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# From Maiden to Matron: Victorian Heroines and the Creation of Domestic Identity

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From Maiden to Matron: Victorian Heroines and the Creation of Domestic Identity

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in English from  
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by

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Honors Thesis

## From Maiden to Matron: Victorian Heroines and the Creation of Domestic Identity

### Introduction

For the Victorian heroine, no goal is as important to her happiness, social position and financial security as a successful courtship that leads to a successful marriage with a suitable man. Courtships are a common plot element for the Victorian novel, but what comes after the courtship is not as well defined—or often not depicted at all. This period—spanning the marriage proposal that culminates the courtship, the actual wedding and the first year of the marriage—is one of great upheaval in the heroine’s life, a period where she must transform herself from the virgin bride to the wise and responsible wife and mother that she is expected to become. The change occurs on two levels; on a practical level, the transition from bride to wife involves taking on a new name and making a new home that she will share with her husband. On the psychological level, the girl must prepare herself for the unknown and previously forbidden world of sexual knowledge and pleasure, where she must be ready to please her husband and perform the conjugal duties that he will expect of her and could demand by law. Moreover, the engaged heroine must prepare for a new phase of her life where she will be physically and emotionally dependent on a man outside her immediate family, whose name and family she will take on as his new wife. The result of these changes is a completely new identity, an identity that is filled with new possibilities, responsibilities, experiences and knowledge—for better or for worse. As critic Sarah Bilston describes in her book *The Awkward*

*Age in Women's Popular Fiction*, this period of time represents “the ‘liminal’ stage between childhood and womanhood [that is] invested with a range of anxieties and possibilities” (8).

Although much has been written on Victorian sexuality and Victorian marriage, there has been no significant *literary* analysis of this particular aspect of Victorian courtship rituals and female development. Unlike Bilston's analysis, which ends during the courtship phase of the Victorian heroine's life, my analysis encompasses the heroine's development *through* the ‘awkward age’ into her mature, married life.<sup>1</sup> Helena Michie's recent study *Victorian Honeymoons* has dramatically advanced our understanding of how Victorian men and woman underwent the immediate sexual and legal changes related to their weddings and honeymoon periods, but her study does not encompass the entire transitional period of courtship, wedding and marriage. In my research, I have identified the period between the marriage proposal and the first year of marriage as a discrete and unique stage in a Victorian heroine's life, a stage that can teach us much about Victorian culture and about the novels that depict it. Examining how heroines in major Victorian *novels* adopt their new identities as women reveals—more than purely historical research—how important and fragile this time was for women in the Victorian era. In novels it is possible not only to view what actually occurred during this period, but also to learn what this period was ideally *supposed* to enact; in other words, whether or not this transformation was a success or failure in ideological terms. What makes this topic so intriguing is how many novels of this period avoid this subject entirely by marrying off their heroine at either the end of their novels (comic closure) or the very beginning. Eliding the difficult and complicated work of the engagement period, many Victorian novelists lose the possibility to critique the politics and issues of sexuality, femininity, education, knowledge, marriage and society in general that the engagement period includes. As Bilston argues “representations of what girls wanted to be proved a means of mapping out what women could

be” (53). My analysis goes one step further: in representing the period encompassing courtship and early marriage, the novelists I include are able to map out not only what women could be, but also what marriage and society itself could become. Major Victorian novels whose heroines make this transition during the course of the narrative take on the challenge of depicting an identity and a culture in transition. Notable heroines whose journeys from girlhood to womanhood, enacted through their courtships and marriages, and the implications of their fates are fully explored in the text include Dorothy Stanbury, Nora Rowley, and the French sisters in Anthony Trollope’s *He Knew He Was Right* (1869), Gwendolen Harleth in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and Bella Wilfer in Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).

