolhouse is oddly private, consumes suspiciously small rations of food and does not pay its bills, a visit uncovers that the students are malnourished and abused. Lovedy, Rachel's own pupil, contracts diphtheria and dies in the Curtis home days after her rescue, an outcome exacerbated by Rachel's homeopathic philosophy which delays her seeking medical treatment for Lovedy. Rachel is understandably devastated by the terrible outcome of her charity work, abandons philanthropy to those better qualified, and during her own illness and the trial of the school's supervisor and mistress, accepts a proposal from Alick Keith. While this plot summary *already* includes enough events to fill a triple-decker, Rachel accepts this proposal in the middle of the novel. Rachel

proceeds after this proposal to further question her happiness and responsibility in her new role as Mrs. Keith. Reading analeptically shows that not only is marriage not the resolution to Rachel's story, it pales in contrast to Rachel's central vocational failures, and the suggestion of future rebellion beyond the final pages of the novel.

As was the case with *Villette,* the events contemporary reviewers chose to relate in the necessarily limited space for plot summary indicate an expectation of – and thus emphasis on – marriage and not vocation in Rachel's plot. A review in *The Athenaeum* mentions Rachel's' cousin Fanny Temple and her children, neighbor Ermine's love story, and Rachel's marriage to Alick Keith without any reference to Rachel's philanthropic projects or the subsequent trial ("The Clever Woman of the Family"). The real intrigue, for this reviewer, is about the fate of Ermine Williams and Colin Keith, who in a subplot are reunited after years apart and married despite Ermine's disability. In the *Westminster Review,* the Yonge novel is described as a predictable genre, in which characters like Ermine calmly converse with long-lost lovers for ten pages of dialogue and little boys are often the best characters, but not much is worth summarizing. Those who do mention Rachel's philanthropy often do not take it seriously. The *Pall Mall Gazette* describes the trial: "Here her hot philanthropy runs her into such a very obvious pitfall of imposition as none but a most reckless hobby-horsewoman could ride into, and she comes out sufficiently humiliated to submit to be married" ("The Clever Woman of the Family" 551). For each reviewer, Rachel is the unexpected entertainment in this novel, "intended to represent that last worst product of a questioning age, the female reformer – the 'odd' young lady who will not bow her neck to curates, who dabbles in sociology and torments her fellow creatures with systemized philanthropy" ("Belles Lettres" 286). Even if she is a negative stereotype, *The Pall Mall Gazette* writes that Rachel "just redeems the book from being wholly insipid" ("The Clever Woman of the Family" 551). Talia Schaffer has observed that in a Yonge novel, the reform of the errant heroine coincides with the dissipation of the plot: "a

Yonge novel stops because it has finally overcome its story" ("Magnum Bonum" 274). By the final page, the plot has disappeared, creating a confusion as to whether the significant event is the quelling of the plot (the triumph of Yonge's values), or all that has happened before (a powerful challenge to them). This confusion possibly contributes to some contemporary reviewers describing the novel as boring: "The story is of the slightest, turning chiefly on the subjugation of an energetic but perfectly impractical young woman by a still more energetic officer" ("The Clever Woman of the Family" 596). If the vocational plot and the conflict surrounding it are quelled in a marriage plot by the end, our typical modes of proleptic reading obscures the vocational plot.

As in *Villette* there are two story lines: Rachel's vocational plot and her marriage plot, which have a characteristic inverse relationship. When she is focused on maiden philanthropy, Rachel is not interested in marriage. Once she marries, she gives up her philanthropy entirely. Her marriage, however, comes in the middle of the narrative and not at the end, troubling an easy classification of *The Clever Woman of the Family* as a marriage plot. More attention to the "radical middle" suggests that Rachel's plot helps to define the plot of vocational singleness, through her failure as a truly vocational single.

"FATED TO MAKE SUCH MISTAKES!": RACHEL'S VOCATIONAL PLOT

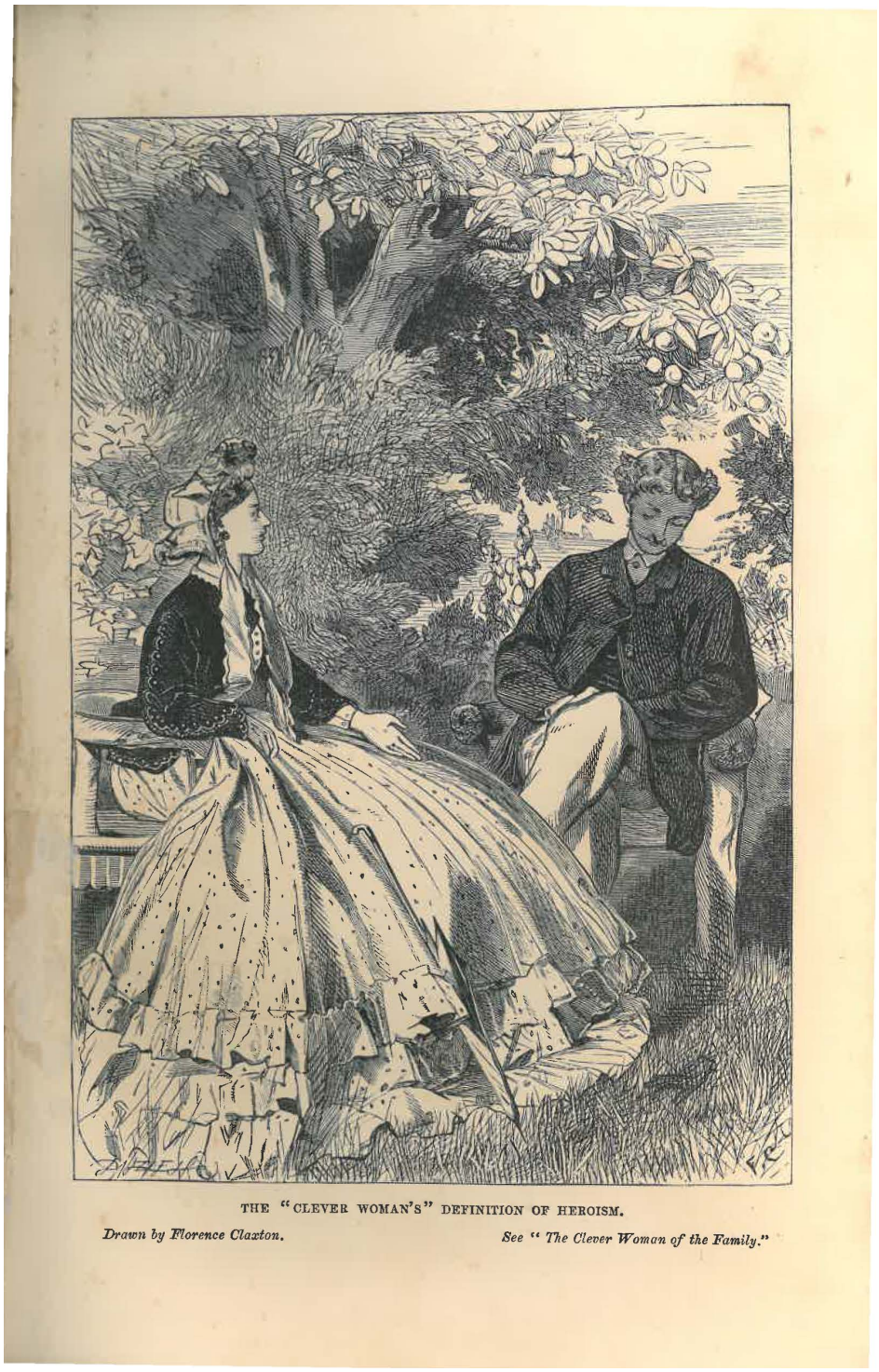
Before Rachel's marriage comes the eventful and even sensational experience of her failure as a philanthropist. The trajectory of Rachel's humbling at first seems to conform to a classic Austenian pattern that Eve Sedgwick calls the trope of the "Girl Being Taught a Lesson" (833).[53] June Sturrock draws a parallel between Austen's Emma Woodhouse and Rachel. Like Emma who

[53] Fiamengo also makes this connection between Sedgwick's reading of Austen and Yonge (82).

misinterprets Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill's affections and is scolded for her rudeness to Miss Bates before marrying Mr. Knightley, Rachel also makes a series of small, embarrassing mistakes on her path to marriage. First, she does not realize that Ermine Williams is the anonymous writer of the column "The Invalid" and offers her unsolicited literary advice while praising the author of the column. Next, Rachel dismisses Alick Keith, her future husband, as merely ornamental while telling him the story of a war hero, which happens to be his own. Completing the trifecta of mistakes is the disastrous end to Rachel's school, resulting in child abuse, the death of a student, an outbreak of diphtheria, and a criminal trial. Florence Claxton, who provided the illustration for each monthly part of *The Clever Woman of the Family*, chose to represent the trajectory of Rachel's "lesson," suggesting the central role these episodes have in Rachel's plot. Illustrations from April, August, and December 1864 depict Rachel's over-confident retelling of Alick's own heroism (Figure Fourteen), her discovery that Ermine is "The Invalid" (Figure Fifteen), and fainting upon learning hearing that she is "accountable" for Lovedy's death (Figure Sixteen) (Yonge *CW* 346).[54] In the first illustration, as Rachel tells Alick his own war story, she sits straight up, confidently facing him as he looks out of the engraving and away from her gaze. His evident embarrassment has not yet impacted Rachel. Rachel's posture expresses confidence and her dress takes up the lower third of the engraving, covering Alick's crossed legs from view. As Alick corrects Rachel in Figure Fifteen, her head is depicted lower than his. She no longer obscures the reader's view of Alick's body and she occupies less space as Alick's confident and easy posture expands to fill half of the engraving. In the final engraving, Rachel is slumped in a faint, limbs drooping as the doctor's left leg moves in front of her.

[54] For more on Florence Claxton's illustrations of *The Clever Woman of the Family,* see Susan Walton's essay "Suitable Work for Women? Florence Claxton's Illustrations for *The Clever Woman of the Family* by Charlotte Yonge" (2015), which points out that the conservative novel was illustrated by a real-life Rachel Curtis, adding ideological wrinkles to our interpretation of the role of women and work in Yonge's novel.

In the course of the illustrations, Rachel's posture goes from upright to downcast to slumped and unconscious. Her male counterparts gain stature and space.



THE "CLEVER WOMAN'S" DEFINITION OF HEROISM.

Drawn by Florence Claxton. *See "The Clever Woman of the Family."*

Figure Fourteen: Florence Claxton. "The 'Clever Woman's' Definition of Heroism." ***The Clever Woman of the Family, The Churchman's Family Magazine,*** **vol. 3, April 1864. Image courtesy of University of Queensland, Australia.**

"THEN IT IS, LIKE ALL THE REST, A DELUSION," ANSWERED CAPTAIN ALEXANDER KEITH.

Drawn by Florence Claxton. *See "The Clever Woman of the Family."*

Figure Fifteen: Florence Claxton. "'Then it is, like all the rest, a delusion,' answered Captain Keith." ***The Clever Woman of the Family, The Churchman's Family Magazine,*** **vol. 3, August 1864. Image courtesy of The Styberg Library (formerly The United Library) of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois**

Figure Sixteen: Florence Claxton. "The Dinner Party at the Deanery. – The Announcement of the Verdict." ***The Clever Woman of the Family, The Churchman's Family Magazine,*** **vol. 3, December 1864. Image courtesy of The Styberg Library (formerly The United Library) of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois**

Critics often group these widely disparate mistakes – from social *faux pas* to child abuse – together and, it is only in a parenthetical that Sturrock writes that one of Rachel's students dies of "neglect, beatings and diphtheria" (37). However, in a novel that has previously taken croquet as a serious moral quandary for all of its flirtatious potential, the introduction of "terrible stripes and weals of recent beatings" is shocking and, according to Janice Fiamengo, a "narrative indictment [against Rachel] that seems, to a modern reader, stunningly excessive" (Yonge *CW* 337, 82). Rachel's story departs from "The Girl Being Taught a Lesson;" Rachel is far more unfortunate than Emma, to the same degree that her causes are far more unfortunate than Harriet. Rachel's vocational failings are central to the plot of *Clever Woman*.

Rachel's "sweet hypocrisy," her transformation from ardent philanthropist to ordinary married woman, emphasizes how terribly wrong Rachel was for attempting to create her own vocation, further defining Yonge's concept of vocation. The most significant mistake Rachel makes (if not the most tragic), and one that critics do not class with the other corrections the novel doles out, is that she was "clever" as in the title, or, in other words, that Rachel was the exception to the Victorian rule that the female vocation is to marriage:

> Rachel had had the palm of cleverness conceded to her ever since she could recollect, when she read better at three years old than her sister at five, and ever after, through the days of education, had enjoyed, and excelled in, the studies that were a toil to [Rachel's sister] Grace. Subsequently, while Grace had contented herself with the ordinary course of unambitious feminine life, Rachel had thrown herself into the process of self-education with all her natural energy. (Yonge *CW* 41)[55]

[55] Rachel's childhood cleverness mirrors Emma Woodhouse's facility above her elder sister Isabella.

Rachel, interprets her cleverness as exceptionality, the alternative to "the unambitious course of feminine life." While Rachel takes pride in her self-declared exceptionality, other characters mock and pity her for vaunting the sobriquet of "cleverness." Bessie observes to Ermine, "She has always been told she is the clever woman of the family, and what can she do but accept the position?" to which Ermine responds that Rachel may, "one day shake herself clear of her little absurdities" (Yonge *CW* 274). What Rachel takes seriously is a joke to other characters and is used as an insult in the aftermath of Rachel's failed philanthropy, when Colin claims, "'The Clever Woman has managed matters so sweetly, that they might just as well try her as [Mauleverer] for obtaining money on false pretenses" (Yonge *CW* 364). During the course of the trial, "clever" becomes a synonym with "dupe" (Yonge *CW* 387). Rachel has not only been duped by Mauleverer, but by her own process of discernment and sense of vocation. Rather than clever or exceptional, Rachel eventually proclaims herself to be "just like other women" and "an ordinary married woman" (Yonge *CW* 430, 516). The novel makes clear from the beginning that Rachel cannot be both vocational philanthropist and wife.

After her second, merely embarrassing *faux pas*, Rachel wonders aloud, "why [she is] fated to make such mistakes!" (Yonge *CW* 313). "Fated" tellingly erases Rachel's choice in the matter. It is as if Yonge wants to make an example of Rachel in the most extreme manner. The same critics who note the excessiveness of Yonge's discipline of Rachel bring our attention to the fact that these correctives detract from the realism of the narrative. Yonge's violent correction of Rachel is arguably better attributed to her ideological mission than the needs of the plot. A Victorian reviewer characterizes Yonge as a consistently violent narrator*:* "Having brought before us one or more fine creatures, she beats them; she binds them; she lets her other inferior creatures make butts of them; she sticks pins into them; she impales them; she makes them declare it is 'so comfortable' to be impaled; she calls upon us to congratulate them; then, in triumph, she bears them out of our sight"

("Two Recent Novels" 55). Nineteenth-century reviewers agree that Yonge's treatment of her heroine is harsh. *The Athenaeum* writes that "We are, of course, rather glad at first to see the haughty Rachel 'taken down' a little; but we feel a touch of compassion when she has fallen to this fearful pitch of degradation" ("The Clever Woman of the Family" 489). *The Saturday Review* writes that "it is worthwhile reflecting whether this most unpleasant heroine is a fair representation of the people whom she is meant to imitate. If this is not parody, but a truthful image of what a young lady must come to if she ventures to aspire to do practical good, … the lesson is rather startling" ("The Clever Woman of the Family" 419). *The Saturday Review* accuses Yonge of bordering on caricature, but given the author's earnest tone, notes that Rachel's punishment has gone too far.

Given that Rachel's lesson is irksome to Victorian and modern readers alike, and detracts from the realism of the novel, what is its purpose? The bland conclusion of Yonge's novel refers readers back to the thrilling and sensational trial and child abuse at its center for confirmation of Rachel's vocation and a definition of vocational singleness. If Rachel is vehemently *not* a vocational single woman, as is "startlingly" and even cruelly apparent to readers, this discovery is also deeply disappointing to Rachel. Moreover, her lack of a vocation does not guarantee happiness in marriage. Even so, it also leaves open the possibility that *other* heroines are vocationally single. Rather than disregard Yonge's ideology, such a reading focuses on the novel's radical center as its contribution to defining the plot of vocational singleness.

"DIVERTED FROM GREAT PURPOSE": RACHEL'S SINGULAR MARRIAGE PLOT

Early in the novel, Rachel is tempted by what she (mistakenly) thinks is Colin Keith's romantic interest in her. While working on a letter writing campaign for her charity, and apparently also indulging in fantasies about writing "Mrs." on the return address, Rachel rationalizes: "She had

so much on her hands that it would be a public misfortune if any one man's private domestic love should monopolize her; and yet, such was this foolish world, the Honourable Mrs. Colin Keith would be a more esteemed lady patroness than Miss Rachel Curtis" (Yonge *CW* 230). Rachel's rationale contains a choice: dedication to public or private, a cause or one man, even as she hypothesizes (against Yonge's own ideology and the novel's claims) that bringing together these two missions would be more effective. Though misguided, Rachel's philanthropy provides her with a serious sense of fulfillment, one that allows her to choose it *over* marriage. After embarking on her projects, Rachel observes: "Never since she had grown up to be a thinking woman had Rachel been so happy as with this outlet to her activity and powers of managing" (Yonge *CW* 231). And due to this sense of satisfaction, she reasons, "Best to have done with Colin Keith now that her mission had come to find her" (Yonge *CW* 232). The choice between marriage and mission is what elevates vocation, as Rachel realizes it is singular, exclusive and rare:

> but now her mission had found her out, and she did not want to be drawn aside from it. Colonel Keith might have many perfections; but alike as Scotsman, soldier, and High-Churchman, he was likely to be critical of the head of the F.U.E.E., and matters had gone too far now for her to afford to doubt, or to receive a doubting master. Moreover, it would be despicable to be diverted from a great purpose by a courtship like any ordinary woman; nor must marriage settlements come to interfere with her building and endowment of the asylum, and ultimate devotion of her property thereunto. (Yonge *CW* 242)

Yonge asserts that marriage and a mission are incompatible: husbands are likely to disapprove (or at least interfere with opinions and guidance) and married women lose access to the private funds they could have used to support their projects. Further, "it would be despicable to be diverted from a great purpose by a courtship like any ordinary woman." In other words, it is too predictable to marry

and too predictable to fuss over choosing not to. Rachel evaluates her actions alongside those of a heroine in a novel to discover that, "After all, it was not so dreadful as people would have one believe, it was no such wrench as novels describe to make up one's mind to prefer a systematically useful life to an agreeable man" (Yonge *CW* 267-268). If Yonge is a conventional and even a conservative moralist, she is a radical plotter: Rachel avoids having a predictable marriage plot (even if she later claims to be "ordinary") *or* becoming a predictable single woman.

Rachel eventually discovers that all her daydreaming about Colin and about the romance of forsaking him for her higher mission is imaginary – Colin has been Ermine's long-lost lover all along. The realization forces her to confess that "her sacrifice had been snatched away, and a cloud placed in its stead" (Yonge *CW* 275). This "sacrifice" helped bolster Rachel's sense of vocation. If she is seen as available for marriage and forsakes it to pursue another vocation, her singleness is not merely happenstance. When this sacrifice is "snatched away," Yonge gives readers one of many hints that Rachel is mistaken about her calling, that it is, to return to Greg's language, "artificial," and will, indeed, become a "fearful and fatal error."

Rachel does eventually marry, and long before the novel concludes: her marriage is followed by the conclusion of the trial, the return of Ermine's brother Edward Williams, her sister-in-law Bessie Keith's death by croquet, Ermine's marriage, Alick's uncle Lord Keith's death, and the birth of Alick and Rachel's daughter, Una. Occurring off-page, nestled in the interval between two chapters, Rachel's marriage is a non-event, bringing neither conclusion nor resolution to the novel. While her marriage may happen hastily, in the gap between chapters in the middle of the novel, her process of coming to terms with it is leisurely, filling the final hundred-plus pages. Placing Rachel's marriage in the middle has two effects: it is comparatively bland and uninteresting next to the sensational trial still underway, and it resolves *nothing,* taking marriage out of its typical role.

Rachel arrives at her honeymoon disappointed by the conventionality of her life, which does not seem to be the result of choice. Rachel's' decision to accept Alick emphasizes her need for protection rather than love of Alick. Audrey Fessler glosses Rachel's options, writing that: "Rachel's regretful tone indicates that Yonge was aware of the pain some women felt at being forced into marriage and motherhood. And yet Yonge seems intent on showing, through Rachel, that there were no viable alternatives to these "commonplace" Victorian roles" (Fessler 52-53). If Rachel needs Alick's help in the aftermath of the failed school, she must marry him, an interpretation that gives little real significance to Rachel's conversion. Laurie Langbauer agrees, writing that, "although Rachel does marry, that marriage brings no climax or epiphany: Her life, and her novel, simply continue" (Langbauer 83). Placing Rachel's humbling and marriage at the center of the text makes this anything but a conventional marriage plot (in which marriage resolves by uniting), but a drama of choice and its consequences.

Rachel, "most forbearing" and "holding herself back" concludes the novel as an "ordinary married woman" in a way that is almost cringe-worthy to modern readers (Yonge *CW* 544). And yet, recalling that the ending is another middle suggests the potential for defiance *beyond* the tamest of final chapters. In the last chapter alone, Rachel works alongside her husband on another project, a home for convalescents; she admits to becoming impassioned about the cause of women whose marriages have not been recognized by the military; and, perhaps most promising, Rachel and Alick's daughter Una threatens to become another Rachel. Una is referred to as a "little witch" who has "deluded" and "beguiled" her more timid friend, Ermine's son, into a crowd; her parents alternately refer to Una as a "bright, forward child" and the next "Clever Woman of the family" (Yonge *CW* 544, 546). Even as Rachel and Alick agree to discipline Una's cleverness to avoid the pitfalls of Rachel's past, Una's characterization as a "forward child" moves in direct opposition to

the energy of Rachel "holding herself back." Reading analeptically permits us to imagine Rachel and Una attaching themselves to new causes, remaining clever women.

By placing her decision in the middle of the novel, Yonge emphasizes discernment and the right kind of vocational plot, not marriage. While Rachel's concluding pronouncements are infuriating and even unbelievable, (as when she hopes in the final lines that her daughter never be out of her husband's influence, "I should have been much better if I had had either father or brother to keep me in order" [Yonge *CW* 547]), the form of her plot suggests that vocational plots are available and laudable, just not for Rachel. Both Dorice Williams Elliott and Talia Schaffer agree that *The Clever Woman of the Family* retains the possibility that other women could have vocational plots, but carefully defines how true vocations are determined and monitored. Elliott writes that Yonge's vocational plot, "establishes domestic virtues as primary and subordination to male authority as necessary to the proper exercise of any ambitious aspirations. It also clearly represents the tension between acting on these aspirations and gaining erotic fulfillment" ("Angel" 174). Schaffer, noting the examples of the hard-working Williams sisters claims, "The novel strongly supports women's right to work but insists that it be the right kind of work, performed in the right way" (*RR* 235). Yonge's corpus contains many examples of women who work according to her definition of vocation and are rewarded with fulfilling vocational plots. These realized vocational plots take a different form: without conflict, they never rise above subplot.

ALL TOO "ORDINARY"? ETHEL MAY, GERALDINE UNDERWOOD, AND HONORA CHARLECOTE

Mrs. Rachel Keith begins to seem like an outsider among Yonge's female characters including Ethel May in *The Daisy Chain* (1856), Honora Charlecote in *Hopes and Fears, or Scenes from the Life of a Spinster* (1860), and Geraldine Underwood in *The Pillars of the House* (1873), all of whom

successfully pursue fulfilling careers. In order to better understand Rachel's error in discernment, it is helpful to turn to these other women, who, in addition to remaining vocational celibates, all occupy less central roles in their respective novels. As the titles indicate, *The Clever Woman of the Family* revolves around one central character, Rachel, even if she is surrounded by a large supporting cast. In *The Daisy Chain* and *The Pillars of the House,* both titles allude to a large family of connected and dependent siblings; Ethel is one of ten and Geraldine is one of thirteen. Subtitled *Scenes from the Life of a Spinster, Hopes and Fears* uses intermittent scenes from Honora's life to bookend the fates of her adoptive children and their relatives. Truly vocational spinsterhood, in Yonge's work, is attended by less conflict, and Yonge uses large casts of characters to accompany vocational plots that provide one subplot of a multi-plot work.[56]

[56] For more on Yonge and the chronicle form, see Maia McAleavey, "The Radical Boredom of Realism: Charlotte Yonge and the Family Chronicle."

THE DAISY CHAIN

OR

ASPIRATIONS

A Family Chronicle

BY

CHARLOTTE M. YONGE

ILLUSTRATED BY J. PRIESTMAN ATKINSON

London
MACMILLAN AND CO.
AND NEW YORK
1895

Figure Seventeen. The title page to *The Daisy Chain* illustrated by J. Preistman Atkinson is a singular example depicting a crowd and an act of service. In this illustration, charity is the defining event of the novel, which is about a family, rather than one character. Yonge, Charlotte M. *The Daisy Chain or Aspirations: A Family Chronicle.* Macmillan and Co, 1895.

The plot of Ethel May in *The Daisy Chain* is a straightforward example of the plot of vocational singleness. Ethel vows early in the novel to build a church. She pursues her religious mission from the beginning of the book to the end, and Yonge's narrative trajectory for this vocational spinster mirrors in some ways the marriage plot: many serendipitous events foreshadow Ethel's eventual union with the community she dedicates her life to, and the novel ends in a religious ceremony in the form of the dedication of a church. As the novel opens, Yonge's heroine Ethel May and her brother Richard make a charitable visit to the neighboring, working-class village of Cocksmoor. While there, Ethel is inspired by the need for a church and Sunday school. When they return home, Ethel and her ten siblings learn that their mother has been killed and sister paralyzed in a carriage accident. Ethel vows to see out her philanthropic plans: "I said … I would go on doing and striving, and trying, till this place was properly cared for, and has a church and a clergyman. I believe it was a vow, Richard, I do believe it was, – and if one makes one, one must keep it. There it is. So, I can't give money, I have but one pound in the world, but I have time, and I would make that useful, if you would help me" (Yonge *DC* 50). In offering her "time" to this philanthropic vocation as a young woman, Ethel has less time for romantic pursuits in the pages ahead. In fact, when Norman explains to Ethel that her older sister Margaret will be less interested in the project once she has a beau, (saying "Why, it is what they always say. Everybody can't be first, and Ernescliffe has the biggest half of her, I can see"), a young Ethel declares that she will not have a lover if it means decreasing her commitment to Cocksmoor or her family (Yonge *DC* 269). Yonge makes it clear that Ethel's vow takes the place of marriage and is incompatible with marriage.

Ethel, like Rachel, has a chance at love, but rejects it wholeheartedly: she has previously predicted that she will not have a beau, and committed herself to live celibately after her sister's marriage. When she senses that a family friend is on the verge of proposing, she reflects on the vow she has already made to remain unmarried and shepherd her family and church-building project:

> That resolution [to remain single] came before her, but it had been unspoken; it could not be binding, and, if her notion were really right, the misty brilliant future of mutual joy dazzled her! But there was another side: her father oppressed and lonely, Margaret ill and pining, Mary, neither companion nor authority, the children running wild; and she, who had mentally vowed never to forsake her father, far away, enjoying her own happiness. 'Ah! That resolve had seemed easy enough when it was made, when,' thought Ethel, 'I fancied no one could care for me! Shame on me! Now is the time to test it! I must go home with papa.' (Yonge *DC* 369-370)

Even though Ethel sacrifices individual happiness for responsibility to home, the final pages of the novel revise her sense of fulfillment as she realizes that her family's need for her will dwindle, but consoles herself against the prospect of a "lonely life" with her sense of vocation, "What is it to me? … My course and aim are straight on, and He will direct my paths" (Yonge *DC* 564). In *The Daisy Chain*, vocation, whether to singleness or marriage, is apparent through the divine. Ethel's clarity about her calling results in making her less central. Her plot is one among many – Ethel's brother Harry is presumed lost at sea, her sister Flora struggles with an unhappy marriage and the death of a child, Margaret endures invalidism and the death of a fiancée. Placed alongside her siblings' struggles, Ethel's discernment is placid and relatively plotless

Geraldine Underwood in *The Pillars of the House* is one of thirteen children left orphaned. Though she is among the elder of the siblings, Geraldine's lameness prohibits her from fully assuming a parental role for the younger Underwoods. With relatively fewer family responsibilities, Geraldine spends her free time making art, progressing from designing Christmas cards with her brother Lance, to winning a prize for a life study, to having her art displayed in the Royal Academy. After the exhibit, she is commissioned to make a companion piece for which she will earn 150 pounds – the confirmation that her painting is not mere lady's amusement, but serious business.

Geraldine's disability seems to excuse her from the marriage market, and frees her to pursue another vocation. Her brother Felix, who considers that he must remain unmarried as the patriarch for his 12 siblings, thinks of Geraldine as his companion: "he had been so secure of her, too. She had seemed so set apart from marriage, so peculiarly dependent on him, that it had been to her that he had turned with a sort of certainty as his companion in the life of self-sacrifice that he knew to lie before him" (Yonge *PH* 433). Yet, strangely, it is Geraldine's art that motivates a proposal; one of her patrons makes her a marriage offer. Geraldine's first response is embarrassment and annoyance: "How very disagreeable it is that such things will happen; I thought, at any rate, that I was safe from them; and he was such an old man, and such a kind friend, that I was so proud of; and now I have vexed him so – and it is all over" (Yonge *PH* 442). She refuses claiming that she does not love the suitor. Further, Geraldine claims that her lack of love is even more of a reason to refuse because of her disability: she especially should have loved her husband who would have had to care for her. Geraldine demurs that she has work to do and something to occupy her: "If I had not learnt to work, and had not a work to do, I might try to think of freeing you from a burden" she tells her brother Felix (Yonge *PH* 445). Her work gives her the ability to choose her own plot.

The ideological progressiveness of Geraldine's vocation is measured. She is carefully marked as exempt from the lot of ordinary Victorian women by her skill and her disability. She draws a "parody of Raphael's School of Athens" populated by women "pervaded by" "vanity and vexation of spirit" and a companion set in a "cloister" where all of the women are in domestic harmony (Yonge *PH* 1202). The moral is clear: the only legitimate female vocations are available through the church. Like Ethel, Geraldine is one of many siblings whose struggles and challenges, though acute, do not rise to the level of plot because of her vocational clarity. To persist so certainly on the same path (work, not marriage), is to avoid narrative.

The title spinster of *Hopes and Fears,* Honora Charlecote, receives two offers of marriage in her youth, one from clergyman Owen Sandbrook to whom she promises herself before he goes to Canada for missionary work, and the second from her cousin, who she refuses based on her understanding with Owen. While in Canada, Owen marries another woman and returns after her death, ill, with two children in tow. While Honora no longer loves Owen, she does become attached to his children, first serving as a temporary and then a permanent guardian after his death. Honora revisits the possibility of marrying her cousin, but the diagnosis of an aneurism leaves all thoughts of romance aside. She inherits the family estate, and near total control of its operation and disposal. The failure of two marriage plots leaves Honora a mother with a career, a situation that sounds like the basis of a plot. However, after Part I, *Hopes and Fears* moves narrative attention away from Honora, focusing instead on her adoptive children and their cousins.[57] She provides occasional, gentle reminders of morality through the middle of the novel but makes only the briefest return in the final paragraphs.

Each of these heroines, though they enjoy the vocational plots Rachel dreamed of for herself, remains marginal because their plots lack a "radical middle." In the middle of *The Daisy Chain* and *The Pillars of the House,* Ethel and Geraldine persist in their respective celibate plots without seriously questioning their vocations. Honora disappears during the middle of *Hopes and Fears.* Because narrative attention and conflict are dispersed among other characters in the center of these texts, these characters all enjoy vocational plots, but are not indisputably *the* heroine of their respective novels. Though Rachel marries, her struggle with discernment makes her role central to the novel.

[57] Liggins writes that *Hopes and Fears* "foregrounds the role of the old maid," while also noting that the novel records the "moral development, flirtations, elopements, and courtships of the two children, their cousins and a neighboring family" (55). She may be the title character, but the plot is not Honora's

CONCLUSION

The clarity Yonge creates for her heroines, at the expense of making Rachel a sweet hypocrite, elevates the work of single women as *singular*. If cleverness in *The Clever Woman of the Family* indicates exceptionality to the rule of Victorian female lifestyles, then Yonge clears the ground of those who may *seem* to be exceptional single women. A single woman herself, it hardly makes sense that Yonge dismisses the idea of the exceptional single woman altogether, but makes a case that women cannot, like Rachel, declare themselves exceptional or select their own mission. Rather, singleness is a providential and exclusive state. Yonge's conduct book *Womankind* (1877) enforces a sense of singleness as ordained. She writes that "it is only as a Daughter of the Church that woman can have her place, or be satisfied as to her vocation" (5, 8). Ethel, Geraldine and Honora respond to such a vocation; Rachel admits to losing sight of her spiritual mission in the fervor for her charity school. Rachel's humbling preserves the idea of a vocational singleness even as it refuses such a calling to our Clever Woman. By guarding the attribution of vocation to singleness, Yonge contributes to defining the emerging plot of purposeful celibacy and carves out an exceptional place for herself as a single woman and a writer.

While the strictly religious nature of Yonge's approved vocations may seem as restrictive as the conventional marital ending, June Sturrock points out the feminist possibilities of even religiously defined vocation:

> The point is that while Jane [Eyre's] work leads her to human relationships, the work of Cherry Underwood and Ethel May leads them to God: and one advantage of God over man as a goal is that he is not likely to ask one to abandon one's serious pursuits to care for him… And statistically he is far less likely to distract one from one's serious pursuits by pregnancy. Yonge never presents a woman as frustrated

> because she is not married; she is far more likely to express the frustrations of being without appropriate work. (36)

Despite the conservative nature of Yonge's definition of vocation, in *Villette* and *The Clever Woman of the Family,* Brontë and Yonge emerge as equally radical writers if not equally progressive feminists. Reading these two protean texts and their challenging heroines *through the middle* of each novel uncovers plots more radical and unexpected than the typical marriage plot, and suggests a wealth of not only ideological, but also formal resistance to the lot of "ordinary married women" in the nineteenth-century novel.

CHAPTER THREE:

TAKING THE VOCATIONAL PLOT TO EXTREMES IN *MISS MACKENZIE* AND *MISS MARJORIBANKS*

Though the vocational plot reached peak prevalence in the 1860s, the vocational heroine was still considered a novelty.[58] Henry James wrote of Anthony Trollope's *Miss Mackenzie,* in which Trollope's heroine begins the novel at 35, "The subject has, at least, the charm of novelty… We had had heroines of many kinds, maidens in their teens, yea, even in their units, and matrons in their twenties, but as yet we had had no maidens in their thirties" (51). What is even more remarkable than a maiden heroine in her thirties is two: Margaret Mackenzie debuted the same year as Margaret Oliphant's Lucilla Marjoribanks, another heroine who remains unmarried into her thirties. In February 1865 *Miss Mackenzie* was published in two volumes by Chapman and Hall and *Miss Marjoribanks* began serialization in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Both novels further develop the plot of vocational singleness by taking the now-familiar pattern to extremes.

While Brontë and Yonge expanded the possibilities for single women by developing the drama of discernment in the vocational plot – the intractable choice, either but not both, between love and vocation – Trollope and Oliphant challenge the necessity of refusal with successive, multiple, and simultaneous marriage and vocational plots that rely on delay instead. Lucy and Rachel are allowed one plot at a time – necessarily and vocally disavowing other possibilities in radical,

[58] In addition to the two examples in this chapter, 1865 alone also saw the publication of Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* in which Alice Vavasor declines two different suitors and expresses a desire for a career and *The Clever Woman of the Family,* discussed in Chapter Two. In her book *The Angel Out of the House* (2002), Dorice Williams Elliott notes that novels about philanthropic women, often unmarried, were so popular in the 1860s "that the "'philanthropic heroine' could be said to rival the traditional 'romantic heroine' as a literary convention" (161). I argue that Elliott's philanthropic heroine is one subset of the era's vocational heroines.

climacteric middles. Because neither Margaret Mackenzie or Lucilla Marjoribanks refuse marriage absolutely, Miss Mackenzie has many successive and overlapping plots seemingly by accident and Miss Marjoribanks attempts to engineer a vocational plot and then a marriage plot exactly ten years later. Analeptic reading, which was necessary to locate the radical middles in vocational plots driven by choice and discernment is also helpful in this case to identify the places where Lucilla and Margaret's plots start and restart in the middle. This next development in the vocational plot builds on the development of choice – marriage *or* mission – achieved by writers like Brontë and Yonge by exploring the formal and ideological possibilities of different permutations of these female plots: mission *then* marriage, successive *missions* then marriage, alternating mission *and* marriage. By testing the limits of the vocational plot, *Miss Mackenzie* and *Miss Marjoribanks* expand its boundaries.

TROLLOPE'S *MISS MACKENZIE:* PROPOSALS AND PROFESSIONS

Old maid Margaret Mackenzie's plot includes multiple suitors and professions; she tries out every occupation known to spinsters, including caring for two invalid brothers, educating a young niece, investing, nursing, and charity work. The plot of *Miss Mackenzie* is composed both of numerous proposals (most refused, and one, finally accepted) and partial vocational plots. The repeated offers of marriage which are declined represent refusals of the marriage plot, while the plot twists that end Margaret's proposals and start and restart her vocational plot(s) suggest the innovation and wealth of narrative possibility available in its absence. Margaret is allowed successive and simultaneous plots.

Miss Mackenzie opens on a single woman of 35 who spent the last 15 years caring for her invalid brother. His recent death leaves her in possession of a considerable fortune. Reviewers were almost uniformly surprised (and dismayed) by Margaret's age. "Our most popular novelist," writes

one review, "has devoted two volumes to the outer and inner history of an excellent spinster of five-and-thirty" ("Belles Lettres" 283). Juliet McMaster writes that the reception of *Miss Mackenzie* was "cool," but it also seems that it was grudgingly accepting of the novel and of Margaret ("Introduction" unnumbered). *The London Review* agrees that it is "bold" for Trollope to ask readers to care about an old maid, continuing that, "Few writers could have imagined such a heroine" ("Miss Mackenzie" 387). Though not often the subject of scholarship, those modern scholars who write on *Miss Mackenzie* also focus on the unlikeliness of Margaret as a protagonist due to her age. Kay Heath looks specifically at mirror scenes to argue that Margaret's ability to see herself as young no matter her age posits aging as independent of time, a position that goes against cultural beliefs about menopause and female desire. Steven Amarnick writes that Margaret experiences a sexual awakening in middle age, daring to want not only security and companionship in marriage, but desire as well, noting that nineteenth-century writers struggled to depict desire in women who had exited their twenties. Focus on the choice of a 30-something protagonist as *the* innovation of *Miss Mackenzie* distracts us from Trollope's other formal innovations, made possible by Miss Mackenzie's unconventional character.

The novel opens with an awareness of the expectations for narratives about single women for which Tennyson's "Mariana" serves as a shorthand. Frequent references to "Mariana" suggest, falsely, that Margaret's story is confined to idleness, especially the 15 years spent caring for her brother before the novel opens:

> her life had been very weary. A moated grange in the country is bad enough for the life of any Mariana, but a moated grange in town is much worse. Her life in London had been altogether of the moated grange kind, and long before her brother's death it had been very wearisome to her. I will not say that she was always waiting for some one that came not, or that she declared herself to be a-weary, or that she

> wished that she were dead. But the mode of her life was as near that as prose may be near to poetry, or truth to romance. (Trollope *MM* 5)

The playful borrowing of Tennyson's language ("weary", "moated grange") quickly establishes the conventions that Trollope uses as a shorthand for singleness and exposes as lacking. Comparison to a stanza from Tennyson's poem shows that prose can be only so similar to poetry:

> Her tears fell with the dews at even;
> Her tears fell ere the dews were dried;
> She could not look on the sweet heaven,
> Either at morn or eventide.
> After the flitting of the bats,
> When thickest dark did trance the sky,
> She drew her casement-curtain by,
> And glanced athwart the glooming flats.
> She only said, "The night is dreary,
> He cometh not," she said;
> She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
> I would that I were dead!" (lines 13-24)

The narrator's colloquial tone in phrases like "bad enough" and "much worse" in the novel sounds decidedly different from Tennyson's verse: "Her tears fell ere the dews at even;/ Her tears fell ere the dews were dried." The narrator's syntax in phrases like "I will not say that she was always waiting for someone that came not" is purposefully and playfully long and prosaic compared to "he cometh not, she said." In prose form, the rhythmic repetition of Tennyson's poem looks meandering, and according to one reviewer, Trollope's novel is a "monstrously prosaic version of Mariana in the moated grange" ("Miss Mackenzie" 265). "Prosaic" is also the word Juliet McMaster uses to describe Margaret's lot in her introduction to *Miss Mackenzie*: "In aligning Margaret Mackenzie's story with those of Griselda, and Cinderella, and Mariana, … Trollope is making clear his vision of the potential for romance in the most prosaic and mundane lives" (unnumbered). While explicit comparison to "Mariana" invites a description of *Miss Mackenzie* as prosaic compared to Tennyson's verse, a "monstrously prosaic" version of a prosaic life dares to claim that the "ordinary" is not so.

By playfully exaggerating of a novel about a middle-aged spinster, Trollope invites readers to rethink preconceptions of single women in prose.

The narrator's fears for Margaret's plot potential are echoed by her family, who: "had declared her to be a silent, stupid old maid. As a silent, stupid old maid, the Mackenzies of Rubb and Mackenzie were disposed to regard her," even after she inherits (Trollope *MM* 9). Margaret worries similarly about her own affinity to Tennyson's Mariana, explicitly working to avoid the "lifeless life" that so many expect of her (Trollope *MM* 26). In free indirect discourse, Margaret considers, but dismisses the possibility of befriending a clergyman, giving all her money to the charity of his choice, and waiting around to die:

> Would it not have been easier for her – easier and more comfortable – to have abandoned all ideas of the world, and have put herself at once under the tutelage and protection of some clergyman who would have told her how to give away her money, and prepare herself in the right way for a comfortable death-bed? There was much in this view of life to recommend it. It would be very easy, and she had the necessary faith. Such a clergyman, too, would be a comfortable friend, and, if a married man, might be a very dear friend. And there might, probably, be a clergyman's wife, who would go about with her, and assist in that giving away of her money. Would not this be the best life after all? But in order to reconcile herself altogether to such a life as that, it was necessary that she should be convinced that the other life was abominable, wicked, and damnable. (Trollope *MM* 27)

The refrain of "easy" and "comfortable" imply the conventionality of this narrative mode – the story of the single woman too afraid to handle her own affairs (like Miss Matty, who Mary Smith and her father carefully shield from knowledge of her real financial situation in *Cranford*) and Margaret's futile attempts to convince herself of the appeal of ease and comfort at the expense of plot. Margaret is

offered two options: a watered-down version of the vocational charity plot where all of her action is handed over to a clergyman and his wife, and "the other life" in the world.

Instead of abdicating her money and her plot, the chapter "Miss Mackenzie Commences her Career" opens a story that alternates between potential marriage plots and other plots – most of which remain incomplete. A brief summary illustrates the fullness of Margaret's plot in contrast to Mariana-like expectations. After her elder brother's death, Miss Mackenzie considers marrying in the long term, but in the short term takes lodging in Littlebath and brings along her niece Susanna, whom she promises to educate, and, if Margaret should marry, whom she promises to provide with 500 pounds. Margaret also invests in her brother Tom and Mr. Rubb's business (Rubb and Mackenzie), advancing them a large sum on the faith of the family before mortgage papers can be made out. Over the holidays, she travels to visit her cousins the Balls in London. The widowed John Ball proposes to Margaret before the visit is up. She refuses him (much to his mother's dismay, since he and his nine children could benefit from Margaret's money) because she does not love him. During this trip, she learns that her money has been mismanaged by Tom and Mr. Rubb, but decides not to press the matter.

Upon returning to Littlebath, Margaret is pursued by Mr. Maguire, who Mrs. Stumfold, wife of the local clergyman, insultingly claims is just after Margaret's money and is already attached to another woman. Mr. Rubb also courts her. She asks Mr. Maguire for two weeks to think, and then gets a telegram that her brother Tom is dying. She returns to London where she learns that her money with Rubb and Mackenzie is completely lost. As he is dying, Tom asks Margaret to care for his family, meaning Margaret cannot entertain Mr. Rubb or Mr. Maguire's offers. She recommits herself to singleness and using what is left of her fortune to care for Tom's family. But Tom's death is followed shortly by the revelation that there has been a mistake with the inheritance: all of her money actually should have gone to John Ball. John offers to marry Margaret for love even if she is

now a pauper and she readily accepts. Mr. Maguire arrives at the Ball's residence claiming that he and Margaret are engaged (even though she had decisively broken it off in letters). She assumes that her engagement to John is broken and goes to live with a former servant. Meanwhile, lawyers continue to unravel the case of the will and Mr. Maguire publishes a story in the papers, "The Lion and the Lamb," accusing John Ball of cheating Margaret out of her money. He claims Margaret was engaged to him and then John Ball, tainting both of their reputations. A distant cousin arrives and facilitates a reconciliation between Margaret and John, and the two are married. This ending goes against Trollope's own explicit attempt to write "with a desire to prove that a novel may be produced without any love" (*Autobiography* 118-119). Trollope abdicates responsibility for the direction of his plot, suggesting that the marriage plot ideology is so overwhelming that the novel concludes that way *despite* his best efforts: "even in this attempt it breaks down before the conclusion. In order that I might be strong in my purpose, I took for my heroine a very unattractive old maid, who was overwhelmed with money troubles; but even she was in love before the end of the book, and made a romantic marriage with an old man" (*Autobiography* 118-119). By highlighting a "breakdown" before the conclusion, Trollope encourages us to read analeptically for the moment where Miss Mackenzie's story veers from unconventional to conventional.