The end of a courtship and proposal of marriage signaled the end of girlhood. What does the Victorian girl have to abandon, change or adopt when she has entered into an agreement of marriage? Most Victorian heroines spend their youth making themselves agreeable and desirable to men in the marriage market, shaping themselves and their lives in the pursuit of a husband. When they have successfully found a mate, there is suddenly no need for the coquettish behavior of the unmarried girl, and new personality traits and strengths need to be cultivated in order to become a good wife. Being able quickly to adapt herself and her behaviors to fit her new role as fiancée and eventually wife is an essential part of this stage in a young woman’s life, and a large indicator of success in the marriage state. Acknowledgment as a woman and as an adult grants the heroine newfound authority and power. The power to make decisions also comes with new responsibilities: the wife must leave her family and home and create/prepare an entirely new home and new life.

A large part of this preparation involved ‘fitting out’ a trousseau to accompany the bride to her new home. My research on the trousseau, is in part, what led me to choose this topic for my honors research—while looking at the historical and sociological significance of the

trousseau in Victorian history and fiction, I began to realize how important that aspect of a girl's development into woman really was to Victorian culture. The trousseau is the symbolic and practical manifestation of the transition of a girl (or literary heroine) from a virgin to a married woman. In preparing for her wedding, the Victorian heroine must purchase items she will need to create a domestic space for her husband such as bed and table linens. In order to refashion herself, as it were, as a sexually active and mature adult, the girl must also include in her trousseau the lingerie and the clothing she will wear for the first years of her marriage. Through the acquisition and embellishment of lingerie, the bride finds herself preparing for her new life, and looking forward to the time when she will no longer be ignorant and innocent of matters of sex and sexuality. Indeed, the trousseau has a highly sexual meaning. In many ways, purchasing, embroidering, 'marking,' and assembling the trousseau was a tacit acknowledgement of a girl's budding sexuality, something that had previously been repressed and discouraged; in some ways, it was also a reward for remaining chaste and virginal before marriage. As social and feminist historian Agnes Fine explains, the "[s]ocial modeling of [a girl's] status as a woman works both as a constraint and as a means of affirming her sexual identity, her social identity and her identity as an individual in her family" (Fine 133). Fine defines the trousseau as "the bedroom, the bed, the sheets in which the sexuality of a new couple is to be expressed" (Fine 127).

What the trousseau is meant to accomplish is the creation of a domestic space. This is the first and most pressing duty of the new wife in Victorian society and literature. As historian and critic Jenni Calder notes, the wife's efforts to create this space "[are] essential to the comfort and well-being of all who dwell[1] in her home" (Calder 103). Moreover, the "home reflect[s], [is] the *only* reflection of, her achievement and her importance" (Calder 103). It gives the new wife a purpose and an enhanced sense of identity and autonomy in her new life.

This visible and practical change in a heroine's life connects with the more psychological development that occurs in the first year (often in the first night) of marriage: the loss of virginity and beginning of a heroine's sexual awareness. Most Victorian girls were ignorant about sex: to the Victorians, "any information about sexuality [is] believed to be inherently dangerous" (Gorham 92). Middle-class girls are accordingly given almost no sexual knowledge prior to their wedding night, when their marriage (and transition into womanhood) is consummated. Girls are instructed how to be sexually attractive, but never told what it means to be sexually *active*. A woman's first sexual encounter, usually occurring during her honeymoon, involves "sexual reorientation: for women, from a female body indicatively singular, virginal and asexual to a body perhaps desiring and legibly sexual" (Michie 234). This reorientation, however, is not always possible or successful. In several of the novels, I will be examining "[m]arriage [...] often prove[s] a sexual and emotional disaster for those trained to be affectionate, yet asexual and mentally blank" (Vicinus x). While acquiring the possessions they will need in marriage in the form of the trousseau, they are often unable to acquire the one thing they most need: sexual knowledge.

These two aspects of the transition from girlhood to womanhood, domesticity and sexuality, are essentially two different types of knowledge—knowledge that a Victorian heroine can only attain through marriage. Knowledge enriches and enhances the Victorian woman's life, giving her a place in her society where she is useful and respected. The engagement period becomes an "area where innocence and knowledge immediately blur" (Yeazell 344). Learning and internalizing the lessons learned during the period between the proposal and the first year of marriage is essential for the heroines in the novels I discuss: failure to do so causes hardships and regret, while success opens more possibilities for happiness than the unmarried woman could hope to possess. The end result of this transition from maiden to matron (success or

failure, though it is not always that simple) is a valuable tool for evaluating Victorian women and girls, as well as the literary heroines and the novels themselves.