"NOT PERFECT OR WHOLE": MARGARET'S VOCATIONAL PLOTS

The plot of *Miss Mackenzie* follows a pattern in which it restarts multiple time as Margaret considers marrying, and then is pulled back into another vocation. When presented with her first proposal from old lover Harry Handcock, Margaret is "not prepared to sacrifice herself and her new freedom, and her new power and her new wealth, to Mr. Harry Handcock" (Trollope *MM* 12-13). The listing of repeated "and her new" makes explicit all she has gained, and all she has to lose by

marrying so early in the narrative. Refusing Harry Handcock launches Margaret on her first vocational plot, in which she joins the ranks of Littlebath bluestockings. Her brother's business partner Mr. Rubb also proposes, but his proposal only confuses Margaret's professional relationship with him, in which he mismanages her investments. In fact, a pattern develops in which, rather than providing a marriage plot, Trollope uses suitors to create other plots for Margaret: rather than accepting Harry Handcock, Margaret enjoys social freedom in Littlebath; rather than accepting John Ball's first proposal, Margaret endures a disinheritance plot; rather than accepting Mr. Rubb's proposal, Trollope flirts with an investment plot for Margaret, and rather than accepting Mr. Maguire's proposal, Margaret's plot becomes a periodical scandal.

After each proposal, Margaret is brought back again into the vocational plot, denouncing marriage for celibacy and work. After guiding Susanna in Littlebath and entertaining the offers already mentioned, she is pulled away from all of them by her brother Tom's illness which requires her to again assume the role of caregiver (before for her elder brother, and now for her younger): "Margaret promised that the seven children should not want. As she did so, she made certain rapid calculations in her head. She must give up Mr. Maguire. There was no doubt about that. She must give up all idea of marrying any one, and, as she thought of this, she told herself that she was perhaps well rid of a trouble" (Trollope *MM* 186). Her resolution seems like a providential move when Margaret naturally reassumes the role of nurse, "She, if she be such a one as our Miss Mackenzie, arranges her bottles with precision; knows exactly how to place her chair, her lamp, and her teapot; settles her cap usefully on her head, and prepares for the night's work certainly with satisfaction" (Trollope *MM* 182-183). Margaret's aptitude and satisfaction suggest that this, finally, is her vocation.

If nursing two brothers seems like self-sacrifice, Margaret has quiet artistic aspirations during *both* of her caregiving stints, doubling her vocation as selfless service and self-expression. In the

years spent nursing her older brother she writes, "quires of manuscript in which [she] had written her thoughts and feelings – hundreds of rhymes which had never met any eye but her own" going on to note that she has also written "outspoken words of love contained in letters which had never been sent" (Trollope *MM* 9). She rediscovers the remaining pages when caring for Tom:

> She had brought a little writing-desk with her that she had carried from Arundel Street to Littlebath, and this she had with her in the sick man's bedroom. Sitting there through the long hours of night, she would open this and read over and over again those remnants of the rhymes written in her early days which she had kept when she made her great bonfire. There had been quires of such verses, but she had destroyed all but a few leaves before she started for Littlebath. What were left, and were now read, were very sweet to her, and yet she knew that they were wrong and meaningless. What business had one as she to talk of the sphere's tune and the silvery moon, of the bright stars shining and hearts repining? She would not for worlds have allowed any one to know what a fool she had been – either Mrs. Tom, or John Ball, or Mr. Maguire, or Miss Todd. She would have been covered with confusion if her rhymes had fallen into the hands of any one of them.
>
> And yet she loved them well, as a mother loves her only idiot child. They were her expressions of the romance and poetry that had been in her; and though the expressions doubtless were poor, the romance and poetry of her heart had been high and noble. (Trollope *MM* 191-192)

The love she expresses returns us to the language of vocational service; Margaret is a virgin mother to a needy child. It is notable that we have heard of these papers only once before (after her first brother's death) and yet they have traveled to Littlebath, and now the Mackenzie home. Margaret's artistic ambitions are suggested to run always under the surface. Her interconnected, multilayered

vocations, not always visible to the reader, suggest the rich, vocational life that could be mistaken for prosaic, because it is not always readily transcribed to prose. These papers represent both the artistic inner life Margaret harbors, and her hopes of a future romantic plot. When she tears them, she rededicates herself (yet again) to single life. Doubling vocations – Margaret is at once a caretaker and a struggling artist, and as an artist a caretaker of fragile, newborn verse – puts almost excessive pressure on singular plots. Unmarried, Margaret has not one, but two plots at a time. This excess is characteristic of Margaret's story: she cares for not one, but two brothers; she discards and destroys her verse not once, but twice; she receives not one, but four proposals, many of them repeated; she reconsiders and then renounces her marital aspirations not once, but multiple times; and she moves in and out of fortune. Margaret has a plot that exceeds her family's knowledge and expectations, and the reader's, too.

Miss Mackenzie's circumstances, and the plot, change again when she learns she is disinherited. Margaret begins the vocational plot again. In this version, she is poor, friendless, and looks for a wage-earning occupation rather than a vocation. Nursing crosses that boundary, too: "She had declared to herself but lately that the work for which she was fittest was that of nursing the sick. Was it not possible that she might earn her bread in this way?" (Trollope *MM* 239). Her aunt suggests she will make a good companion: "She would do admirably for a companion to an old lady, because her manners are good, and she does not want much waiting upon herself" (Trollope *MM* 263). Each time Margaret is pulled away from a marriage plot, she considers a vocation – caregiver, companion, nurse, artist, investor – allowing her to explore the myriad options available to single women. The narrator declares, perhaps ironically, that though, "There is, I know, a feeling abroad among women that [they should] learn to take delight in the single state," the "truth of the matter" is much simpler, "A woman's life is not perfect or whole till she has added herself to a husband" (Trollope *MM* 136). The full-to-bursting plot of *Miss Mackenzie* suggests that Margaret's single life is

not "perfect or whole" because it lacks something, but because it exceeds the boundaries of marriage or vocational plots. When John Ball repeats his proposal, their romance is resolved in the language of work: "'You want to be a nurse; will you be my nurse?" (Trollope *MM* 270). Her marriage unites the "work for which she is fittest" with matrimony, challenging the convention of choice between marriage and mission in the vocational plot.

Margaret's final role as nurse and wife begs a comparison to that other famous nurse-wife, Jane Eyre. In the conclusion to Brontë's novel, Jane tells readers that nursing Rochester occupies all her "time and cares" (*JE* 542). Jane admits, after claiming that she and her husband are perfectly united, that her experience of nursing him is not as complete as he thinks: "And there was a pleasure in my services, most full, most exquisite, even though sad – because he claimed these services without painful shame or dampening humiliation. He loved me so truly, that he knew no reluctance in profiting by my attendance: he felt I loved him so fondly, that to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes" (Brontë *JE* 544). Is it *not* her sweetest wish? *Should* Rochester know reluctance and feel shame? Jane's hesitation regarding her own fulfillment stands in contrast to her certainty about St. John Rivers's vocation with which the novel closes, "unclouded" and "undaunted" (Brontë *JE* 545). To "profit," as Jane describes Rochester's position, from a wife's services is vexed. John Ball's easy solution that Margaret can be both nurse and wife belies that, for women, the combination of work and marriage is uneasy.

THE MIDDLE OF *MISS MARJORIBANKS*

Like Margaret Mackenzie, Lucilla Marjoribanks has multiple romantic and vocational plots. Unlike Margaret, whose multiple plots seemingly arise through circumstance (illness, inheritance, disinheritance), Lucilla's stated purpose is to engineer the sequence of her plots. Lucilla

Marjoribanks returns home from school at nineteen determined to spend the next ten years caring for her widowed father and establishing "society in Carlingford" before marrying just before she begins to "go off" (Oliphant *MM* 14, 61). She presides over Thursday "Evenings" at which Lucilla has a hand in various discoveries (an assumed name, an inheritance feud) and romances (the widowed Mrs. Mortimer and Mr. Beverley, alternately Mr. Cavendish and Lucilla and Mr. Cavendish and Barbara Lake) among the people of Grange Lane. Lucilla's social project is successful and the ten-year interval Lucilla declared for herself to remain with her father passes in the break between Volumes II and III of the novel.

In Volume III, Lucilla is (to her own surprise) not on the verge of marriage, and thus chooses another occupation for the time-being, supporting newcomer Ashburton in his run for MP against the returned Cavendish. Her father dies unexpectedly before the election, then, by a "second inconceivable reverse of fortune" is discovered to be ruined (Oliphant *MM* 404). Lucilla considers her options as a single woman (parish work, a House of Mercy, time abroad?) when Ashburton's win virtually guarantees that she will become wife of the MP for Carlingford, her longtime goal. However, cousin Tom Marjoribanks, Lucilla's first-ever suitor, returns from India at the exact moment of Ashburton's proposal and to everyone's surprise, Lucilla accepts Tom instead. The two purchase the family estate of Marchbank where Lucilla anticipates another society to improve.

Writing of *Miss Marjoribanks* as a version of the *bildungsroman*, Linda Peterson argues that "the plot Lucilla follows is unabashedly conventional" (68). Peterson goes on to summarize Lucilla's plot quickly:

> she remains in school to study domestic management and political economy; then she returns home to "be a comfort to dear Papa"; she fulfills her responsibility to Carlingford society with great success; she is wooed by several suitors, one her dull, if devoted cousin Tom, another the more polished, if also more dangerous Mr.

> Cavendish; she is deserted by Cavendish (and at least two other beaux) and so must face society according to the best principles of her feminine "philosophy"; in the end, after considerable trials, Lucilla marries the appropriate man and finds her place in the world. (68)

The semi-colons with which Peterson connects Lucilla's plot give the effect of continuity: Lucilla's is one story, event follows event. From the edges, the beginning and the ending, Lucilla's education and marriage, her plot can pass for conventional. But from the middle, Lucilla's declared period of singleness and her multiple, successful careers, that is not the case. Lucilla's attempt to engineer a successive vocational and marriage plot, and the failure of her machinations that results in Lucilla starting *another* vocational plot, is anything but conventional.[59] Like the vocational plots we have already looked at, *Miss Marjoribanks* contains the two events that define the plot of vocational singleness: a commitment to remain unmarried and another occupation in its place. Also like other vocational plots, these events happen in the middle of the novel, making them easy to miss in what otherwise looks like a marriage plot. Oliphant writes to her publisher Mr. Blackwood who complained of the "hardness of tone" directed at Lucilla:

> I have a weakness for Lucilla, and to bring a sudden change upon her character and break her down into tenderness would be like one of Dickens's maudlin repentances, when he makes Mr Dombey *trinquer* with Captain Cuttle. Miss M. must be one and indivisible, and I feel pretty sure that my plan is right. It is the middle of a story that is always the trying bit – the two ends can generally take care of themselves. (*Letters* 205)

[59] Talia Schaffer has more recently described *Miss Marjoribanks* as "a rarity: a comic, unsentimental account of a woman's desire for a career" (*RR* 220).

As in Peterson's reading, Oliphant locates convention in the beginning and ending but reorients Blackwood analeptically to the middle, the "trying bit" where convention cannot suffice. Analeptic reading allows us to see the starting and restarting of the vocational plot in the middle.

"WE MUST LEAVE THAT TO PROVIDENCE"

If the novel is not immediately recognizable as innovative it could be because Lucilla disguises the unconventionality of her desires by attributing them to providence. When her school friends observe that Lucilla cannot "be a comfort to dear Papa" all her life, implying that she must eventually marry, Lucilla responds, "'We must leave that to Providence'… with a sense of paying a compliment to Providence in intrusting it with such a responsibility" (Oliphant *MM* 17). This is the first of over 30 invocations of providence Lucilla and other characters make. The narrator's explanation of Lucilla "paying a compliment to Providence" and "intrusting" to providence suggest how the term is used by Lucilla and others to camouflage their own desires, disappointments, and agency.

The uses of providence in *Miss Marjoribanks* are profuse and broad; Lucilla uses providence as an excuse for her own wants, big and small, from household decorations to social occasions to marriage. One of her first acts upon taking up her residence in Carlingford at nineteen is to redecorate the Doctor's drawing-room which has remained the same since he was married 22 years ago, a neglect of fashion that Lucilla declares to be "going against Providence" (Oliphant *MM* 46). Calling on providence as a part of the argument for redecorating the drawing-room empties providence of its divine intention and brings it to the level of the personal, the quotidian. In another instance, Lucilla attributes the perfect attendance at her Thursday *Evenings* to providence: "But Providence, which had always taken care of her, as Lucilla piously concluded, had spared her the

trial in that form [low attendance]. Up to this moment, it had always providentially happened that all the principal people in Carlingford were quite well and disengaged on the 'evening"' (Oliphant *MM* 114). What is attributed to providence is perhaps Lucilla's own importance (everyone is well and disengaged because Lucilla's evenings are considered important to partake in, no one would dream of missing them) and also skill (as a hostess, a social leader). Lucilla's attribution to providence could suggest her savvy in not giving herself too much credit – it would be unbecoming – on the other hand, it suggests that she does not recognize her skill as such.

Lucilla is not the only one who invokes providence, it is the communal language of Carlingford. Neighbor Mrs. Chiley tells Lucilla after her first successful *Evening* that she "should be very thankful to Providence for" her facility as a hostess (Oliphant *MM* 59). Mr. Bury when making the suggestion that Mrs. Mortimer can serve as a governess for Lucilla states that the widow had made the request for work to him "by a singular providence" and Mrs. Mortimer thanks providence for "giving me such a home" when Lucilla finds work for her as a schoolmistress (Oliphant *MM* 66, 287). In many cases – Lucilla's facility, Miss Mortimer's home (which I will discuss in more detail later) – providence is the term used for Lucilla's work and success. In all cases, overuse of the term makes clear that the novel does not give any credence to its divine valence.

The frequent invocation of providence for concerns trivial and important alike makes the term less meaningful, but Oliphant goes even further toward vacating the word of meaning by having the Doctor suggest that providence makes mistakes. Doctor Marjoribanks frequently laments the "blunders of Providence" that gave him Lucilla and his sister-in-law Tom, rather than the reverse (Oliphant *MM* 43).[60] When he anticipates an eventual marriage between Lucilla and Tom, he blames

[60] While the "blunders of Providence" introduce the role of agency in the novel, Oliphant is also self-aware about the role of accident in fiction, writing of Lucilla's year abroad "so little do we know what momentous issues may hang upon the most possible accident! Had that energetic traveller slipped but an inch further upon the *mer de glace* – had she taken that other step which she was with

providence doubly: "Oddly enough, though he had just been finding fault with Providence for not giving him a son instead of a daughter, he was not at all delighted nor grateful when Providence put before him this simple method of providing himself with the son he wanted" (Oliphant *MM* 48). To attribute mistakes to providence is an oxymoron. Providence, by definition, does not make mistakes. To suggest that it does demonstrates the way characters in *Miss Marjoribanks* use providence as an excuse for their own disappointments and wants – the Doctor wants a son but he would also be disappointed in Tom as a son-in-law. Providence is not infallible in the novel because it is a cover for individual desires and efforts.

In perhaps her most skillful invocation, Lucilla uses Providence to declare her ten years of celibacy, which sanitizes her choice to remain single and her failure to wed in ten years, while additionally allowing her to change her mind. Returning to Lucilla's first use of the word, Lucilla tells a school friend of her marital aspirations, "We must leave that to Providence" (Oliphant *MM* 17). She is able to disguise her own desire to remain single as something out of her control. Later she uses providence to reserve the right to change her mind: "She had not at the present moment the least inclination to get married, as she truly said; it would, indeed, to tell the truth, disturb her plans considerably; but still, if such was the intention of Providence, and if it was to the Member for Carlingford, Lucilla felt that it was still credible that everything might be for the best" (Oliphant *MM*

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difficulty persuaded not to take on the Wengern Alp – there would have been an end of all the hopes of social importance for Carlingford. But the good fairies took care of Lucilla, her mission, and saved her from the precipice and crevasses; and instinctively the air at home got note of what was coming, and whispered the news mysteriously through the keyholes" (Oliphant *MM* 22). "Good fairies" and "news" arriving "mysteriously through the keyholes" wink at Oliphant's agency as a writer – her story requires Lucilla's safe return from Alpine exploration in a way that foreshadows Lucilla's agency in her plot. Lucilla, in attempting to engineer sequential plots, is attuned to choices that will provide her with the most expansive occupations.

81). Lucilla hedges her earlier statement first by insisting on her integrity ("truly," "to tell the truth") then creates an opening ("intention of Providence") to change her mind.

But what would be "credible"? Other characters would have no difficulty finding her marriage – to the MP or anyone – "credible" because they find her claims to singleness *incredible*. Mrs. Chiley responds to Lucilla's declaration of singleness by saying, "Oh yes; I have heard girls say that before… but they always changed their minds. You would not like to be an old maid, Lucilla" (Oliphant *MM* 61). The Doctor does not take Lucilla's intention seriously either: "it never occurred to him that that filial devotion, though beautiful to contemplate, would preserve Lucilla's heart from the ordinary dangers of youth, or that she was at all in earnest in postponing all matrimonial intentions until she was nine-and-twenty and had begun to 'go off' a little" (Oliphant *MM* 52). And he repeats his opinion again, after she has in fact remained single until the age of 29, "I don't think you are cut out for a single woman, for my part" (Oliphant *MM* 392). What the doubters misunderstand is that Lucilla does not remain single for "filial devotion" or for the stereotypical lot of an "old maid," but in order to pursue an occupation. Lucilla continues her imaginary consideration of the MP for Carlingford as a potential husband: "To marry a man in his position would not, after all, be deranging her plans to any serious extent. Indeed, it would, if his hopes were realized, constitute Lucilla a kind of queen in Carlingford, and she could not but feel that, under these circumstances, it might be a kind of duty to reconsider her resolution" (Oliphant *MM* 81).[61] Lucilla thinks of the wife of MP as an occupation in itself. Lucilla always imagines that her

[61] Melissa Schaub writes of Lucilla as a version of Queen Victoria, noting that it was difficult for Victorian women to imitate the queen because queenly qualities were often about image rather than action, and there was not a set way to perform queenliness for middle class aspirants to the ultimate model of Victorian womanhood: "Oliphant rewrites queenliness to emphasize this gap between being and doing. By transforming queenliness from a myth or image into a narrative (as lived and imagined by Lucilla), Oliphant explores the prosaic possibilities for queenly power available to middle-class women while at the same time highlighting their limitations" (204). Schaub argues that Lucilla is a commentary on critiques of Victoria's mourning for Albert (213).

singleness, while purposeful, will be limited, as it sets the stage for a subsequent plot. What must be "credible," then, is her plot – a successive story of vocation and marriage.

Lucilla's attribution to providence connects the novel directly to the debate about nineteenth-century single women and work. Returning to the terms of the debate I framed in Chapter One, thinkers, including, most notably, W.R. Greg, insisted on the distinction between natural celibates – those women providentially intended to remain single and do vocational work for the common good – and contingent singles, those who were single due to demographic accident or misfortune and doomed to lead unfulfilling lives in the absence of marriage or another vocation. By invoking the term providence to defend her initial singleness and explain her eventual marriage, Lucilla disguises choice as vocation. The narrator suggests that providence is another term for agency: "Miss Marjoribanks was of the numerous class of religionists who keep up civilities with heaven, and pay all the proper attentions, and show their respect for the divine government in a matter befitting persons who know the value of their own approbation" (Oliphant *MM* 17). By adhering to conventions that attribute female lots to providence, Lucilla can set her own plot and justify it with reference to providence. This habit when used frequently reveals that providence has little to do with women's status as single or married. Oliphant's use of providence has two implications for debates on the Women Question. First, it suggests that the debate about accidental versus vocational single women is one of rhetoric and ideology and not nature. Women are not providentially married or single, but one or the other by choice. Second, fiction need not support or bolster the naturalizing of such labels. The same way that Gaskell created a purposeful plot out of seeming contingency in *Cranford*, Oliphant takes the now choice-driven plot of vocational singleness (marriage *or* mission) and transforms it into marriage *then* mission or marriage *and* mission. By entrusting her plot to "providence," Lucilla allows for successive plots.

"A Woman with a Mission": Lucilla's Occupations

Lucilla's first stated occupation is being a comfort to her Papa and establishing Carlingford society. The latter takes its official form in her Thursday "Evenings," (Lucilla "held the reorganisation of society in Carlingford in her hands and was a woman with a mission" [Oliphant *MM* 18]), but being the society organizer comes with a number of ancillary jobs as well. Lucilla wins power from her father and his housekeeper Nancy, a job accomplished deftly and swiftly on her first morning home; she clears up a long-held feud between Mr. Cavendish, Mr. Beverley and Mrs. Mortimer; she assists neighbor Rose with her sister Barbara's love life; and, later in the novel, Lucilla occupies herself with electioneering, which I will return to.

In addition to the work of Lucilla's main plot, there are hints within the text and other Carlingford novels about the extent of Lucilla's occupation beyond her stated aims, making her plot appear even more expansive. The reader learns abruptly that Lucilla is the "lady-patroness" of a school as she announces to Mr. Beverley and the reader "I may call it my school, for that matter. I came to know her [the schoolmistress] in the funniest way; but I will tell you that another time" (Oliphant *MM* 195). As a reminder of just how occupied and industrious Lucilla is, the narrator reveals that Lucilla has found a job for Mrs. Mortimer (originally suggested as Lucilla's governess) and even decorated her apartment with bric-a-brac from the Marjoribanks's drawing-room remodel. Lucilla's position as patroness is introduced as if to suggest that such a small, side project was not even worth relating earlier (and there is no time to tell the whole story to Mr. Beverley now, who learns "another time"). To Lucilla's credit, the pupils, the school mistress, and the school are thriving:

> Her house, and her garden, and her little scholars, and the bloom on her cheeks, and the filling-up of her worn frame, were all Miss Marjoribanks's doing. In the intervals

> of her legislative cares Lucilla had run about all over Carlingford searching for pupils, and at the same moment had cut and stitched and arranged, and papered walls, and planted flower-beds, for the feeble creature thus thrown upon her. This was a side of Lucilla's character which certainly she did nothing to hide from the public, but which, at the same time, she never made any fuss about; and it was an endless pleasure to her to find a *protégée* so perfectly content to be "done for." (Oliphant *MM* 196-197)

The off-handed account of this large and successful endeavor is what makes it important. Oliphant signals first, that Lucilla is quite skilled at helping people and patronizing a school, and second that she can successfully take on this task in the "intervals of her legislative cares." Readers are led to wonder and imagine, analeptically, that during the entire story preceding, Lucilla has been managing a large project about which we have not heard.

Readers are further encouraged to read sideways and to imagine Lucilla's other occupations with references to *The Doctor's Family* (1861), another chronicle of Carlingford in which Lucilla briefly appeared as a rumored love interest for Doctor Rider. Hints to this other story allow readers to imagine that Lucilla continues to exist in Carlingford even when her activities are not recorded in the pages of the chronicles.[62] Lucilla's appearance in *The Doctor's Family* is referenced late in *Miss*

[62] In *The Doctor's Family,* Carlingford resembles *Cranford,* populated by single women from the two Miss Wodehouses to Nettie to Miss Marjoribanks. Nettie has her own plot of vocational singleness of the sacrificial kind. Dr. Rider's useless brother arrives from Australia and takes up residence in the doctor's home until his wife, sister-in-law, and young sons arrive, unbeknownst to Dr. Rider. They establish themselves in town and the family functions under Nettie Underwood's practical governance. While Fred and Mrs. Fred are lazy and inept, Nettie is a tireless worker for the family. Eventually, Dr. Rider develops feelings for Nettie and becomes enraged at the amount of unappreciated work she does for his brother's family. When he proposes, he is turned down – she is dedicated to caring for the family. When Nettie finds Fred has drowned, Rider is surprised and angered to find that Nettie carries on just as usual, caring for her sister and nephews. Her sister decides she wants to go back to Australia against Nettie's wishes and remarries, freeing Nettie for

Marjoribanks. After her father dies, it is suggested that Doctor Rider and his wife (Nettie) are the natural choice to buy her father's practice, but that the suggestion is sensitive because Lucilla and the Doctor were once rumored to be a pair. Lucilla dismisses all sentimentalism and gets back to business:

> people used to say there was something between us, and you think I may have some feeling about it. But there never was anything between us. Anybody with a quarter of an eye could have seen that he was going out of his senses about that little Australian girl. And I am rather fond of men that are in love – it shows they have some good in them. …If Dr Rider has any arrangement to propose, I should like to give him the preference, please. (Oliphant *MM* 410).

By referencing Nettie and Dr. Rider's love story, Lucilla points the reader elsewhere for a romance plot and further establishes herself as someone interested in the efficient disposal of Dr. Marjoribanks's practice and not in marriage.

SINGLENESS AND NARRATIVE INTERVALS

While the plot summary at the beginning of this section starts when Lucilla is nineteen and the action of the novel gets underway, the first chapter of *Miss Marjoribanks* depicts Lucilla at fifteen.[63] The gap between Chapters One and Two anticipates and sheds light on later intervals in

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the first time in her life. She agrees to marry Rider on the condition that she can keep her nephew, young Fred, with her.

[63] Melissa Schaub has another reading of the non-linearity of the plot, writing that Oliphant disrupts a typical teleological view of plot through connections between Lucilla and Queen Victoria. If Lucilla is a fictional version of Queen Victoria, Lucilla's mourning for her father before she becomes a wife inverts widowhood and wifehood: "That marriage must come before widowhood – because one state is a condition of the other – is a logic inherent in the nature of the two terms. Such a cause-and-effect logic underpins emplotment as well – in fact it is a truism of fiction writing that a

the plot. Lucilla's "retirement" after the first chapter is one of many false starts in the novel that indicate that Lucilla is interested in declaring the start and conclusion of her own plots. The novel opens with the death of Lucilla's mother and Lucilla intends to return to her home of Carlingford in all her choreographed, adolescent mourning to assume her inherited position as first lady of the house.[64] Lucilla declares herself at the beginning of a vocational plot of the sacrificial variety 11 times in the first chapter alone, alternately stating to herself, her mother's now-jobless maid, and her father, that "it was evidently the duty of an only child to devote herself to her father's comfort, and become the sunshine of his life, as so many young persons of her age have been known to become in literature," "we must try to be a comfort to poor papa!," and "I will give up everything in the world to be a comfort to you!" (Oliphant *MM* 4, 6, 9). Elizabeth Langland writes of Lucilla's mission to be a "comfort" to her father as a deliberate manipulation of Victorian clichés to her own ends, "Lucilla insinuates her own purposes under the guise of domestic duty, and her bewildered audience capitulates" (155). But Lucilla's purpose is not only to become lady of the house, but to declare the start of her own vocational plot – emphatically, repeatedly – thus excusing herself from marriage and allowing herself to choose an occupation. Despite her enthusiasm, Lucilla is

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novel's plot must be more plausible (logical) than life itself. To dispense with basic sequential logic, then, is a radical disruption of the assumptions that underlie plotting. The decoupling of widowhood and marriage makes each an independent event without connection to any other and transforms Lucilla's life from a history into a chronicle, and the chronicle is the only form of narration that does not idealize or abstract or impart meaning to events: in this sense, it is crucial that Miss Marjoribanks is part of a series known as the "Chronicles of Carlingford." The ending of the novel, which projects Lucilla's life beyond the final pages, reinforces the sense of Carlingford as a place with a "real" chronicle history rather than the idealized narrative history found in novels." (217). The decoupling of marriage and widowhood is a common tool in the vocational plot – Lucy Snowe and Lily Dale both consider themselves widows without ever having married. As Schaub suggests, "to dispense with basic sequential logic" is especially useful in the vocational plot, where it signals to readers to read analeptically.

[64] Elizabeth Langland notes briefly the commonality between Lucilla and Austen's Emma Woodhouse. See Amy Robinson and June Sturrock for more on *Miss Marjoribanks* as a version of Austen's *Emma.*

unsuccessful; she is hastily sent back to school for an additional three years and then to Europe for a year. The novel seems to end before it started: "Thus she consented to postpone her reign, if not with a good grace, yet still without foolish resistance, and retired with the full honors of war" (Oliphant *MM* 11). Lucilla's "retirement" before the novel starts creates a jarring opening.

The false start in Chapter One is repeated between Volumes II and III where it leads to *more* successive plots than Lucilla intended for herself. Volume III picks up after a long interval, repeating the pattern of starts and stops seen in Chapter One. Lucilla has previously declared a limited period of ten years for her singleness, but to her own surprise, she has received no offers in the interval: "The singular thing about it was, that the years passed on, and that [Lucilla] was permitted by the world in general to fulfill her own promise and prophecy about remaining ten years at home to be a comfort to her dear papa" (Oliphant *MM* 335). Everyone else is surprised and Lucilla is offended that she has received no marriage offers. The expiration of Lucilla's stated timeframe leads to a pause; as Elisabeth Jay writes in her introduction to the novel, "Time is running out… a novel that had seemed to promise a female *Bildungsroman* has reached apparent stasis" (xv). From this stasis, Lucilla starts her career *again*. The vocational plot reboots: "she took up her burden again boldly, and set out anew upon her way" (Oliphant *MM* 333). Schaub records the strangeness of this interval as well, writing that up until the interval before Volume III, *Miss Marjoribanks* conforms to the shape of the marriage plot even if it does not seem to be moving toward that particular conclusion:

> At first it seems that Lucilla will quite radically substitute the remaking of Carlingford society for marriage as the goal that will provide meaning to her life. Except for this one substitution the novel seems to reinforce conventional plot structure, accepting Lucilla's success or failure at taking over Carlingford as the conflict that requires resolution for closure. But just when Lucilla successfully defends her organization of Carlingford society from its first serious threat, the Archdeacon (thus creating the

> perfect moment for a climax and resolution), the novel slips off the rails of comfortable plot development. Miss Marjoribanks's dinner provides the climax she planned, and at first events fall out the way that Lucilla wants them to (i.e., the Archdeacon marries Mrs. Mortimer). But her success, importantly, does not provide closure. Oliphant writes beyond the ending that readers might logically expect. (207)

By "writing beyond" the anticipated ending and making it a middle, Oliphant challenges the limits of the vocational plot. Like Aurora Leigh, Emma Woodhouse, Rachel Curtis, and Dinah Morris, Lucilla thinks that she can claim singleness and then wed at a designated time. Both Lucilla and, as Schaub suggests, readers, orient their expectations to this well-established fictional convention, making both the extended interval and Lucilla's eventual marriage surprising. Amy Robinson writes, "If readers are surprised or disappointed by the novel's ending in marriage, we are just as guilty as the novel's characters in not thinking Lucilla in earnest when she declares that she plans to remain single, but only for a decade" (171). What does it mean to take this claim seriously? To believe that the novel will allow her singleness to be limited to that time period? To think that it will provide Lucilla with a husband dutifully at the moment of ten years? To take seriously the fulfillment she will find in the interval? To think of the ten years not merely as an interval, but as an event? Lucilla's failure to marry in ten years creates another beginning, in the middle.

As Lucilla readjusts her generic expectations and restarts her career, she is alternately described as satisfied and bored, making her motivations for marriage difficult to discern. Lucilla is initially described by the narrator as happy, "But, to tell the truth, Lucilla was so well off that it was not necessary to invent any romantic source of happiness to account for the light of well-being and satisfaction that shone in her eyes" (Oliphant *MM* 370). Caring for her father is not a duty or sacrifice, but fulfilling:

> She was very comfortable, no doubt, in every way, and met with little opposition to speak of, and had things a great deal more in her own hands than she might have had, had there been a husband in the case to satisfy; but, notwithstanding, she had come to an age when most people have husbands, and when an independent position in the world becomes necessary to self-respect. To be sure, Lucilla *was* independent; but then – there is a difference, as everybody knows. (Oliphant *MM* 335-336)

If Lucilla is "comfortable," unhindered by a husband, and independent, what she can achieve by marriage remains unspoken. But the narrator also tells us that at 30, the triumphs of Lucilla's single twenties no longer provide a challenge. Her "Evenings" "occurred every week, to be sure, as usual; but the machinery was all perfect, and went on by itself, and it was not in the nature of things that such a light adjunct of existence should satisfy Lucilla, as she opened out into the ripeness of her thirtieth year. […] she had come to an age at which she might have gone into Parliament herself had there been no disqualification of sex" (Oliphant *MM* 389). The reference to Parliament suggests that Lucilla is bored, and seeking another occupation, but one that goes beyond what is available to her as a single woman. As Merryn Williams: "Lucilla *is* wasted; there can be no question of her going into Parliament, nor will she be allowed to take over her father's medical practice as a young man could do" (170). Both Lucilla's ambitions and her frustrations threaten to become problematic. Since she has so successfully manipulated clichés and providence to her own ends, the failure of another cliché (the ability to wed just-in-time) leads her to the precipice of revolt:

> when the ripe female intelligence, not having the natural resource of a nursery and a husband to manage, turns inwards, and begins to 'make a protest' against the existing order of society, and to call the world to account for giving it no due occupation – and to consume itself. She was not the woman to make protests, nor to claim for

> herself the doubtful honours of a false position; but she felt all the same that at her age she had outlived the occupations that were sufficient for her youth. To be sure, there were still the dinners to attend to, a branch of human affairs worth the weightiest consideration, and she had a house of her own, as much as if she had been half-a-dozen times married; but still there are instincts which go even beyond dinners, and Lucilla had become conscious that her capabilities were greater than her work. She was a Power in Carlingford, and she knew it; but still there is little good in the existence of a Power unless it can be made use of for some worthy end.
> (Oliphant *MM* 389-390)

However, the "protest" does not come, as the narrator assures readers that Lucilla is innovative enough to work within societal norms. Lucilla's reasons for marrying now relate to her age – "she had come to an age when most people have husbands" and "at her age she had outlived occupations sufficient to her youth." But rather than feel that she must marry now or be an old maid, she must marry now in order to find the next occupation. The language of Lucilla's discernment illustrates that Lucilla is not after love, security, or companionship – she is not lonely and she is comfortable. She seeks a new challenge, and the only route available to her for a new occupation is marriage: "Thus the moment arrived to which she looked forward, but the man had not arrived with it. Ten years had passed, during which she had been at the head of society in Grange Lane, and a great comfort to her dear papa; and now, if there remained another development for Lucilla's character, it was about time that it would begin to show itself" (Oliphant *MM* 336). Lucilla has been happy, successful, and does not explicitly want love or romance, but a new "development." Lucilla thinks of her life as a narrative, and of herself as the contriver of plots. When she has imagined her sequential plots and greedily hoped for all a woman can hope for, marriage is the only second act that presents itself.

Lucilla attempts to make "electioneering" her next occupation, but providence is conspicuously absent from the language of this latest career. At the end of ten years, she feebly offers, "I don't mean to be any man's wife just now…I am too busy electioneering" (Oliphant *MM* 347). In the midst of the election which provides temporary occupation, the Doctor dies, and the novel asks, almost as if beginning again, "What would Lucilla do?" (Oliphant *MM* 399). Her father's death makes this question newly relevant. If "electioneering" is presented as a feeble excuse for not marrying, living alone without her father and in the reduced circumstances of the genteel poor suggests previously unavailable occupations for Lucilla. Following the rector's guidance that "parish work… was the inevitable and providential destination of a woman who had 'no ties,'" the residents of Carlingford suggest that Lucilla reinvent herself as a philanthropist, take in inmates, open a House of Mercy, or devote herself to the parish (Oliphant *MM* 419, 429, 430). These options remain unattractive to the discerning Lucilla:

> The House of Mercy was not a thing to be taken into any serious consideration; but still there was something in the idea that Lucilla could not dismiss carelessly as her friends could. She had no vocation, such as the foundress of such an establishment ought to have, nor did she see her way to the abandonment of all projects for herself, and that utter devotion to the cause of humanity which would be involved in it; but yet, when a woman happens to be full of energy and spirit, and determined that whatever she may be she shall certainly not be a nonentity, her position is one that demands thought. She was very capable of serving her fellow-creatures, and very willing and well disposed to serve them; and yet she was not inclined to give herself up entirely to them, nor to relinquish her personal prospects – vague though these might be. (Oliphant *MM* 431)

Lucilla admits that she does not have a vocation for service, and that a life of service provides a ready outlet for vocational energy. The time that Lucilla spends considering the possibilities of charity is brief – only from after her father's death until the outcome of the election a few weeks later. But the suggestion helps define what exactly Lucilla is looking for now that her ten years are up – the ability to create a new sphere for occupation.[65]

"LUCILLA MARJORIBANKS FOREVER AND EVER"

When Lucilla rejects Mr. Ashburton in favor of Tom, there is a "dead pause of incredulity and amazement" in Grange Lane that Lucilla has chosen for her husband a man who the narrator described a potential union with as a "nightmare" (Oliphant *MM* 492, 62). Oliphant herself admits in a letter to Blackwood, even as she upholds the union, that "it was silly of her [Lucilla] to like Tom, still we never set up for inhuman consistency, neither Lucilla nor I. The last part shall come on Monday, and I hope Tom will give you satisfaction, and you will find that Miss M. has not done so badly for herself after all" (Oliphant *Letters* 210). Reviewers agree that "It is so very just, and yet pathetic, that rough, clumsy, cousin Tom should carry of the prize at last" ("Miss Marjoribanks" 490). And while Mrs. John and the Doctor respectively hope and suspect that it has been Tom all along, according to Robinson, the ending is both, "unexpected and obvious" (68). The reluctant acceptance of Tom as Lucilla's husband both within and without the novel responds to the

[65] Lucilla's ruin can be compared to Miss Matty's in *Cranford*. While Miss Matty is not aware of the extent of her circumstances and is cared for by the community, Lucilla faces her ruin head on, discussing with Nancy how they can run their household in the ways of "genteel economy" (Oliphant *MM* 411). While Miss Matty is rescued by Peter's return from India, Tom's return from India, rescues Lucilla in a different way, not by saving Lucilla from work but by allowing her a husband for whom she can choose work.

paradoxical logic of the pairing: the union makes narrative sense *because* it so obviously fails as a love match.[66]

According to Talia Schaffer, this ending to *Miss Marjoribanks* is not only appropriate but desirable. Tom fills the category of both romantic partner and safe choice (*RR* 36). If Tom was the blundering, silly cousin before, he returns from India changed – bearded and confident. Writing of *Miss Marjoribanks, Middlemarch,* and *The Clever Woman of the Family* as versions of *Emma,* Talia Schaffer summarizes the best possible outcome of vocational marriage, a plot that, as its name indicates, unites vocation and marriage:

> a strong, intelligent woman stuck in a small provincial society desperately wants to improve her neighbor's well-being with well-intentioned schemes of social engineering. Each woman craves a vocation, a need she struggles to express. That urge may propel her toward ill-chosen unions. … Each woman suffers terribly if denied work, and she changes fundamentally as the result of the collapse of her vocational wishes. Each subsides into a happy marriage that will redirect and subdue her vocational impulses into the more socially acceptable role of the helpmeet. In each case, she gets some modest work after marriage, but it is now properly rerouted through the husband and made part of marital duties. (*RR* 219)

Schaffer classifies Oliphant's *Phoebe Junior* and *Miss Marjoribanks* as comic versions of vocational marriage plots. Tom fills the role of husband not because he is the perfect passionate partner, but

[66] That Lucilla's eventual husband and only proposal comes from India furthers the novel's connection to the 1851 census and surrounding debates. The population imbalance resulted in more women at home and more men abroad, and prompted suggestions of shipping single women to the colonies (as is proposed in Greg's in "Why are Women Redundant?").

because in the logic of familiar marriage, he is a good enough companion who also provides an occupation.

If, as Schaffer argues, Tom is the winning suitor because he provides both partnership and career, the same could be said of Ashburton. In fact, Lucilla explicitly lists the potential career as wife of MP among Ashburton's attractions when she considers that marrying him results in "beginning a new and more important career" (Oliphant *MM* 390). "In that case," Lucilla imagines, "she would have gone to an established house and life – to take her place in the one and her share in the other, and to find the greater part of her surroundings and duties already fixed for her" (Oliphant *MM* 479). But the premade and predetermined quality of this career is not what wins Lucilla in the end. Instead, she chooses Tom who *does not* have a career: Tom "had left his profession behind him in Calcutta, and had nothing to do in England, and was probably too old to resume his (non) practice at the bar, even if he had been the least disposed to do so" (Oliphant *MM* 479). "Idle" Tom has an empty resumè and no ambition, which provides the opportunity for Lucilla to create a career for *both* of them, rather than to assume her husband's career through a sort of professional coverture (Oliphant *MM* 479).

A Return to Providence

It is this opportunity to craft a new professional plot for herself *and* Tom that revives the language of providence absent from Lucilla's electioneering days. When the Marchbanks estate is advertised for sale in the Carlingford *Gazette,* Lucilla "can't help feeling it was a special providence" (Oliphant *MM* 483). Oliphant's use of providence peaks in Volumes I and III, with over a dozen references in each Volume, and is less prevalent in Volume II, where is occurs half that frequently. In Volume III, references to providence are concentrated in the final pages once Lucilla sets her

sights on the Marchbanks estate. Providence returns, not to declare the perfect ending but send us, analeptically, back to Lucilla's vocational confidence in Volume I:

> 'It is a special providence,' said Lucilla to herself, with her usual piety; and then she folded up the paper in a little square, with the announcement in the middle which had struck her so much, and placed it where Tom could not fail to see it when he came in, and went up-stairs with a new and definite direction given to her thoughts. That was how it must be! Lucilla, for her part, felt no difficulty in discerning the leadings of Providence, and she could not but appreciate the readiness with which her desires were attended to, and the prompt clearing-up of her difficulties. There are people whose inclinations Providence does not seem to superintend with such painstaking watchfulness; but then, no doubt, that must be their own fault." (Oliphant *MM* 481).

As mentions of providence rise, so does Lucilla's agency. Lucilla's "piety" is followed immediately by an action that assures the fulfilment of her wishes: she places the paper in Tom's view. Phrases like "definite direction," "no difficulty discerning," the "readiness with which her desires where attended to," all speak to Lucilla regaining narrative control. The imperatives "how it must be" and "must be their own fault" do not indicate progress for Lucilla, but a *return* to the confidence of her youth that allowed her to so easily win over her father and Nancy. Now she will win over Tom, not to redecorating the drawing room, but to purchasing an estate and embarking on another, more ambitious societal transformation. Elisabeth Jay suggests that this social project is ill-conceived, "despite Lucilla's invincible optimism… her failure to learn from her earlier enterprise is all the more to be pitied" (xvi). Yet, what is at stake is *not* the benefit of Lucilla's vocation to others, as it was in *Emma* (who learns how to be Mrs. Knightley), but Lucilla's ability to remain occupied and choose that occupation. Unlike Rachel Curtis who learns a lesson and marries, Lucilla makes very little

progress, learns no lessons. The plot bends to her wishes, instead of Lucilla bending under the weight of the plot.

Though *Miss Marjoribanks* may seem to veer back toward convention with the promised union of Tom and Lucilla, their partnership is related in a strikingly unconventional manner. A typical martial ending records the wedding (usually in the final paragraphs) and hints in the future tense of children or fast-forwards to assure readers that the focal couple has become a family. In *Bleak House* (1853), the final chapter "The Close of Esther's Narrative" records Esther's domestic situation seven years after she marries Allan Woodcourt, when she tells the reader of their two daughters. The concluding chapter of *Barchester Towers,* launches Eleanor and her second husband Dean Arabin into their ecclesiastical life after the honeymoon and promises the arrival of a child in a matter of months; *Can You Forgive Her?* ends with two babies – Lady Glencora and Plantagenet Palliser welcome their son and heir and Alice is expecting. Even in Wilkie Collins's sensation novels, like *The Moonstone* or *The Woman in White,* a return to normalcy is defined by marriage and a baby; readers are assured that Rachel Verinder and Franklin Blake will soon welcome a child at the end of *The Moonstone* and Walter and Laura's son becomes the heir to Limmeredge at the end of *The Woman in White.* In recording the wedding, fast-forwarding beyond it, and promising children, these more typical marital endings from a diverse set of novels limit the imaginative space available to readers by insisting on the stability and permanence of the domestic situation the novel has achieved. In *Miss Marjoribanks* concrete discussions of what Tom and Lucilla will *do* stand in stark contrast to more typical dreamy, future-tense musing of static domestic happiness and leave the possibility of children not only unspoken, but so distant as to be forgotten, unnoticed by readers.