## Chapter One

### Engagement and Marriage in Anthony Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right*

#### Part I: Expectation

Trollope's 1869 novel *He Knew He Was Right* begins at what is essentially the beginning of the end of the Trevelyan marriage. Quickly summarizing the courtship and early marriage of the ostensible protagonists of the novel, Louis and Emily Trevelyan, Trollope introduces the reader to a scene of marital discord. The focus of the novel on the decline of the union would seem to challenge the idea of marriage, questioning the possibility of finding happiness in a society where husbands and wives play unequal roles in their families and households.

However, the breakdown of the Trevelyan marriage is only part of the message of the novel; in fact, the culmination of the novel finds several characters entering unions that re-examine and re-define the Victorian marriage convention. The Trevelyan marriage is a foregone conclusion by the end of the first chapter of Trollope's novel; Emily's decision to marry Louis, however mistaken or misguided, has been made, and what Trollope depicts is its tragic consequences.

The other heroines of the novel, however, have that choice yet before them; at least half of Trollope's narrative effort is in describing the courtships of the other couples in the novel, the majority of which are positive affirmations of the power of love to overcome obstacles and bridge the gap between a life of lonely dependence and the independent love matches of the emancipated and empowered Victorian woman. Trollope critic James Kincaid describes these courtships as "triumphs of pure romance, ending in marriages that combine wit, spirit, love and



property;" it is "as if three Elizabeths married three Darcys" (149). A fourth courtship—the tempestuous relationship among the French sisters and the Rev. Mr. Gibson—completes the novel's examination of courtship and marriage, presenting two misguided women desperate for the security and material comforts of marriage, but fundamentally challenged in their choice of mate and understanding of marriage. In addition to examining courtship and marriage, Trollope also presents the reader with characters who either choose to or are forced to remain unmarried. Priscilla Stanbury's characterization provides another possibility for those who are unable to navigate successfully their own courtship plot, and contributes to Trollope's progressive and realistic discourse on the Victorian marriage.

Inherent in all of the plots in *He Knew He Was Right* is the idea of risk—the liabilities of marriage and its alternatives in a society where women were expected to marry and become entirely dependent on (and subordinate to) their husbands. Focusing on the heroines of the novel is especially apt as "[w]omen take most of the risks, the novel says, and are therefore required to be better and more desperate athletes if a nation founded on leaps in the dark is to prosper" (Kincaid 152). Trollope recognizes that, for a woman, the question of marriage is more important than any other; Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark describe this narrative choice in their book *Corrupted Relations*, writing that "[the heroines'] choices during courtship and the marital conflicts that follow are invested with significance and intensity [...] because Trollope views marriage for a woman as a choice involving status, security, autonomy, and power—her very identity" (205). Even if the choices made are the wrong choices, there is something to be learned from the experience of those wrong choices, as the Trevelyan marriage and French-Gibson courtship prove.

The engagement of a Victorian heroine necessarily sets off a flurry of activity on the part of herself, her family and her friends. Preparation for marriage involves the whole family,

and often the whole community—the bride is showered with congratulations and, more importantly, gifts. Fitting out the bride’s trousseau, or wedding chest, is the first and most symbolic activity which occurs at the end of a successful courtship. A “bride elect” (Trollope 692), to use Trollope’s phrasing, is at the center of this operation, preparing herself and her possessions for her future role as wife in the domestic sphere.<sup>ii</sup> Some heroines, however, become so absorbed in the acquisition element of the trousseau that they forget to consider the deeper, more abstract meaning of the trousseau: a woman’s sexual awakening. In Anthony Trollope’s *He Knew He Was Right*, both meanings of the trousseau are negotiated and explored in the competitive and unstable courtship among the two French sisters, Camilla and Arabella, and the clergyman Thomas Gibson.