Instead of recording wedding bells, we see Lucilla visit her future home at Marchbanks in mourning for her father and think to herself "A year after this!" indicating that she and Tom will need to wait a year to be wed in deference to her bereavement (Oliphant *MM* 494). This final

interval allows Oliphant to redirect readers from focusing on the nuptials (delayed, and then, underplayed) to a focus on Lucilla wrapping up one career and starting another. On the one hand, the details about the transfer of the Doctor's home from Lucilla to Mrs. Rider (down to the carpets that Lucilla, in her magnanimity, decides to leave behind). On the other, Lucilla's aspirations for Marchbanks: "It occupied her a great deal more than the gardens did, which Tom was arranging so carefully… Lucilla's eyes went over the moral wilderness with the practical glance of a statesman, and, at the same time, the sanguine enthusiasm of a philanthropist" not, specifically, with the domestic cares of a wife (Oliphant *MM* 494). Lucilla launches a new project, self-directed as always, that places her back in the middle of her vocational plot. The ending suggests another interval, similar to the one that opens the novel, and occurs after Lucilla's ten-year vocational hiatus. In doing so, the final chapter returns us, analeptically, to the opening chapter, with Lucilla, "in the first freshness of her youthful daring," and directs us outward *not* to a static image of domestic bliss, but the dynamic possibilities of Lucilla's next career (Oliphant *MM* 496).

The span of Oliphant's career shows the evolution of the single woman in fiction, from the matchmaking spinster sisters of her 1852 story "Annie Orme" to *Miss Mackenzie* and later *Kirsteen,* as well as journalism on the Woman Question. Though scholars have argued about Oliphant's status as feminist, antifeminist or "Gentle Subversive," as she is termed in the subtitle to one collection of essays, Oliphant promoted the acceptance of women to medical school and mused in "Mill on the Subjection of Women" about the challenges for a female doctor who is also wife and mother:

> She works for a year, let us say with intermissions, finding it more and more difficult to maintain her place against the lively competition of men who have no divided duty. Then she is stopped short by the inevitable discharge of the primary function of woman. This business over, she resumes again with a heart and attention sorely divided between the claims of the infant she leaves at home and the

> duties she finds outside. During the interval of her seclusion, however restricted in point of time, every one of her male competitors has made a stride before her. Faltering and discouraged she resumes her laborious way; and if she has the energy of half a dozen men in her single person, if her courage is indomitable, and her determination sublime, she perhaps manages by a strain of mind and body which it would be impossible to continue long, to make up half of the ground she has lost; when lo another interruption comes, and she has to step aside again and bear her feminine burden, and see her competitors, light and unladen, stride past once more. This is the inevitable course, known only too well to every woman who has endeavoured to combine professional exertions with the ordinary duties of a man's wife. (Oliphant 304)

The language Oliphant uses to describe the cycle of a career-oriented woman's life in its movement from domestic and familial cares to career and back again including "intermissions," "stopped short," "resumes again," "interval," "resumes," and "interruption," is language that describes the starts and stops, pauses, and restarts of the plots of *Miss Mackenzie* and *Miss Marjoribanks*. While these novels are optimistic about the ability of Margaret and Lucilla to make the most of each successive and sequential plot, until they unite career and wifehood in simultaneous plots, the language of Oliphant's 1869 essay acknowledges the burden of such a "divided duty" for women, and looks forward to Trollope's Lily Dale and Oliphant's Catherine and Hester Vernon, who fail to flourish under the weight of the vocational plot.

CHAPTER FOUR:

"REBEGINNING": THE "END" OF THE VOCATIONAL PLOT IN *THE SMALL HOUSE AT ALLINGTON* AND *HESTER*

For Margaret Mackenzie, whose proposals lead to successive and simultaneous careers and Lucilla Marjoribanks, who attempts to engineer sequential vocational and marriage plots, Anthony Trollope and Margaret Oliphant expand on the ideological and formal possibilities of the vocational plot. Where does the vocational plot go after reaching such extremes? Both Trollope and Oliphant also wrote novels that seem to renege on the promise of the vocational heroine. In *The Small House at Allington* (1864) and *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1867), Lily Dale deliberately remains single but conspicuously does not embrace a vocation. Yet Trollope effectively uses Lily for plot generation, showing how single women are valuable narrative tools. Margaret Oliphant's *Hester* (1883), features two generations of single women; Catherine Vernon discourages the younger Hester from following the plot of vocational singleness. This seemingly inexplicable choice is interpretable through Lily Dale. After being pushed to the limit, the vocational plot seems to disintegrate.

THERE MAY BE A SLIP

Lily Dale is famously jilted by Adolphus Crosbie early in *The Small House at Allington.* Though her engagement to Crosbie is dissolved against her wishes, Lily continues to refuse the marriage plot in *Small House* and *The Last Chronicle of Barset* by declining the repeated proposals of Johnny Eames. Lauren Byler dismisses this well-loved but also frustrating heroine as useless precisely because of her refusal to provide narrative resolution, writing of Lily's stubborn resistance to the marriage plot as an "affective clot" that is paradoxically necessary to the continuance of the narrative and counter to

plot expectations (268). These refusals are at the same time tiresome, difficult to explain, and necessary. In the:

> rhetoric of utilitarian authorship, the girl clogs [Trollope's] smoothly running novel-machine. An almost unavoidable component of the Victorian novel, the girl drives the marriage plot that Trollope found obligatory to the construction of a lucrative novel. Yet her function depends largely upon her uselessness, or her marital impasses that generate narrative and lubricate readerly desires. The trope of the pair laces the marriage plot to the shoe, but the girl hobbles not only efficient marital pairing but the fully developed subjectivity achieved, according to (and by) Trollope, through utility. The affective center of many novels, certainly not excluding the novels of Anthony Trollope, the girl nonetheless threatens to reduce the subjectivity that the novel represents and produces to a useless object. (Byler 268)

Byler suggests a conundrum: the marriage plot that obsessed the Victorian novel sustains itself on the delay – or in Lily's case refusal – of marriage. Said another way, "Lily's refusal to enter the productive economy of marriage marks her as useless while also rendering her unique and even valuable" (Byler 269). Byler's analysis of Lily's value speaks to two registers. Within Victorian culture and the fictional world of Barsetshire, Byler suggests that Lily's refusal to marry, (and, moreover in my argument, her subsequent refusal to embrace a vocation) renders her "useless," a redundant woman. Formally, that same refusal makes her valuable to Trollope and readers; remaining single preserves her narrative potential. If female characters have the most "usefulness" when a marital outcome is both possible and not inevitable, the single woman is most valuable as long as she

remains single.[67] The paradoxical tension between Lily's formal value and her cultural value is one of many "slips." The misfire of the marriage plot – which Trollope terms a "slip between the cup and the lip" – becomes the foundation of an unrealized vocational plot. If vocational heroines have intense narrative value, as for Margaret Mackenzie and Lucilla Marjoribanks, *unrealized* vocational plots have even more. In this lacuna between form and culture, Trollope demonstrates that Lily's *unrealized* vocational plot maximizes her narrative value.

Trollope uses the phrase "a slip between the cup and the lip" multiple times in nine of his forty-seven novels to indicate plans thwarted or simply unfulfilled. In *The Eustace Diamonds* (1872), the scheming Lizzie Greystock opens the novel by worrying that "still the cup might slip from her lips" in her efforts to marry the wealthy and sickly Sir Florian Eustace; subsequent chapter titles "Lizzie Greystock" and "Lady Eustace" telegraph her success (Trollope 12). Later in the same novel, Lady Fawn warns the innocent Lucy Morris that "there may be a slip between the cup and the lip," in her engagement to Frank Greystock (the now widowed Lizzie sets her sights on her cousin for her second marriage), specifying that "sometimes engagements take place which never become more than engagements" (Trollope *ED* 246-247). These two central slips (neither of which in the end prevent marriages) set the tone for a novel full of half troths and broken engagements.[68] While this

[67] J Hillis Miller makes a similar claim: "Most of Trollope's novels center on the question of what man the delightful English girl will marry. Once she is married, she is comparatively uninteresting, …When a British maiden has reached marriageable age, she is the focus of anxious and absorbed attention by her parents and siblings, her friends, the whole circle of her "community." Whom will she marry? Until she marries, her selfhood, insofar as it depends on her subject position as the wife of so-and-so, has not yet been settled. She is a wild card, without a fixed value, unpredictable. She is even dangerous to the status quo, since it is impossible to predict with certainty to whom she will say yes or no, how she will employ her right to "marry when she wants" (45).

[68] Between the years 1864 to 1880, Trollope wrote a number of plots that revolve around a broken engagement, including Lily and Crosbie in *The Small House at Allington* (1864), alternately Alice and her cousin George and Alice and John Grey in *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864), Lizzie and Lord Fawn and Lucinda Roanoke and Sir Griffin Tewett in *The Eustace Diamonds* (1872), Georgiana Longstaffe and Emanuel Brehgert and Felix Carbury and Marie Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now* (1875), and both Celia Holt and Sir Francis Geraldine and George Western and his fiancée in *Kept in the Dark*

phrase most often refers to slips in the love plot, as in the example from *The Eustace Diamonds,* it can refer to any kind of narrative mishap. The same phrase is used to describe Mr. Quiverful's tenuous promotion to warden of Barset in *Barchester Towers* (1857) as Mrs. Quiverful worries that there will be a "slip between the cup of her happiness and the lip of her fruition," an adage she repeats later, even after her husband's appointment has been signed by Bishop Proudie; the same phrase is used by Miss Prettyman to confide to her sister her fear that the news of Mr. Crawley's exoneration may not reach him (Trollope *BT* 187, 351; *LC* 747). Mrs. Quiverful and Miss Prettyman exhibit a meta-textual awareness of how uncertain and delicate the completion of an event is in a Trollope novel. The pervasiveness of this phrase, which also appears in *Castle Richmond* (1860), *Lady Anna* (1873), *The Way We Live Now* (1875), *Cousin Henry* (1879) and *The Duke's Children* (1880), suggests its importance as a narrative strategy; Trollope creates his plots out of "slips," and his use of them demonstrates the way that thwarted events are more powerful generators of plot than realized events. [69]

The "slip" is best classed as an event, rather than as non-event or plotlessness. Rather than nothing happening, something *almost* happens: the anticipation and disappointment of these near events takes on the status of an event itself. If, returning to my definition, plot connects events through causality in order to answer questions or resolve a mystery (*Why* does this happen?), the

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(1880), to name a few. In a review of *Can You Forgive Her? The Saturday Review* writes, that Trollope is particularly interested in "the offenses of the jilt" (240).

[69] In *The Duke's Children* (1880), Lady Mabel says of her near-engagement to Silverbridge, "The cup had come within the reach of her fingers, but she had not grasped it. Her happiness, her triumphs, her great success had been there, present to her, and she had dallied with her fortune. There had been a day on which he had been all but at her feet, and on the next he had been prostrate at the feet of another. He had even dared to tell her so, — saying of that American that of course he loved her the best!" (Trollope 346). An example from *Lady Anna* (1874) also refers to a broken engagement, "'I cannot help your anxiety just at present, Aunt Julia; but you should always remember that there will be slips between the cup and the lip.' 'Then there has been a slip? I knew it would be so. I always said so, and so did my brother'" as does an example in *Castle Richmond* (1861): "The lady of his choice had been chosen as an heiress; but there had been some slip between that cup of fortune and his lip; and she, proud and beautiful, for such she had been—had neither relieved nor softened the poverty of her profligate old lord" (Trollope 172, 4).

same can be said of slips. In the case of engagements that remain mere engagements, an event is set in motion, appears imminent, and then is not completed, leaving characters to wonder why. The slip puts perhaps even *more* pressure on causality than the event, as characters like Mrs. Quiverful or Lucy Morris brood over the potential causes for their anticipated disappointment. This distinguishes the slip from sequence, and places it in the causality-driven category of plot. For Trollope, such brooding over causality constitutes a plot in itself.

Trollope's most common type of slip, a broken engagement, is complicated by the status of engagements and marriages as a performative, a category of event completed through words, not actions. J.L. Austin theorizes that a performative utterance both describes and creates its reality: to verbally agree to an engagement is to become engaged; to speak wedding vows is to become married. What, then, distinguishes an engagement, which can be "broken" from a marriage, which is nearly impossible to extract oneself from?[70] This question plagues characters like Lily Dale, who declares herself Crosbie's widow after their engagement is broken. Lily's reaction challenges the distinction between engagement and marriage, near event and event, utterance and binding utterance in a way that mirrors Trollope's formal interest in extending plots with slips. These slips, present in most of Trollope's plots, achieve their apex with the single girl – always available for marriage, and yet always susceptible to a slip that will return her to the middle of her plot.

A plot-based analysis of Trollope may seem curious. After all, it is a critical commonplace that Anthony Trollope had little interest in plot. In his autobiography, Trollope underplays his ability

[70] Austin details conditions for distinguishing a performative from a constative and also details the ways that a performative can go wrong either through "misfire" or "abuse" (16). In a misfire, one or more conditions of the performative are not met (for example, there are no conventions, it is executed by people without the authority, it is performed incompletely or incorrectly), making the utterance void (Austin 16). In an abuse, the intention is wrong, for example, one could congratulate someone and not mean it (Austin 16, 40). Arguably, in the case of *Small House,* Crosbie's resolve is never as unwavering as is necessary for an engagement to be enacted with the proper intention, making the engagement valid, but an abuse of the performative.

to craft plots, writing "I have never troubled myself much about the construction of plots .... I am not sure that the construction of a perfected plot has been at any period within my power" (145). Trollope's conscious formal experiments challenge conventional notions of plot, requiring us to expand our idea of plot to include not only the radical, climacteric middles of Brontë and Yonge, (those that contain a moment of discernment at the root of the story), but also plots that seem all middle with no clear climax and no end, like Lily Dale's.[71] In each case, the middle refers to a metaphorical location – either concentrated at the root or seemingly everywhere and unbounded. I use analeptic reading to notice the repeated beginnings and mark the places in the middle of the text where one plot is left unfinished and another starts – giving the sense of being always in the middle.

The concept of a plot that is "all middle" is distinct from plotlessness, a term I have used to characterize literary works featuring single women in the early nineteenth century. Instead of the detachment and disconnection that define plotlessness, plots that are all middle fall into the category that Rebecca Rainof terms "radical gradualism" (3). Rainof identifies what we typically think of as plot (the eventful, steady, rapid progress of the *bildungsroman*) as one of many varieties of plot, another option of which is slower and steadier change, in which "it is in these apparent lulls in 'story' that a gradual form of narrative progression is often most rigorously at work" (Rainof 10). Rainof attributes such plots to the "mature protagonist," a fitting epithet for Lily Dale who alternately declares and resists the mantle of old maid of Allington. One significant difference between Trollope's middles and the plotless spinster of the early nineteenth century is length –

[71] Mary Poovey makes the case in *Genres of the Credit Economy* (2008) that Trollope is embarking on a serious formal experiment, noting the singularity of this claim, "To cast *The Last Chronicle* as a formalist work of art – as a novel that approaches James's ideal of organic unity – might seem perverse" (384). Jane Nardin writes in *He Knew She Was Right: The Independent Woman in the Novels of Anthony Trollope* (1989) that Trollope used "formal techniques whereby he could conceal an unorthodox subtext beneath the conventional surface of novels written to please a conventional public" (xviii).

whereas the plotless sketches of Mitford and Dickens concede the difficulty of writing a plot for single women by providing vignettes focused on description and character, Trollope prolongs stories (also about single women), by using mischances to extend narrative. Lily Dale has a formal function – the (re)generation of plot, paradoxically born of a non-reproductive woman. If Lily's function is not the same thing as plotlessness, it also falls short of a vocation, a concern to which I will return.

What is the value of extending plot? One obvious answer is monetary. Recycling characters through a series (like Septimus Harding, Eleanor Bold, and Lily Dale, who appear in multiple of Trollope's Barsetshire novels), helped Trollope create a market in which to use and reuse his most "valuable" material – favorite plots, characters, and settings could be used again with almost certain success. According to Laurie Langbauer, "The serial works as an exemplary tool of capitalist production (specifically its self-production, its self-generation by forming the subjects that perpetuate it) through its own replications of the same: the ongoingness, the repetitiveness of serial publication" (10). Langbauer characterizes the self-perpetuation of the series, like Trollope's Barsetshire novels, as "sustaining" the capitalist "social order," which undoubtedly reflects its money-making potential (12). Trollope's commercial aspirations are recorded in his own writing where he expresses pride in his disciplined work schedule, and the resulting prolixity and material gain (reckoned in the final pages of his autobiography as £70,000 over the course of his career [226]).[72]

There is also a formal payoff. Extending plots allows Trollope to continue generating narrative out of scant material. D.A. Miller writes of *Barchester Towers* as a book that revolves around a conflict that is not really a conflict, which is the essence of plot: "the formal name for 'moderate

[72] Trollope writes of his habits: "This division of time allowed me to produce over ten pages of an ordinary novel volume a day, and if kept up through ten months, would have given as its results three novels of three volumes each in the year" (*Autobiography* 170).

schism' would no doubt be plot – except that moderate schism, even extended to include all instances of fighting in *Barchester Towers* – does not quite amount to what ordinarily grips us under that term" (122). Instead, the plot is, according to Miller, "bland" (122). While there are things that happen, "these incidents occur in the absence of a strong teleology, which, elsewhere in Victorian fiction, would allow them to gain point… Geared primarily to its own self sustenance, moderate schism is useless in calling a halt or even giving much direction to the narrative, which as a result seems underplotted: more a meandering succession of episodes" (Miller 122). What Miller's discussion of *Barchester Towers* suggests is that for Trollope, sustaining the narrative is achieved through underplotting. It follows from Miller's observations that, paradoxically, fewer, weaker events allow the story to continue.[73] In the case of Lily Dale, Trollope takes this strategy to the furthest extreme.

THE SMALL HOUSE AT ALLINGTON AND *THE LAST CHRONICLE OF BARSET:* A PLOT OF ENDLESS MIDDLES

Lily Dale is a central character in two long novels even though seemingly few events happen to her. Within the first one-hundred pages of *The Small House at Allington,* Lily engages herself to Adolphus Crosbie while he is visiting her cousin Bernard in the Dale's country home of Allington. Crosbie vacillates in his devotion to Lily while visiting Courcy Castle shortly after becoming engaged: he is alternately committed to marrying her and skeptical that they will make each other happy, especially given the increased importance her lack of fortune takes on after their engagement.

[73] Making a similar claim of *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, J. Jeffrey Franklin writes, "The objective of plot is to sustain … tension, and so the interest of readers, until its end, which it does by activating forward-oriented modes of exchange and then delaying the completion of the transactions" (511).

He surreptitiously engages himself to Alexandrina de Courcy, after which he must extract himself from his promise to Lily. Lily is both quick to forgive and slow to recover – she declares that she will remain faithful to Crosbie even if he is married to another woman, comparing her situation to that of a widow. In the following 400 pages, Lily helps her mother pack up their home to move to town, and then unpacks when they decide to remain in the Small House after all (another iteration of a plot slip). Lily's longtime admirer Johnny Eames proposes to her twice, and she refuses him both times, citing her love for Crosbie. In the final pages of *The Small House at Allington,* Lily is a garrulous guest at her sister Bell's wedding. When her story resumes in *The Last Chronicle of Barset,* Lily is a more minor character and the host to Grace Crawley, providing Grace sanctuary from the scandal plaguing her father in the main plot. Crosbie's wife has died and he renews his attentions to Lily in a letter to her mother, which is swiftly dismissed. With her family and community's support, Johnny continues to propose to Lily who insists, even after she realizes that she no longer loves Crosbie, that she will remain unmarried. In the final lines written about her, the narrator assures readers that she remains an old maid, and "that she will live and die as Lily Dale" (Trollope *LC* 798). The foregoing story, which extends over 1500 pages, is relatively quick to relate, with few events and much repetition. After Lily is jilted, her story reverts to stasis (refusals of marriage, staying put at Allington) and plot points are recycled (Crosbie renews his suit when Alexandrina dies, Johnny proves himself unworthy by not once but twice making the mistake of dallying with a lower-class woman). The relative slowness of Lily's plot is evidenced in illustrations of *Small House.* Out of 18 illustrations John Everett Millais completed for the novel, five depict Lily.[74] "Bell, the inkstand

[74] In the other illustrations in which Lily is depicted, Lily is relatively inactive and similarly not facing the viewer. On the title page, Lily, Bell, Bernard and Crosbie are shown enjoying croquet on the lawn of the Small House while Mrs. Dale watches, a scene of lighthearted fun that can hardly be said to characterize the novel. On closer inspection, the illustration is perhaps apt in that it features two hoped for and failed pairings: Bell and Bernard and Lily and Crosbie. "And have I not really loved you?" shows Lily and Johnny as she assures him that the two have no future. The rigid, retreating

please" is indicative of Lily's uneventful life: Lily is packing to move, a mundane, laborious task that, nevertheless was chosen as one of few instances to represent Lily visually.

posture of the characters mirrors Lily's stance toward Johnny: she refuses to marry him or anyone. In "Mamma, she said at last, it is over now. I'm sure." Lily, Bell and Mrs. Dale slump against walls and chairs in postures of inactivity.

Figure Eighteen: John Everett Millais. "Bell, the inkstand please." ***The Small House at Allington, with eighteen illustrations by J.E. Millais.*** **1864.**

Moreover, this illustration literalizes the potential consequences of a slip. The metaphorical slip between the cup and the lip risks a spill, but there is no liquid running down Lily's chin, no stain on her bodice. Trollope avoids the fall, literally from the ladder, figuratively from virtue, making the slip frictionless. All the slip shows is that the cup was empty after all.

With frequent references to "a slip between the cup and the lip," Trollope raises the question of the role of suspense in plot. Lily may literally or figuratively fall, producing, on the one hand, a cliffhanger and on the other the fallen woman. Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865)*,* in which the first book is titled "The Cup and the Lip" provides a counterpoint of slips that *do* result in cliffhanger-quality "spills": the presumed John Harmon is found drowned, and the real John Harmon assumes a false identity; Gaffer Hexam is found dead after falling out of his own boat. Dickens uses slips to generate plot in *Our Mutual Friend,* and keeps readers in suspense as they wonder about the fate of characters across chapter breaks. As a single woman, Lily also diverts from the fallen woman, like 'Lil Em'ly in *David Copperfield.* Trollope avoids either of these suspenseful outcomes, and yet, generates a plot from slips that do not result in spills, pointing up the distinction between what is suspenseful and what is compelling. Will Lily marry? Will she find purpose? Will she fall from grace, like Amelia Roper? The reality is much more mundane than the outcomes readers can imagine, yet those imagined outcomes keep us reading.

The first slip Lily suffers is in her engagement to the "swell" Adolphus Crosbie (Trollope *SH* 13). Before she has any hint that Crosbie will defect, Lily ponders, "She had heard of girls who would not speak of their love, arguing to themselves cannily that there may be many a slip between the cup and the lip" (Trollope *SH* 94). Later, Lady Courcy uses the same phrase to urge her daughter to make her marriage to Crosbie hasty: "There are so many slips, you know, in these things" (Trollope *SH* 279). And finally, when Bell engages herself (successfully) to Doctor Crofts, Mrs. Dale, chastened by Lily's disappointing engagement, cautions Lily not to telegraph the news, saying that

there is "many a slip between the cup and the lip" (Trollope *SH* 549). This phrase serves as a caution and also an excuse for measured expectations. It also serves as a warning to proleptically inclined readers: you never know with certainty where an engagement may end. Carolyn Dever writes about Trollope's use of this phrase in *Small House* as an axiom:

> The metaphor itself signifies a problem of timing and of space, the failure of a vessel to find its proper point of contact with the body, and the improper, premature spilling of a liquid. Throughout *The Small House*, the always-imminent possibility of a "slip" underscores the novel's fear of those disastrous detours that seem all but inevitable. The slip between the cup and the lip is a parable of narrative as well as sexual misfire in a novel stubbornly at odds with the very formal conventions that shape it. (139)

Dever's interpretation of the slip is pessimistic: the novel is "afraid" of the "inevitable" that threatens to derail it from the conventional marriage plot. But what may be "misfire" for Lily and her fictional sympathizers, is narrative possibility for Trollope and Lily's readerly admirers. Narrative misfires are also narrative tools, they take on an agency to make something other than the apparently intended marriage plot.

Trollope's triple-deckers suggest that plot is just as successfully (perhaps more successfully) generated from misfires and slips – a cheque not really stolen in the case of *Last Chronicle,* a jewel not really stolen in the case of *The Eustace Diamonds,* a wife wrongly suspected of infidelity in *He Knew He Was Right* (1869)*,* an engagement that is broken in the case of *The Small House* and *Can You Forgive Her?* – rather than from completed events – like a theft, an infidelity, or a marriage. The pervasiveness of the phrase "a slip between the cup and the lip" suggests its narrative use. These slips, are, paradoxically, the failure of an event to manifest, and also key turning points in the plot that allow the story to continue rather than resolve.

Slips make it difficult for readers to agree on the "center" of *The Small House at Allington*. Carolyn Dever locates the climax of *Small House* at the moment of Crosbie's proposal to Lily, one of few nameable "events" in a novel that far more often moves slowly forward based on gradual changes or slips. Dever proposes, in the tone of noting a generic exception, that "The plot of *The Small House at Allington* turns on a climax that occurs just about 100 pages from the novel's beginning. In the moment of erotic misfire *sine qua non*, the narrator observes a scene of passionate embrace between Lily Dale and her betrothed lover, Adolphus Crosbie" (Dever 139-140). But while conventionally the proposal would be the climax before the decrescendo to marriage, in this novel it is the crescendo to a broken engagement. In fact, not long after Crosbie presses his suit, Lily qualifies it with her premonition of slips that she ignores: "And yet she knew that there was a risk. He who was now everything to her might die; nay, it was possible that he might be other than she thought him to be; that he might neglect her, desert her, or misuse her. But she had resolved to trust in everything, and, having so trusted, she would not provide for herself any possibility of retreat" (Trollope *SH* 135). Lily's hypothetical list of all of the "risks" that may divert the realization of her happy marriage – death, disappointment or disillusionment, desertion, neglect or mistreatment – suggests the wealth of plots that rely on the marriage plot *failing* – that occur only in its absence. Further, the richness of such risks helps us see that the woman who is jilted, ruined, misused or deserted, is at the center of her plot (as is Clarissa Harlowe, Marianne Dashwood, Laura Fairlie, or Hetty Sorrel); the woman who is happily married is at the end.

Another option for the center of *Small House*, and one more centrally located, in the final pages before Volume II of a two-volume novel, is the final separation of Lily and Crosbie, which serves as both the delayed end to their engagement and the beginning of Lily's (unrealized) vocational plot. After receiving a note from Crosbie that confirms the end of their engagement and his impending marriage to Alexandrina, Lily immediately declares first that she forgives him and

next her vocation to her mother: "you must be very good to me now; and I must be very good to you. We shall be always together now. I must be your friend and counsellor; and be everything to you, more than ever. I must fall in love with you now" (Trollope *SH* 327). In this strange and pseudo-incestual profession, Lily commands herself in repeated "musts" to enact the events that make up the plot of vocational singleness. A claim to never marry ("we shall always be together now") is followed by the declaration of a new vocation ("I must be your friend and counsellor; and be everything to you"). The possibility of multiple centers is the result of a plot that continues to generate. When read as a "failed marriage plot," Lily and Crosbie's engagement may very well be the center; when read as a vocational plot, her declaration to her mother may be (Dever 147). Her plot continues to regenerate, resulting not in a clearly defined "radical middle," but an ever-renewing, endless middle. Readers find themselves always in the middle of Lily's plot.

LILY'S (UNREALIZED) VOCATIONAL PLOT

If one center of *The Small House at Allington* is arguably the start of the vocational plot, what, then, is Lily's vocation? Her first profession of vocational devotion to her mother suggests that Lily adopts the role of spinster caregiver to her elderly parent. However, Mrs. Dale is capable of living alone and even expects and welcomes her daughters' departure to their marital homes. In stating her object Lily's language, is, in fact, the language of mutual partnership ("we") that mirrors marriage, not the singularity of the vocational plot. Does Lily treat her mother like a new husband, attempting to resurrect a pseudo marriage plot for herself? If so, her mother resists, hoping Lily will marry Johnny Eames. Lily's filial devotion is one of many suggested, but unrealized, vocations for Lily in *Small House* and *Last Chronicle*.

Lily enters her engagement with Crosbie idealizing the role of Victorian wife. She claims early in the novel, "I have only one wish in the world, and that is, to be your wife – to be able to share everything with you. The sooner we can be together the better it will be" (Trollope *SH* 127). Lily's "vocation" as wife corresponds in Lily's definition to actively taking care of Crosbie and their home. Lily proposes helping Crosbie ("working for him") to ameliorate their economic situation. She wants to be "useful:" "I want to be with you at once that I may be of service to you. Would that you and I were alone together, that I might do everything for you. I sometimes think that a very poor man's wife is the happiest because she does do everything" (Trollope *SH* 161). Crosbie by contrast wants Lily to have her own occupation separate from him, thinking, "Nor must he allow her to suppose that either he or she were to depend solely upon the other for the amusements and employments of life" (Trollope *SH* 119). While Lily considers that wifehood will be her vocation, Crosbie expects that Lily will have some other "occupation" which suggests that he never intends marriage (which prohibits all other occupations) or that he has another, more progressive conception of it. Given that Lily never marries, this traditional vocational option is quickly dismissed.

Lily's vocational naiveté is explicitly questioned by Lady Julia, a minor character who provides a knowing view into the future of Lily's single life. When Lady Julia asks Lily about her "purpose," Lily feigns confusion. Lady Julia wishes that a newly engaged Lily, "might be made happy in that sphere of life to which it had pleased God to call her," continuing, "We all try, my dear, but many of us fail to try with sufficient energy of purpose. It is only by doing our duty that we can hope to be happy, whether in single life or in married." (Trollope *SH* 130). Lady Julia advocates attention to vocation but also effort to discover and create fulfillment. Thinking that her engagement makes her vocation obvious, Lily is offended, "But why did she tell me to do my duty? I didn't go there to have a sermon preached to me" (Trollope *SH* 133). While Lily seems not to

understand Lady Julia's concerns, when she suggests releasing Crosbie from the engagement a few pages later, she also indicates that she is aware of other vocations and is able to be happy in them. Her suggestion is accompanied by the reassurance that she can occupy herself: "I would sooner be so divorced from you, then cling to you as a log that must drag you down under the water, and drown you in trouble and care. I would – indeed I would. If you go, of course that kind of thing is over for me. But the world has more than that – much more; and I would make myself happy – yes, my love, I would be happy. You need not fear that." (Trollope *SH* 158). Recall that Lily and Crosbie are still engaged, and remain so for a time after this conversation. Lily's promise to remain happy is for Crosbie, and yet her choice to remain single ("that kind of thing is over for me") occurs even before the engagement is broken. Lily both *chooses* to remain single, and yet does not fill her singlehood with a well-defined occupation as Lady Julia recommends. Lily becomes a paradox of a character: unoccupied, bored and dissatisfied, she is also Trollope's workhorse, reappearing throughout 1500 pages and two novels. Lily has a function rather than a vocation; her work is formal, if not ideological.

Trollope's short story, "Never, never – never, never" published in America in 1875 is a parody of Lily Dale's continued refusals in which Trollope apparently makes fun of her refusal to love the perfectly good Johnny Eames. Each chapter ends with the refrain "never, never – never, never" and this negative becomes the connecting refrain between parts of this condensed novel, serving as an example in miniature of the way that Lily's refusals serve to connect the story, rather than conclude it. The story is written in three volumes with chapters, giving the illusion of length, and highlighting the importance of length in Lily's story. In its emphatic concision, "Never"

demonstrates the role of refusal to embrace a vocation in lengthening the plot of *Small House* and its sequel.[75]

Lily claims to be, alternately, a widow, an old maid, and regretful of her declaration to remain single. Each role that Lily declares conjures up an associated plot, expanding her narrative possibilities in theory, remaining unrealized in practice. In *Small House,* Lily prefers the term "widow," a role with its own associations that allow Lily both time for mourning *and* the possibility of remarriage. Immediately upon being jilted in *Small House,* Lily declares herself a widow, telling her mother of Crosbie, "Of course I shall always love him, and must feel almost as you felt when you lost my father." (Trollope *SH* 336).[76] When refusing Johnny's proposal and explaining the refusal to her mother, Lily again uses widowhood as her excuse, telling Johnny that she cannot marry him because it is "as though" she had married to Crosbie (Trollope *SH* 596). Widowhood allows the possibility of remarriage, but since Crosbie is alive, Lily denies herself even that option. Lily tells her mother that she cannot marry Johnny because she is in love with another man: "I am as you are, mamma – widowed," going on to say that if Alexandrina died (as she does in *Last Chronicle*) she would be constrained by her earlier promise to Crosbie (Trollope *SH* 631, 630). At Bell's wedding,

[75] Trollope's "The Parson's Daughter of Oxney Colne" (1861) is another jilting story that resembles *Small House.* In this short story, Patience Woolsworthy, who has long remained single and cared for her father, starts a romance with the nephew of an old maid neighbor, Captain Broughton. After they are engaged, Captain Broughton wants Patience to recognize that her station is below his. She refuses and declares that they should both be free of the engagement. Captain Broughton goes on to marry an heiress and Patience continues to care for her father and members of the community: "she spends her time in the concerns of the parish. In her own eyes, she is a confirmed old maid; and such is my opinion also. The romance of her life was played out that summer. She never sits now lonely on the hillside thinking how much she might do for one whom she really loved. But with a large heart she loves many, and, with no romance, she works hard to lighten the burdens of those she loves." Patience's story differs from Lily's in two important points: she seems satisfied with the old maid role, and her story is limited to a few pages.

[76] Margaret Marwick offers the convincing reading that Lily thinks of herself as a widow because she and Crosbie have consummated their engagement (84).

Lily excuses her gaiety by again referring to her pseudo-widow status: "'Wives when they have lost their husbands will still eat and laugh' she said to herself, 'and he is not dead like that'" (Trollope *SH* 664). While this classification of widow is not literally true for Lily, Christopher Noble points out that widowhood had the status of an occupation: "For Victorian widows vacancy was a vocation, requiring bodily entombment in crape and prolonged social seclusion. In cultural (though not legal) terms the Victorian widow continued to be married to her husband long after his demise, her identity subsumed in his absence; loss was her occupation" (Noble 178). What Mrs. Dale refers to as Lily's "perpetual widowhood" is actually an inverse widowhood (Trollope *SH* 596). If Crosbie dies, she is released; if his wife dies, she sees her promise as renewed. Compare this to Eleanor Bold who is widowed in the interval between *The Warden* and *Barchester Towers,* freeing her to be a more prominent character in the latter novel and have yet another marriage plot. By contrast, in this entirely immobile position, Lily is perpetually single. If she had married Crosbie happily, her only hope of returning later in Barchester would be as a minor character, as Eleanor Arabin (née Harding, formerly Bold) does in *The Last Chronicle of Barset.*

Between *Small House* and *Last Chronicle,* Lily shifts from considering herself a widow to considering herself an old maid, a change in terms that is accompanied by a change in plot expectations. Lily is the first to indirectly declare herself an old maid, telling her mother in an aside that perhaps mothers do tire of their children when they "turn out old maids" and writing "Lilian Dale – Old Maid" in her diary, but does not fully embrace the label until *The Last Chronicle of Barset* when, no longer in love with Crosbie, she *still* will not marry Eames, and she declares herself an old maid rather than a widow (Trollope *SH* 336, *LC* 358).[77] McMaster claims succinctly that Lily has reasons for refusing Johnny and after the reasons disappear her decision remains the same:

[77] J Hillis Miller writes of Lily's act as a performative: "Lily Dale's double bind leads her not just to say no to Johnny Eames's repeated proposals, but to proffer another odd kind of speech act. She

> For Alice Vavasor and Emily Wharton and Grace Crawley and the rest say no, for good if not quite sufficient reasons, only up to the penultimate chapter, but Lily says no right to the end of two long novels, and for no reason at all. Like Crosbie, she tries to rationalize her rejection of Johnny in various ways, both in *The Small House* and in *The Last Chronicle*: she still loves another man, or Johnny is fickle, or he gets too many people to plead for him, or she doesn't love him. But all these reasons crumble away, and in the second novel at least Trollope makes it plain not only that she now despises Crosbie but that she has come to love Johnny, as a man though not as a god. (McMaster "Unfortunate" 135)

McMaster claims that Lily says no because she is "enamored of suffering." ("Unfortunate" 136). But the categorical shift from widow to old maid is not simply inexplicable; it is precisely what allows Lily's story to continue "through two long novels." Lily's use of the terms widow and old maid suggest two separate plots, one of patient and endless mourning, another of singular occupation.

The challenge of defining Lily's occupation is bolstered further by her resistance to typical maiden activities. When decorating the church for Christmas in *The Last Chronicle of Barset,* Lily approaches the task with an antagonistic boredom that singles her out among the church-decorating women. She declares "I wouldn't tie another twig … for all the Christmas pudding that was ever boiled" before going on to admit that she has decorated the church for six years in which time the ranks have dwindled from Lily and her then-unmarried sister Bell to Lily, the curate's wife, and her middle-aged friends (Trollope *LC* 153). Lily is bored, too spirited, familiar and critical of the clergy, calling the curate "fat" and telling his wife that he must not make his Christmas sermon too long

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declares herself an Old Maid. She writes, "Lilian Dale, Old Maid," in her diary as a decision and promise never to change" (53).

(Trollope *LC* 153). Lily is displeased and annoyed with her prospects as a single woman, telling Grace:

> I do so hate myself for being such an old maid… I see it in people's eyes, and hear it in their voices. And they all talk to me as if I were very steady, and altogether removed from anything like fun and frolic. It seems to be admitted that if a girl does not want to fall in love, she ought not to care for any other fun in the world. If anybody made out a list of the old ladies in these parts, they'd put down Lady Julia, and mamma, and Mrs Boyce, and me, and old Mrs Hearne. The very children have an awful respect for me, and give over playing directly they see me. (Trollope *LC* 159-160)

Lily does not embrace the role Trollope gives her, making "vocation" seem like a misnomer for her plot. Yet this confusion of possibilities: daughter, widow, old maid, is precisely the point. Trollope shows that Lily can succeed formally even as the plot fails to expand on the promise of the vocational heroine ideologically. This fissure between form and ideology becomes another "slip" that heralds the disintegration of the vocational plot. What more can it *do* after *Miss Mackenzie* and *Miss Marjoribanks?*[78]

[78] Lily's resistance to typical old maid activities leaves her with a vocational vacancy which could be attributed to Trollope's politics on the Woman Question, which tend toward the conventional. In a review of *Can You Forgive Her?,* one reviewer remarks that "The story is a confirmation of the writer's position that the proper answer to the question, what a woman shall do with her life, is simply this – 'Fall in love, marry the man, have two children, and live happy ever afterwards,'" suggesting that Trollope takes a very traditional Victorian position on the question of female vocation ("Can You Forgive Her?" 241). Scholarship on Trollope and female vocations most often takes *Can You Forgive Her?,* in which Alice Vavasor vacillates between engagements to her cousin and another man, all while considering whether she is interested in another occupation beyond wifehood, as an example. Margaret F. King writes that Trollope uses Langham Place discourse to articulate Alice's career interests, but moves Alice (and Glencora Palliser) back into more traditional female roles (312-313). Talia Schaffer writes of Alice's plot as a compromise between marriage and vocation. While she is attracted to her cousin George Vavasor for the economic partnership he offers her, she loves John Grey, and ultimately makes the choice to marry him, and is compensated

NO END

Elizabeth Gaskell remarked while reading the novel in serial form, "I wish that Mr. Trollope would go on writing *Framley Parsonage* forever" (*Letters* 602). With Lily Dale, Trollope achieves the effect of an endless story. *The Athenaeum* writes in March 1864 after the publication of *Small House* that people have speculated as much about Lily and Johnny Eames as any living couple in the periodicals, implying that readers do not see the final pages of *Small House* as the end of her story ("The Small House at Allington" 437). *The London Review* writes, "No one shall ever call her his wife, if Mr. Trollope, her guardian, will follow our advice when he has to lead her forth again, as we hope he means to do, in the next novel of this series" ("The Small House at Allington" 494). In another instance of readers not treating *Small House* as the end of Lily, Trollope responds to a letter from the Rowe sisters in which they express their fondness for Lily Dale and ask her creator to comment on her prospects for marital bliss in the future (Trollope *Letters* 152). Readers speculate "She will make the most agreeable and estimable of old maids. It will be such a comfort to her mother, the widow, that Lily shall remain at the Small House – it will be such a blessing to the children of Dr. and Mrs. Crofts at Guestwick, – that for Mrs. Dale's sake and for Bell's sake, whom we care to see happy as well as Lily, we would rather not have her married and carried away. This is what comes of being an angel; your friends will never let you go about your own business, and the Allington people cannot spare Lily Dale" ("The Small House at Allington" 494). The image of this "angel," caring for her mother, performing the role of doting aunt, and serving "the people of Allington" casts Lily as old

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with a small career as the wife of an MP. For Schaffer and King, Trollope's ideological response to the question of female work in *Can You Forgive Her?* is ultimately conventional: he quells Alice's career desires and marries her off. However, this ideological approach to Trollope and vocation does not align with Trollope's *formal* interest in extending narrative. He successfully delays marriage in *Can You Forgive Her?* but in *The Small House at Allington*, he refuses that conclusion altogether.

maid in all its sacrificial glory. Though Mary Poovey points out that the Barsetshire novels were only considered part of a series in retrospect, readers intuit that Lily's story continues after the final pages of *Small House* ("Trollope's" 31).

Though Lily Dale occupies a small subplot in *The Last Chronicle of Barset,* reviewers uniformly mention her story as a main attraction of the novel. The *Athenaeum* writes, "How many, both men and women, have desired to know the sequel to the story of Lily Dale!" ("The Last Chronicle of Barset" 141). Lily gets top billing in chapter titles like, "Miss Lily Dale's Resolution," "Lily Dale Writes Two Words in Her Book," and "Lily Dale Goes to London" which promise readers more of their favorite heroine. She is introduced in *Last Chronicle* without being named. Instead the narrator offers a concise and simple retelling of her story, complete in three sentences, as a young lady whom Grace Crawley's cousin had loved, and whom Grace had developed a friendship with: "The name of the lady was Miss Lily Dale, and the name of the well-to-do cousin in London was Mr John Eames" (Trollope *LC* 51). Trollope shares with his readers a knowing familiarity – of course it is obvious to all who pick up *Last Chronicle* after "desiring to know the sequel to the story of Lily Dale" who this woman is.

Even after the *Last Chronicle* promises to be the end of Barsetshire and thus of Lily, readers *still* imagine what Lily is doing beyond the final pages. *The Athenaeum* writes that readers return to Lily in *Last Chronicle* with an appetite to hear more of her story, the review concludes by noting that readers are able to *continue* imagining a plot for Lily after finishing *Last Chronicle:* "The story of Lily Dale comes to a conclusion, in one sense, and on the whole it is satisfactory… in spite of all Mr. Trollope says, we persist in hoping that she will find a good man, whom she can make into hero enough to marry him… There is much delicate painting in this second appearance of Lily Dale, and

she loses none of the reader's interest" ("The Last Chronicle of Barset" 141).[79] Lily is a character who can be imagined "meanwhile" back at Allington, an activity many reviewers participate in between Lily's last scene at Bell's wedding and her return in *Last Chronicle***.** She seems, by contrast, to end the novel as a plotless old maid. The "still" and "still" of *The London Review's* response happily imagines Lily abiding motionless and timeless at Allington: "For aught we know – Mr. Trollope knows better than we do – Miss Lily Dale **…** lives with her mother still. And if there are no better and nobler *men* in the world than such as Mr. Trollope has yet introduced to her acquaintance, we would have the most lovable of women abide still in her maiden home." ("The Small House at Allington" 494). Declaring the *Last Chronicle* the *last* does little to dissuade readers who still imagine themselves in the middle of Lily's story.

Further, Trollope's official last words about Lily are far from so. Toward the end of *Last Chronicle,* Trollope signals that Lily "passes out of our sight. I can only ask the reader to believe that she was in earnest, and express my own opinion, in the last words that I shall ever write respecting her, that she will live and die as Lily Dale," and yet the conclusion to Johnny's story includes multiple mentions of Lily (Trollope *LC* 798). As Johnny comes to terms with her refusal, he is "swearing that he would never give another thought to Lily," and pages later "Johnny thought of Lily Dale" (Trollope *LC* 818, 821). Trollope playfully teases readers who will continue to think of Lily, too. But the last word is not left to Johnny. Upon finally guaranteeing her engagement to Grantly, Grace Crawley writes a letter to her friend: "'I declare I don't believe it even yet,' she said, in the letter which she wrote to Lily Dale that night"' (Trollope *LC* 846). Trollope manages to both officially declare the end of Lily's story and avoid bringing Lily's story to an end, signaling the

[79] Mary Poovey writes, "By shifting the relative prominence of characters from novel to novel and by putting the character traits he has already established to various uses, Trollope was able both to create the impression that the lives of these characters continued even when the narratives stopped" (Poovey "Trollope's" 39).

ultimate success of his strategy of slips and middles to assist readers in imagining her existence in the world of Barsetshire after the last page of the *Last Chronicle.*

THE USE AND ABUSE OF LILY DALE

The mere engagement of Lily Dale gains its narrative use from its slipperiness; Trollope's plot is generated by the half-troths of Lily and Crosbie. Crosbie offers the excuse that he was only "half engaged" to Lily, claiming first, "I was part engaged to that other girl before," downplaying the commitment by not naming Lily, and then that "I was already half engaged to Lady Alexandrina de Courcy" (Trollope *SH* 272, 270). "The reader" the narrator goes on, "will understand that this half-engagement was a fiction." (Trollope *SH* 270). Half-engagements are central to Trollope's fictions. By refusing closure, mere engagements (half, partial, never trustworthy) sustain Lily's plot in the middle.

But Lily does not find much fulfillment in the plot generation of single women. Lily hates being the subject of gossip (a sort of plot creation).[80] When, in *Small House,* the parlor maid indicates that she is aware Lily has been jilted, "Lily for a moment felt angry,": "The girls' manner was intended to convey sympathy; but it did convey pity" and she tells her uncle "do not talk about it"

[80] In *Last Chronicle,* Johnny's clerks imagine the details of his and Lily's love affair in ways that far outstrip the reality of the situation: "The little history had grown to be very touching and pathetic, having received, no doubt, some embellishments from the imaginations of the gentleman of the Income-tax Office. It was said of him that he had been in love from his early boyhood, that at sixteen he had been engaged, under the sanction of the nobleman now deceased and of the young lady's parents, that contracts of betrothal had been drawn up, and things done very unusual in private families these days, and that then there had come a stranger into the neighborhood just as the young lady was beginning to reflect whether she had a heart of her own or not, and that she had thrown her parents, and the noble lord, and the contract, and poor Johnny Eames to the winds, and had – Here the story took different directions as told by different men" (Trollope *LC* 142). This imagined plot, far more inflated than the real story, teases readers by suggesting the suspense that is not included. When the story diverges "as told by different men" there is the suggestion of indecency that cannot be recorded.

(Trollope *SH* 331). Far from taking pride in her single state, Lily considers her own refusals of Johnny to be "mawkish" and her reasons as both sincere and annoying:

> 'I have made up my mind about it. I shall never become any man's wife. Mamma and I are all in all together, and we shall remain together.' As soon as these words were out of her mouth, she hated herself for having spoken them. There was a maudlin, missish, namby-pamby sentimentality about them which disgusted her. She specially desired to be straightforward, resolute of purpose, honest-spoken, and free from all touch of affectation. And yet she had excused herself from marrying John Eames after the fashion of a sick schoolgirl. (Trollope *Last Chronicle* 789)

Lily's language – "disgusted," "hated herself," "sick schoolgirl" – is almost shockingly harsh, especially so close to the final pages, where we would expect resolution or at least acceptance. Her words reveal a lack of satisfaction with her lot.

What do we do with this disappointment? How can Lily be a vocational single woman in form, and be so deprived of vocation in content? Laurie Langbauer makes the surprising claim, given the apparently bucolic, staid tenor of Barsetshire, that "Violence to women is necessary to keep Trollope's series running straight," pointing out examples of wives who are "kept in order" by physical means (115, 116). A sort of narrative violence is used against Lily Dale as a casualty of Trollope's formal experiment.

Trollope, while he acknowledged that readers loved Lily, himself called her a "prig" (*Autobiography* 113). Some twentieth-century critics are ungenerous as well, calling Lily "perverse" or attributing to her "an element of self-laceration" (McMaster 135, Kincaid 127, Lerner unnumbered). Trollope attributes Lily's relationship with fans (and his success) to her misfortune: "It was because she could not get over her troubles that they loved her" (*Autobiography* 113). He deems her lack of fulfillment necessary. In fact, Trollope goes on after claiming that he has "never troubled himself"

about plot, to write about his intense relationship to his characters in terms that express just as strongly love and hate, writing that an author "can never know [his characters] well unless he can live with them in the full reality of established intimacy. They must be with them as he lies down to sleep, and as he wakes from his dreams. He must learn to hate them and to love them. He must argue with them, quarrel with them, forgive them, and even submit to them." (Trollope *Autobiography* 145-146). It is difficult to recover Trollope's position toward or representation of his "prig" of a heroine as empowering. In submitting to his characters, Trollope allows them to be disgusted, to hate themselves, to be unsatisfied. To have a vocation, or in Byler's words to be "useful" is also to be "used," to be brought out again and again for readers. While Lily Dale is an almost inexhaustible narrative engine, in *Hester* Margaret Oliphant worries that these terribly useful characters may become over used.

"PRACTICALLY THE QUEEN OF REDBOROUGH": THE MAGNITUDE OF CATHERINE VERNON

Hester opens with the Vernon family history of Hester's father's disgrace and his cousin Catherine's success. John Vernon and his cousin Catherine are heirs to the Vernon family bank – he taking an active role, she passively ignored by most as "a girl who knew as much about money as her pony did" (Oliphant *H* 8). The two are expected to marry, but John Vernon weds Hester's mother instead. He leads the bank to ruin and absconds to France; Catherine, who saves the bank, turns out to be her grandfather's rightful successor. She continues to run Vernon's successfully and, at the opening of the novel, uses her wealth to house family members including Hester and her mother in the Vernonry, a community for Catherine's poor relations. Hester and Catherine are "antagonists," an opposition exacerbated by Hester's romantic connection to both of Catherine's chosen

successors, the mild Harry, who Hester refuses, and the cunning Edward, who proposes to Hester on the eve of leaving the bank to ruin as her father did (Oliphant *H* 37).[81]

Described by a review in *The Academy* as "woman of genius," "local magnate," and "practically the queen of Redborough," Catherine Vernon is an outsized presence in the novel (Henley 6). Vernon is so attractive that "*All* the youth in Redborough at one time had been in love with [her]" and young girls are said to have their first crush on Catherine ("She had been the first love of more girls than she could count"), though she remains unmarried (Oliphant *H* 16, 24 emphasis mine). Catherine is reported to own "Almost the whole of Redborough" and "she was a sort of amateur grandmother in numbers of young households" (Oliphant *H* 54, 24). A novel about banking invites attention to the quantitative which inflects descriptions of Catherine. Expressions of magnitude and measurement – "all the youth" "count" "numbers" "whole" – encourage readers to keep a balance of Catherine's achievements, roles, and responsibilities. Catherine's "genius for business" leads her to save the family bank not once but *twice* and her great benevolence allows her to act as patroness of *both* the Vernon Almshouse and a private residence, the Vernonry (Oliphant *H* 22). Catherine is businesswoman, philanthropist and legend, lending her name to most streets in town and serving as the "living patroness" invoked by the local church, St. Catherine of Alexandria (Oliphant *H* 23).

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[81] The novel was described in *The Saturday Review* as "wearisome" and a "story of trade with commonplace incidents" ("Three Novels" 90). But even *Hester's* attitude to trade is not commonplace. To return to an earlier example, Miss Matty's emotional connection to the Town and Country bank in *Cranford* motivates her to insist on accepting a worthless bill. In *Hester,* Catherine assures bank clerk Mr. Rule, "I don't know who is to stop me from doing what I like with my own [money]," taking a much more active role as investor (Oliphant 21). The combination of the banking plot and gender is often the focus of scholarship on *Hester*. Patricia E. Johnson argues that the novel shows the "hidden investment" Victorian women had in business (2). Aeron Hunt uses *Hester* to investigate the role of heredity in Victorian ideas of business savvy, wondering "Could talents *particular to business* be defined and transmitted?" (144). Hunt points out that Catherine, while she has inherited her grandfather's genius for business, by remaining unmarried, is also the roadblock to the continuance of that hereditary gift (161).

"I WOULD MARRY… IF I WERE YOU!"

The excess of Catherine's vocational plot informs a reading of Hester's.[82] Like all vocational heroines, Hester rejects marriage in favor of work. Hester's desire for work is constant. Upon her arrival at the Vernonry she wants to use her French upbringing to teach romance languages, claiming, "I want something to do" (Oliphant *H* 65). Catherine is Mrs. John's ally in opposing this scheme, explaining to Hester that she need not work because Catherine will provide: "Women have never worked for their living in our family, and, so far as I can help it, they never shall" (Oliphant *H* 72). Hester notes that this is a falsehood; Catherine herself can provide for the family *because* she has worked. Catherine takes exception:

> That was different. I did not stoop down to paltry work. I took the place which – others had abandoned. I was wanted to save the family, and thank Heaven I could do it. For that, if you were up to it, and occasion required, you should have my permission to do anything. Keep the books, or sweep the floors, what would it matter? (Oliphant *H* 72).[83]

The distinction Catherine makes between exceptional women in singular circumstances ("save the family") and workaday occupations ("paltry work") is built on context. Keeping the books and sweeping the floors seem paltry work, but not when part of a familial rescue mission. Catherine's claim to exceptionality has, perhaps, the opposite of the intended effect. Rather than convince Hester that she is not exceptional, it stokes Hester's desire not only for occupation but vocation; not paltry work, but saving the family. When Mr. Rule relates the details of Catherine's first rescue of the

[82] Hester shares Catherine's excesses. All the available young men fall for Hester, including Harry, Edward and Roland (301).
[83] Hunt writes that Catherine is dismissive of Hester's aspirations because Catherine recognizes the role her wealth played in her ability to save the bank; Hester is poor (167).

bank, Hester is convinced that she could meet the same singular need: "If she had been in these circumstances she would have acted like Catherine. The story of her mother in her gentle ignorance, which the old clerk thought so much of, did not affect the high-spirited girl as did the picture of the other putting herself in the breach, taking upon her own shoulders the weight of the falling house. Hester felt that she, too, could have done this" (Oliphant *H* 300). Catherine's insistence that female vocations are exclusive motivates Hester to identify herself as one of the chosen.

Hester's desire for work is accompanied by refused proposals. Her commitment to celibacy at the close of the novel is a *return* to Hester's response to Harry earlier in the novel. When Harry proposes initially, she rejects him saying, "I would rather not marry – any one. I don't see the need for it" (Oliphant *H* 138-139). Like other vocational heroines before her, Hester is required by a disbelieving audience to repeat her stance ("I don't want to have – any one' and 'I am not in love with you – or anybody' [Oliphant *H* 140, 137]). The absolute after the hyphen states, in the face of our own reading habits, that Hester does not want to marry at all, now or later, Henry, Edward or Roland, despite what her brief consideration of Edward might suggest.

This early refusal is the setup to a vocational plot that emerges later. When Hester contemplates the choice to elope with Edward or remain and attempt to solve the banking troubles he leaves behind him, the reader must look analeptically toward the middle for answers. When Harry suggests that the bank is in trouble, Hester anticipates her choice:

> Harry's revelation brought such a contrast before her, that Hester could but stare at the two pictures with dumb consternation. On one side the bank in gloomy disarray, its ordinary course of action stopped, the business 'all wrong,' poor people besieging its doors for their money, the clerks bewildered, and not knowing what to do; and poor Harry faithful, but incapable, knowing no better than they. On the other, Edward, in all a bridegroom's excitement, with the woman he loved beside him,

> travelling far away into the night, flushed with pleasure, with novelty, with the success of his actions whatever they were, and with the world before him. It seemed to Hester that she saw the two scenes, although she herself would have to be an actor in one of them if it ever came to pass. She saw them in the most insignificant details. The bank … full of angry and miserable people cursing its very name – while the fugitives, with every comfort about them, were fast getting out of sight and hearing of everything that could recall what they had left. Deserter! traitor! Were these the words that would be used? and was he going to fly from the ruin he had made? (Oliphant *H* 397).

Hester imagines two scenes that she will need to choose between: staying in Redborough to help the bank while Edward absconds or eloping with Edward; a vocational plot that mirrors Catherine's, or a romance plot.[84] Hester's imagination of two alternatives, the moment of choice – marriage or mission – in the vocational plot recalls an earlier such example in Chapter Two from *The Daisy Chain*. On the verge of a proposal that would take her away from her commitment to family and Cocksmoor, Ethel May wonders,

> That resolution [to remain single] came before her, but it had been unspoken; it could not be binding, and, if her notion were really right, the misty brilliant future of mutual joy dazzled her! But there was another side: her father oppressed and lonely, Margaret ill and pining, Mary, neither companion nor authority, the children running

[84] Johnson also sees Hester as choosing between two plots: "In one major plotline, Hester Vernon is courted by three different suitors, while in the second major drama of the novel revolves around Catherine Vernon's leadership of the Vernon bank. The novel begins and ends with major crises in the bank's history and Catherine's efforts to resolve them. At the novel's conclusion, the two plots come together, and Hester must choose between the man she loves, Edward Vernon, and her loyalty to the Vernon bank" (4).

wild; and she, who had mentally vowed never to forsake her father, far away, enjoying her own happiness. (Yonge *DC* 369-370)

Oliphant's "on the one side" echoes Yonge's "there was another side." The two long, comma-filled sentences describing Hester and Ethel's choice, the two possible plots, show the layers of complication added to the vocational plot since Ethel May stood imagining two similar alternatives. Ethel places the "misty brilliant future of mutual joy" alongside a list of responsibilities. For Ethel, the choice of mission over marriage is clear, quickly decided and sacrificial. Hester describes both the vocational option of rescuing the bank and the romantic option of leaving with Edward in detail. For Hester, the choice of mission over romance is complicated, richly detailed, and exciting. Both Hester and Ethel cite duty in their considerations, but Hester's duty to the bank is accompanied by public excitement, rather than private domestic cares. Later, when Ethel reassures herself of her vocation, she claims, "'My course and aim are straight on, and He will direct my paths'" (Yonge *DC* 564). Whereas Ethel doubts and marvels that she will certainly find something to do (God will grant her *one* vocational path), Hester's options are crowded by "insignificant details" and "hot partisanship" (Oliphant *H* 397). Her path is not clear and directed; it is cluttered, anxious.

When Hester goes to meet Edward, in response to his suggestion to elope on the eve of the banking crisis, her decision to be part of the business plot and not part of the elopement plot is unintelligible to Edward. He, like well-trained readers of marriage plots, cannot believe that Hester would meet him as an actor in the business plot, encouraging him to take responsibility for his speculations and return to the bank. Edward thinks her presence can only indicate a willingness to elope, and that some gentle persuasion is all he needs to encourage her along the romantic plot. When they meet "Under the Holly," Edward is incredulous and disbelieving of her intentions, "Not going!... that is a pretty thing to tell me just when you have meet me for the purpose. I know you want to be persuaded" (Oliphant *H* 402-403). Hester returns the conversation to the bank; Edward

speaks to the conventions of lovers stealing away in the night, emphasizing haste and secrecy, assuming Hester has given her mother a hint of her plans. The two have chosen different plots.

Why, then, does Catherine discourage Hester from following her own plot? It is *not* surprising for Hester to meet resistance in her singular desires, but it is surprising that after Catherine acknowledges their affinity and receives Hester's aide in saving the bank a second time, she *still* discourages Hester's vocational wishes:

> 'It is a great pity,'' she [Catherine] said, 'a girl like you, that instead of teaching or doing needlework, you should not go to Vernon's, as you have a right to do, and work there.'
>
> 'I would I could,' Hester said, with eager eyes.
>
> 'They tell me you wanted to do something like what I had done. Ah! You did not know it was all to be done over again. This life is full of repetitions. People think the same thing does not happen to you twice over, but it does in my experience. You would soon learn. A few years' work, and you would be an excellent man of business; but it can't be.'
>
> 'Why cannot it be? You did it. I should not be afraid –'
>
> 'I was old. I was past my youth. All that sort of thing was over for me. It could be in one way – if you could make up your mind to marry Harry –'
>
> 'I could not – I could not! I will never marry.'
>
> 'It is a great pity you cannot – I think it is a mistake. I have done him a great deal of injustice in my time; but one finds out sooner or later that brains are not everything. There is another man, and he has brains, who would marry you if you would have him, Hester – Roland Ashton. Take him – it is better in the end.'
>
> 'Oh, do not ask me! I will never marry,' Hester cried.

> Then Catherine suddenly sat upright in her chair, and clasped her hands together with almost wild emphasis. 'I would marry,' she cried, 'If I were you!" (Oliphant *H* 454)

One possible reading of this scene is that Catherine's refusal of Hester's desire to work, her suggestion of two separate suitors, is antagonistic. She, who is "like" Hester, understands how this mystifying refusal to allow Hester permission to follow in her own path, her guarding of her own singularity, will encourage the "perverse" girl to pursue it nonetheless (Oliphant *H* 455, 102). But what if we take Catherine's "wild emphasis" in earnest?

Why discourage work? Because "it was all to be done again," "this life is full of repetitions" the same thing does "happen to you twice over." In Catherine's experience, marriage is easier, less exhausting, less burdensome, than the vocational plot. Oliphant depicts Catherine's exhaustion: "It was hers rather to feel that deep impossibility of rebeginning;" "but after that no more – no more;" "she could do no more;" "I can't bear any more," Catherine announces to an appealing Ellen Merridew (her cousin and sometime dependent), and then again "I can't bear any more." (Oliphant *H* 438, 441). The vocational plot, which repeats and repeats, is too much. For Catherine, the vocational plot is burdened with more events than marriage and domestic life. Stuck in an endless middle, Catherine advises Hester to choose an end in marriage. Catherine's own end comes in death, but even her death is crowded, as "the whole population" of Redborough accompanies the funeral procession (Oliphant *H* 456). Choice is a privilege hard won by the nineteenth century vocational heroine; it is also a burden.

The final pages of *Hester* return us to the beginning of the novel. "Her life had been full of exertion and occupation since that night when Rule called upon her at the Grange" (Oliphant *H* 24), "Since then how much she had found to do!" (Oliphant *H* 24). While we may be assured that Catherine has never missed the "absorbing affections" of wife and motherhood, perhaps the reason

is not only that she has been entirely satisfied with her life, (in which she has acted as wife, mother, and grandmother), but that she has been so absorbed otherwise (Oliphant *H* 24). The exclamation points and "fullness" that looked like triumph four-hundred pages ago sound exhausting when reread through the lens of Catherine's advice to Hester. No wonder Catherine has declared a retirement in the opening pages. No wonder that retirement has been cut short. As Lily Dale and Catherine know, once a vocational heroine, always a vocational heroine.

BEYOND THE END: "I CAN'T BEAR ANY MORE"

When it comes to Hester's fate, Catherine's wild if earnest advice likely goes unheeded, "And as for Hester, all that can be said for her is that there are two men whom she may choose between, and marry either if she please – good men both, who will never wring her heart. Old Mrs Morgan desires one match, Mrs John another. What can a young woman desire more than to have such a possibility of choice" (Oliphant *H* 456). But it is Redborough visitor Emma Ashton who can think of nothing more than such a choice, and Hester who fails to understand what to others is implicit – when Emma talks of a girl's "chance" in marriage as if it is obvious, Hester plays dumb because she would rather it was not obvious (Oliphant *H* 226). Oliphant's final paragraph leaves open the possibility that Hester does pursue the vocational path, but also suggests that if before wife and motherhood were limiting, now the vocational plot is taxing as well. We have seen, in the course of the nineteenth century vocational plot the expansion of roles for women – a humble store for Miss Matty; caretaking and teaching for Lucy Snowe; philanthropy for Rachel Curtis; investing, nursing, and writing for Margaret Mackenzie, filial devotion, societal organization, and electioneering for Lucilla Marjoribanks. But expansion leads, in time, to overextension, a problem recorded for Lily Dale, Catherine Vernon, and Hester, who struggle with the breakdown of the vocational plot. Lily

struggles to find occupation, fulfillment and vocation *despite* opportunity, as Trollope demonstrates how the usefulness of the singlewoman heroine formally becomes a burden within the story. In the plainest of terms, Catherine suggests to Hester that the life of the vocational single woman is exhausting.

Oliphant suggests that in 1883, rather than struggle to create a plot for an unmarried, vocational heroine, writers imbue these heroines with too heavy a narrative burden, saving banks not once, but twice, caring for entire communities. Catherine's caution about the endless and fantastic extremes to which the plot of vocational singleness has progressed anticipates another moment for narrative innovation – from plot back to plotlessness. Just as the ending of *Hester* sends us analeptically beyond the final pages and back to the opening, so, too, does the breakdown of the vocational plot for Lily Dale and Catherine Vernon constitute a "rebeginning." In looking ahead to the single heroine in the final years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, we are returned to the plotless old maids of earlier in the century.

CODA: THE PLOTLESS MODERN SINGLE WOMAN

Within the span of about fifteen years, from the publication of *Cranford,* starting in 1851, to the publication of *The Last Chronicle of Barset* in 1867, the plot of vocational singleness establishes conventions and tests its limits at both sides, from the highly-engineered plot extremes of Lucilla Marjoribanks to the narrative use and abuse of Lily Dale. In one sense, this project records the history of a plot: from a narrative vacuum for single women, a plot emerges in response to a specific historical moment, it codifies, expands, and disintegrates when it has achieved its ideological end. While major plots like the *bildungsroman* can be located through the big sweep of literary history, the vocational plot suggests that other plots have a lifecycle tied to a specific historical moment. Though my primary examples are concentrated in two decades (with the exception of *Hester*), the vocational plot continues to appear during the latter half of the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth. In Christina Rossetti's story, "Commonplace" (1870), Catherine, one of three sisters, never expects to marry and serves as a maiden mother who ends the story optimistic, "my future seems further off than yours; but I certainly have a future, and I can wait" (Rossetti 142). In Thomas Hardy's short story, "Interlopers at the Knapp" (1888), Sally Hall also serves as a maiden mother. Sally receives two proposals, but remains single claiming, "I'm happy enough as I am; and don't mean to marry at all." In Margaret Oliphant's *Kirsteen* (1890), a woman who is disappointed in love early in life leaves home to become a famous mantua-maker and is later able to purchase her family estate. *Mona Maclean, Medical Student* (1892) by Margaret Georgina Todd follows a dedicated female doctor, "a young woman with a position, a mission, and £300 a year in her own right," as she attempts to solve the problem of the double burden by marrying a fellow physician Dr. Dudley, and opening a practice together (Wallace 504). Annie S. Swan's *Elizabeth Glen, M.B.* (1895) is also the story of a female doctor who approaches medicine as philanthropy. The narrator, a married friend of

Elizabeth, assures readers on the first page that "she is a woman of so large a heart and so wide an experience that I have often said wifehood and motherhood could scarcely improve her in that respect" (Swan 2). In *Joanna Traill, Spinster* (1894), the heroine plays the role of guardian to her orphaned siblings and "philanthropises" ("Joanna Traill, Spinster" 183). These examples from 1870-1895, while each interesting in their own right, conform to the conventions of the already established vocational plot; they are both more conventional and less canonical than many of my earlier examples.

In some later examples of the vocational plot, including George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) the vocational heroine mingles with the new woman. In a meta-textual turn, spinster Rhoda Nunn of *The Odd Women* has a vocation helping middle class single women find occupations that allow them financial independence. Rhoda's plot conforms to the typical vocational form: she heartily disavows marriage in favor of dedication to the typing school she runs with fellow old maid Miss Barfoot and like other vocational heroines before her, receives a tempting proposal of marriage, but stays the course. One of her students, Monica Madden, represents the new woman plot: after working as a seamstress and typist, she marries only to find that her husband is jealous and controlling; she dies in childbirth.

This project purposefully elides a consideration of new woman literature popular in the last decade of the Victorian era and during the Edwardian era for a number of reasons. First, the new woman novel is a well-studied place to look for insights on women and work.[85] Second, frequently in new woman novels the heroine marries and endures an *unhappy* or even abusive marriage (as does

[85] See Tessa Magnum *Married, Middlebrow, and Militant: Sarah Grand and the New Woman Novel* (1998), Gail Cunningham *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (1978), Lyn Pykett *The "Improper" Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (1992), and the chapters "Bachelor Girls and the New Woman Heroine" in Liggins and "Sensation and New Woman Fiction" in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing,* edited by Linda Peterson (2015)

Monica in *The Odd Women*). Also, frequently, the heroine bears an illegitimate child and understandably has less time for discerning her vocation while caring for the child and managing to carve a place for herself in a disapproving culture (as in Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* [1895] or Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* [1891]). In each case, either unhappily married or fallen, she falls outside my definition of single. Finally, often, work in the new woman novel is work for a living, without the redeeming rewards of vocational fulfillment. Nicola Beauman writes that twentieth-century single women begin working in office clerical roles (41). While an important step for women in the workforce, this work has a decidedly different character than Ethel May's church-building in *The Daisy Chain.* More importantly though, in the Introduction, I outlined a number of valences of vocation, which in the case of the vocational plot, applies most aptly to singleness itself and not the occupation chosen to fill the single woman's time. For the shopgirls and the typists of the late nineteenth century, plots focus on work and all of the opportunities and challenges it offers, rather than the discernment of a vocation to celibacy. These plots – the new woman plot and the vocational plot – are linked, but not the same.

Rather than catalogue the fictional representations of the single girl in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this project moves ahead to another moment of change for the single woman. I have argued that the vocational plot in the mid-century was in part a response to demographic shifts that came to light in the 1851 census. The interwar years in the twentieth century created another such gender imbalance revealed in the 1921 census. Nicola Beauman writes that there were almost two million more women than men in Britain in the 1920s, an imbalance resulting from years of male emigration to the colonies, the Spanish flu, and most tragically and significantly, the First World War (41). Sixty years after W.R. Greg labeled unmarried women "redundant," newspaper headlines revived the language of surplus that plagued the single woman in the Victorian era, declaring "Problem of the Surplus Woman – Two Million who can Never Become Wives" and

resurrecting the suspect solution of shipping single women to the colonies (Nicholson xiii).[86] As one character in F.M. Mayor's *The Rector's Daughter* (1924) describes it "those crowds of girls getting older, and all unmarried" and "hardly any of my friends have married" (20, 76). The situation is familiar. Yet, given the striking resemblance of the situation of the unmarried woman in 1851 and 1921, these two historical moments are rarely paired.

Described by Ruth Adam as "the era of the spinster" the 1920s has no shortage of literary representations of unmarried women, from the fantastic witch in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926), to the lesbian heroine in Radclyffe Hall's *The Unlit Lamp* (1924), and the triumphant London transplant Muriel Hammond in Winnifred Holtby's *The Crowded Street* (1924) (100). More commonly, these literary old maids have remarkably dull vocations. In his First World War story, "Mary Postgate" (1915), Rudyard Kipling represents an entirely plain, plotless old maid. Mary is a companion to Miss Fowler, characterized by "speech…as colorless as her eyes" (Kipling 179). Like Mitford's "Aunt Martha" a century earlier, she fills the devoted old maid role without creating any particular interest, "she supplied the odd place at the Rector's or the Doctor's table at half an hour's notice; she was a sort of public aunt to very many small children of the village street… she served on the Village Nursing Committee as Miss Fowler's nominee" (Kipling 179). She assists Miss Fowler in raising her orphaned nephew, Wynn, who is called to war and dies in a practice flight. She remains apparently unruffled in the direct aftermath of Wynn's death as she and Miss Fowler put all of their energy into clearing out Wynn's things, which are carefully catalogued: "schoolbooks, and atlases, unrelated piles of the *Motor Cyclist*, the *Light Car,* and catalogues of Olympia Exhibitions" (Kipling 187). She finds she can be useful when burning Wynn's personal items– she encounters a German

[86] For more on the generation of spinsters created after World War I, see Virginia Nicholson's *Singled Out* (2008) and Nicola Beauman's *A Very Great Profession* (1984). For scholarship on the literature of the twentieth-century spinster, see Beauman, Doan, Joannou, Liggins, and Mezei.

soldier who has crashed on Miss Fowler's property, and, in her own estimation, saves others trouble by refusing him medical help by waiting until he dies. While undoubtedly a story about the traumatic impact of war, it is also a story about the place of unmarried women in society: "This, for instance, was *her* work – work which no man, least of all Dr Hennis, would ever have done. A man, at such a crisis, would be what Wynn called a 'sportsman'; would leave everything to fetch help, and would certainly bring It into the house. Now a woman's business was to make a happy home for – for a husband and children. Failing these – it was not a thing one should allow one's mind to dwell upon – but – … A woman who had missed these things could still be useful – more useful than a man in certain respects." (Kipling 193). Vocation becomes violence. And the satisfaction of purpose gives Mary a glow, as she emerges after her post-bonfire indulgence of a hot bath looking "quite handsome" (Kipling 194). In a shocking departure from *Our Village,* the extreme shift from plotlessness to violence in the course of "Mary Postgate" suggests the limiting and unsatisfying options available to women who still crave purpose. "Mary Postgate" heralds the need for more innovation for single women – culturally, ideologically – and the boldness of unconventional answers.

A brief consideration of F.M. Mayor *The Rector's Daughter* (1924) and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) within the context of the nineteenth-century vocational plot is useful for understanding the legacy of the vocational heroine. I read these two novels analeptically, back through the mid-century vocational plot, in order to suggest that questions of marital status and narrative occupation remain inflected by the mid-nineteenth century vocational heroine, making a claim for her importance for our understanding of gender and the form of the novel.

"CURIOUSLY COMPLETE"

Sylvia Lynd writes in a review of *The Rector's Daughter* that "it is like a bitter *Cranford*" (691). In a complimentary review, Lynd's comparison of two short novels featuring unmarried women separated by nearly a century raises questions central to this study. How do the intervening 75 years make the heroine of *The Rector's Daughter* Mary Jocelyn's spinsterhood different from Miss Matty's? In other words, what does the vocational heroine achieve, ideologically and formally?

Mary Jocelyn lives alone with her father Canon Jocelyn at Dedmayne after her mother has died and her siblings have departed for marriages and careers of their own. The one exception is her handicapped older sister who returns home from an asylum when Mary is 22, providing Mary with her occupation for the better part of a decade. After her sister's death from a stroke, others start implying that Mary needs to find something else to do (perhaps marry), and Mary feels her own awkwardness and loneliness. She becomes friendly with a middle-aged clergyman, Robert Hebert, and everyone predicts their marriage. While he is on a trip to recover from rheumatism, he meets and marries a younger and prettier woman. After this romantic disappointment, Mary's friend Dora decides to champion Mary's writing (which her father has earlier dismissed as embarrassingly amateur). Mary is nervous when socializing with the London literary crowd with which Dora connects her and a conversational misstep results in no one looking at her poetry after all. Robert and his wife Kathy are not well-matched, and while spending time visiting her sister-in-law Kathy nearly leaves him. Robert confides in Mary his misgivings about his marriage and the two share a kiss. However, after Kathy has a botched operation that leaves her disfigured, Robert falls in love with his wife. Mary's father discovers her poems, reassesses them as good, and offers to send them to his editor, but dies shortly thereafter. Without her father to shepherd her writing through the process, the manuscript is rejected. Mary has no alternative but to leave her lifelong home in

Dedmayne to live with her Aunt after her father's death. Mary predeceases her aunt. The book closes with her friend Dora sending off Mary's poems one final time, and they are again rejected.

Each attempt at a plot for Mary – from a marriage to Robert, to an attempt to publish her poems, to an affair with the local curate – is thwarted. Robert marries someone else, three times her poems fail to be published, and Robert Hebert falls even more in love with his wife after contemplating an affair with Mary. In a novel with a plot, Mary is denied any part of it. Moreover, each of these thwarted events also avoids any narrative conflict. The most sensational event in the book, the illicit kiss shared by Mary and Robert, is effectively erased. Mary exercises discipline in avoiding Herbert until his wife returns, and he so completely falls back in love with her that the kiss is not only unspoken of but as good as forgotten: "Now there was no mistake, but complete understanding… it had never occurred to her that he would solve their difficulties by forgetting her" (Mayor 166). Instead, Mary comes to understand how Robert could love Kathy, and stands as Godmother for their baby. After her father's death, the narrator summarizes the static nature of the plot, "it appeared that Mary's life had come full circle back to the emptiness when Ruth [her sister] first died. There had been Dora, Brynhilda [her literary friend] and the hope of her writings, Mr. Herbert, and last Kathy… but thirty-nine is a less bitter age than thirty-five; she was able to face loneliness" (Mayor 190). Unlike Lily Dale, whose plot slips result in her stasis and also "hating herself," Mary manages to recuperate each unrealized plot into satisfaction. Mary recovers from the rejection of her manuscript and adjusts to an entirely unfamiliar life with her Aunt Lottie after her father's death, making friends with the spinsters in her new community, who "made her join a discussion society, took her to matinees, lectures, concerts, and political and philanthropic meetings. As for good works to share in, they were as plentiful as blackberries" (Mayor 203). She comes into her own late in the novel, with many friends, less shyness. The story continues to assertively return to stasis between each of these unrealized events.

When John Masefield writes that F.M. Mayor's spinster characters "go passively like poultry along all the tramways of their parishes" it sounds like all ground the vocational heroine won has been lost (404). Assessments of *The Rector's Daughter,* both current and contemporary, often characterize Mary as emblematic of spinster plotlessness. Beauman writes, "it was a life wherein nothing much happened, not much was expected and time endlessly and depressingly spun out. *The Rector's Daughter* (1924) is a novel … in exactly that mould" (45). Mary is *busy* with her daily domestic work, but this work is often presented as obligatory, rather than purposeful:

> Her solace, sometimes severe, were the duties that sprang up in the little home: the daily winding-up of two clocks, the weekly winding-up of three more; the morning paper, which she read all through to Aunt Lottie and later Aunt Lottie read all through to her, and the evening paper, in which the same news appeared in a still brighter form; the cat and dog, who wanted to be let in, and as soon as they were in to be let out, and as soon as they were out to be let in again; the knitting, which she set ready for Aunt Lottie, undid when she was gone to bed, and knitted up again to be ready for Aunt Lottie the next afternoon; the explanations and answers to questions, which must be repeated several times, for Aunt Lottie, though not deaf, was inquisitive and inattentive. (Mayor 206)

Mary's routine is both plotless and full, boring and also charitably kind. She performs what could be defined as vocational parish work in the language of a routine, "Of course she superintended the Sunday School, trained the choir, had a boys' Bible Class, and a Mothers' meeting" (Mayor 16). The "of course" deflates the material of an entire Charlotte Yonge novel into the tedium of a typical week. "Work, for Mary Jocelyn," writes Sybil Oldenfield, "is not manual drudgery, but it is drudgery of another kind… It is to listen sympathetically to the complaints of the village schoolmistress and to keep up some response to six hours of chat from rheumatic Miss Davey. It is to laugh at her

father's jokes – loudly enough for him to hear but not too loudly lest she appear 'unrestrained'" (Oldfield 236-237). Mary's time is spent occupied by tedious tasks, and these tedious tasks, of winding and unwinding knitting for Aunt Lottie, repeating conversations for her patiently, and holding Mothers' meetings, are both vocational and not, small kindnesses and daily burdens. Joannou wonders, "why Mayor conflates the important work of caring for others – which most readers would agree is genuinely life-enhancing – and the routine performance of household duties which may appear to the reader as merely domestic drudgery passed off as caring in a thin disguise" (Joannou 185-186). Mayor confuses distinctions between vocation (caring for people) and occupation (winding the clock) in order to make vocational purpose less exclusive. Mayor shows that what was the rare purview of "natural celibates" can be created for or attributed to ordinary rector's daughters.

Mary's is not the plotlessness of early nineteenth-century spinster heroines. Mary is content and she is inarguably the central heroine of *The Rector's Daughter*. While her poetry is not published and she does not marry or have an affair, her poetry is admitted to be good, and Robert admits to loving her. None of these events need to actually come to fruition; Mary can remain a single woman, and still be "curiously complete" (Mayor 337). Vocation is refigured not as the moment of marriage, or the glory of publishing, but the plotlessness of everyday life, which is nonetheless satisfying. As one reviewer puts it, Mary "lives deeply and therefore, though unhappily, well" ("The Rector's Daughter" 594).

Over the course of "Singular Plots," the value of plot has shifted, from liberating and empowering for Miss Matty, to highly-contrived and even burdensome for Miss Marjoribanks and Lily Dale. This shift is self-aware. As the plot achieves its ends for Gaskell and moves beyond them, the ideology attached to this plot in particular changes. Critics give Mayor credit for making Mary's plotlessness purposeful. "The major achievement of *The Rector's Daughter,*" writes Joannou, "is to

create a heroine who, on the surface, appears nothing more than a garden-variety Anglican spinster, but whose life is acknowledged to be exemplary by the community in which she lives. In the context of the dominant public attitudes to the spinster in the 1920s this is significant. Mary is clearly in no way 'superfluous,' or 'useless,' or 'abnormal'" (Joannou 187).[87] The significance of this peculiar achievement – of creating a spinster heroine who is plotless and also valued – can be interpreted by reading Mary analeptically through the vocational heroine. Mary's quick revolutions between unrealized plots and contentment with plotlessness suggest a narrative triumph for single women. By refusing Mary Jocelyn a plot, F.M. Mayor makes a radical statement, that single women are interesting material for narrative even without the contrivances of plot, and that vocations are banal and ordinary, available to all, rather than fantastic or exclusive as Greg would have it fifty years earlier.

"A Skimpy Old Maid, Holding a Paintbrush"

Virginia Woolf makes explicit the everydayness of female vocations in her essays and in the character of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*. In "A Room of One's Own," Woolf imagines a nineteenth-century style plot of vocational singleness for William Shakespeare's imagined sister Judith, who is told to "mend stockings or mind the stew" and also to marry, but she "cried out that marriage was hateful to her" and runs away to the stage (Woolf *R* 47). Unable to get work, Judith dies. Woolf finds this version of events fantastic: "reviewing the story of Shakespeare's sister as I had made it, [shows] that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly

[87] According to Lynd, "The rector's daughter, Mary Jocelyn, is one of those sad figures of whom it is said that nothing has ever happened to them. Mrs. Mayor reveals the meaninglessness of that phrase. Mary Jocelyn's 'nothing' is a full and rich state of being" (692).

have gone crazed, shot herself, or endured her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (*R* 49). Woolf imagines the vocational plot taken to extremes even more fantastic than those tested by Trollope and Oliphant; in the story of Judith Shakespeare, the vocational plot is prohibitively and dangerously fantastic. By contrast, in describing the start of her own career in "Professions for Women," Woolf tells a story of an everyday decision to become a professional writer, rather than a moment of vocational epiphany: "She had only to move that pen from left to right – from ten o'clock to one. Then it occurred to her to do what was simple and cheap enough after all – to slip a few of those pages into an envelope, fix a penny stamp in the corner, and drop the envelope into the red box at the corner" (2152). The details of starting a writing career are starkly "simple": *only* moving the pen left to right, for three hours a day, affixing a stamp that costs a mere penny, nonchalantly "slipping" the effortless pages into an envelope, and walking around the "corner." Woolf constructs a narrative in which occupations for women were rare, exceptional and dangerous, but are now commonplace, accessible, and as plotless as a quotidian anecdote.

In *To the Lighthouse,* Lily Briscoe provides a fictional example of the triumph of singular plotlessness. As friends and family gather at a summer home, the universally enchanting Mrs. Ramsay casts herself in the role of matchmaker, enthusiastic about the anticipated engagement of Minta and Paul Rayley and conjuring up a potential union between Lily and William Bankes, too: "was that not Lily Briscoe strolling along with William Bankes? She focused her short-sighted eyes upon the backs of a retreating couple. Yes, indeed it was. Did that not mean that they would marry? Yes, it must! What an admirable idea! They must marry!" (Woolf *LH* 71). Mrs. Ramsey's "mania" for marriage, reminiscent of the Victorian novel's similar mania, leaves 35-year-old, unmarried Lily Briscoe on the fringes, plotless and peripheral, "moored to the shore," "solitary, left out," "exempted" (Woolf *LH* 101, 103).

Though Lily is painting Mrs. Ramsey and her son, Lily's potentially vocational artistry is dismissed by Mrs. Ramsey and other characters. Mrs. Ramsey maintains, like mid-century conservatives, that any occupation other than marriage and motherhood is mere consolation: "Minta must, they all must marry, since in the whole world whatever laurels might be tossed to her [Lily] (but Mrs. Ramsey cared not a fig for her painting), or triumphs won by her ... an unmarried woman has missed the best of life" (Woolf *LH* 49). In the first section, the novel is dismissive of Lily's vocational potential. Mrs. Ramsey thinks, "she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously" (Woolf *LH* 17). Lily broods over fellow guest Charles Tansley's oft-repeated refrain, "women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf *LH* 48, 86, 91, 159). Unlike Geraldine Underwood, who is permitted to be exceptional because her paintings have appeared in *The Royal Academy,* Lily's talent is beside the point. She remains, "a skimpy old maid, holding a paint-brush" (Woolf *LH* 181).

In "Time Passes," Mrs. Ramsey's world gives way to a world governed by plotlessness and middles. As the novel returns to the now abandoned summer home after Mrs. Ramsey's unexpected death, the mainstays of plot are relegated to parentheticals in favor of descriptive stasis. Mrs. Ramsey's death, her daughter Prue's marriage, Prue's death in childbirth, and her son Andrew Ramsay's death in the war, are all told in asides, shifting the scaffolding of plot to the periphery and description to the center:

> So with the house empty and the doors locked and the mattresses rolled round, those stray airs, advance guards of great armies, blustered in, brushed bare boards, nibbled and fanned, met nothing in bedroom or drawing room that wholly resisted them but only hangings that flapped, wood that creaked… What people had shed and left – a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes – those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated. (Woolf *LH* 129)

The descriptions of the unpeopled home and the passive voice of "hangings that flapped, wood that creaked" recall Tennyson's "Mariana," where the thatch remains "unweeded" the latch remains "unlifted." In the center of the novel, plotlessness takes over, wholly, irrevocably.

The middle section "Time Passes" (what would, perhaps, be Volume II in the three-volume Victorian that *To The Lighthouse* rejects), is not only the literal center of the novel, but also its ideological center as regards Woolf's commitment to plotlessness for Lily. Mrs. Ramsey likes predictable endings and indulges in reminiscing, "It was like reading a good book again, for she knew the end of that story, since it happened twenty years ago" (Woolf *LH* 93). But Woolf denies the power of endings. Minta, who left the third volume of *Middlemarch* on the train worries that she will be caught out in conversation with Mr. Ramsey because she "never knew what happened in the end," but in reality, he prefers her to be "a goose;" Minta is stuck in the middle of *Middlemarch* (Woolf *LH* 98). While Mrs. Ramsey sees Lily as peripheral because she will not have a marital ending, "Time Passes" suggests that to look for clarity in endings makes one exempted, left out. Twice, Lily's declarations that she will not marry are paired with small adjustments to her painting, in the direction of the middle: "She need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle" and "She would move the tree to the middle, and need never marry anybody" (Woolf *LH* 102, 176). Moving the tree toward the middle is equivalent to avoiding the tyranny of the marriage plot, of forms that rely on the end to define them. Lily and Woolf reinforce the shift seen in the vocational plot from the end to the middle, but also from a definitive event, to plotlessness: "The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one" (Woolf *LH* 161). By associating a refusal of marriage with the middle, Woolf makes a radical break from the form of the marriage plot. Read through the

vocational plot of the mid-century, this break is not necessarily a break from the Victorian novel, but a continuation of the formal radicalness of the vocational plot.

Lily's return visit in in the final section of the novels reveals that she has not neither married *nor* become a painter. She does, however, decide to complete the painting started over a decade ago on this visit to the Ramsey home. "Here was Lily, at forty-four, wasting her time, unable to do a thing, standing there, playing at painting, playing at the one thing one did not play at" (Woolf *LH* 149). Lily's plotlessness is not progress, but it is also a victory. Lily is the center of the novel without doing anything in particular.

Charlotte Yonge goes to great lengths – the death of a child, an amputation – to suggest that Geraldine Underwood and Ethel May are exceptional and Rachel Curtis is not. Catherine Vernon jealously guards her exceptionality (even if it is a form of protecting Hester from her burdensome fate.) Readers are repeatedly reminded, by contrast, that Mary and Lily are *not* exceptional. Paradoxically, this is the remarkable claim made of these two single women. Mary can remain an old maid, and still be "curiously complete." Lily can merely play at painting and still be the heroine. While the vocational heroines of the mid-nineteenth century fought for hard-won exceptionality to the rule of Victorian wife and motherhood, the plotless modern girl has achieved normalcy, showing that a singular life can be unexceptional and also worthwhile. "Singular Plots" is not a neat story of progress, but a dialectic; the plot emerges, coalesces, expands past its own limits, and recedes taking a new, plotless form.

Like W.R. Greg, nearly seventy years before her, Marjorie Hillis writes in her conduct book for the "extra woman," *Live Alone and Like It* (1936), that "the extra woman is a problem… Extra women mean extra expense, extra dinner-partners, extra bridge opponents, and, all too often, extra sympathy" (19). However, unlike Greg, who finds little hope for his redundant women, Hillis prescribes that the extra woman can simply make herself less so: "The idea is to do it yourself – and

to do it first" (19). Hillis provides examples of women who have accomplished this feat by enacting the vocational plots for themselves – transforming their lives. Hillis illustrates her rules for single living with "cases" of successful extra women. Each case reflects, analeptically, to the moment when an extra woman made a change for herself and seized a purpose – business, travel, fine living: "years ago, she found herself an apartment with three large, high-ceilinged rooms," or "this was five years ago, and while Miss A is still no Mrs. Harrison Williams, you would look twice at her an unusually well-dressed woman in any restaurant" (Hillis 21, 34). Another woman is gifted a camera and makes it a hobby, "she got a commission… to try some fashion photography. Miss G now has her own studio and is a professional photographer instead of a section manager" (Hillis 65). A Miss B moved from Buffalo to Chicago and after "[taking] herself firmly in hand" she has such a busy social schedule, (Y.W.C.A, Art Institute, plays), that she must make a "date with herself" if she wants to read (Hillis 66). In these life stories of single women, Hillis looks back from the end to the center, suggesting that when we want to read for other types of narratives and specifically the stories of unmarried women, we need to read in different ways to uncover unconventional, triumphant lives. In the spirit of thinking analeptically, I give the last word to vocational heroine Dinah Morris, who reminds us of the doubleness of female narratives and female lives: "From my childhood upward I have been led toward another path" (Eliot 454).

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