A trousseau was, for a Victorian woman, a reward for successfully obtaining a marriage promise. However, this reward was only meant as preparation for the much bigger reward of becoming a wife and mother in her husband’s household. Yet for Camilla French, the trousseau seems to be the ultimate reward; indeed, it is not an exaggeration to state that Mr. Gibson is to Camilla more of a means to getting a trousseau than a future partner. Camilla imagines her engagement to Mr. Gibson as a “prize” (471) that she has won (over the claims of her older sister). Given her subsequent obsession with her trousseau, it is easy to imagine that it is the trousseau, not Gibson himself, that is truly Camilla’s prize or “reward” (535). She is, for the most part, content with Mr. Gibson’s habitual absences as long as she is able to continue working on her trousseau. She presses Mr. Gibson to set a date for their wedding, but behind these requests there is always a consideration of her trousseau: Camilla complains that her mother “can’t arrange anything until [their] plans are made” (473), and later tells Mr. Gibson she has “begun to get [her] things for doing it in the winter” (474), a timeframe that will be sufficient for her to complete her trousseau because “it isn’t as though [they] had to get

furniture or anything of the that kind” (474). Camilla’s focus on her trousseau seems harmless enough (though, as we shall see, it is a growing financial burden on her family), but it suggests a view of marriage that is not only completely superficial, but also unrealistic. The *accoutrements* of her marriage to Mr. Gibson form a very small part of what her married life with him would entail—by focusing on the material considerations of marriage, Camilla completely ignores the emotional, practical and sexual implications of her impending union. She never seems to stop to consider whether she and Mr. Gibson are emotionally compatible or even temperamentally suited. She seems alarmingly unconcerned with Mr. Gibson’s obvious distaste for her company and his growing alienation during their engagement. Camilla dismisses any uneasiness that she has by reminding herself that “she could trust herself to obtain a sufficient hold upon her husband hereafter, partly by the strength of her tongue, partly by the ascendancy of her spirit, and partly, also, by the comforts which she would provide for him” (619-620). The “comforts” she will provide could be interpreted as physical comforts, or perhaps even the comforts of companionship, but the comforts Camilla seems most concerned with throughout the novel are purely material comforts. Perhaps her preoccupation with her trousseau is designed to keep her mind off these more troubling elements of her engagement, but it is more likely that she hasn’t considered these aspects of her future marriage at all; after all, in the aftermath of Mr. Gibson’s letter dissolving their engagement, Camilla is much more concerned with keeping her things than with trying to salvage her future as Mrs. Gibson. The trousseau, for Camilla, is more important than the marriage it symbolizes—it takes on an importance that is focused on Camilla the girl, not Camilla the wife of Mr. Gibson. This importance is completely opposite to the trousseau’s traditional and practical meanings; by creating the trousseau based on her own selfish desires and considerations, Camilla proves herself incapable of understanding what a trousseau and marriage truly mean for her future.

The biggest indication of Camilla's failure to understand the real purpose of her trousseau is her lavish spending and extravagant purchases, which are made without reference to either her current household budget or her future household needs. Camilla is said to be carrying on a vast arrangement which she called the preparation of her trousseau, but which both Mrs. French and Bella regarded as a spoliation of the domestic nest, for the proud purposes of one of the younger birds. (692)

The French family has an understandably limited budget as a household of women, but Camilla does not seem to consider this as she spends money on fitting out her trousseau. She is spending money all over town, at such an alarming rate that Mrs. French is forced, at two different establishments, to "request that no further articles might be supplied to Miss Camilla" (692). Camilla has sent her family into debt with her preparations (780), but is unconcerned:

The bride elect had rebelled, alleging that as no fortune was to be provided for her, she had a right to take with her such things as she could carry away in her trunks and boxes. Money could be had at the bank, she said; and, after all, what were fifty pounds more or less on such an occasion as this? And then she went into a calculation to prove that her mother and sister would be made so much richer by her absence, and that she was doing so much for them by her marriage, that nothing could be more mean in them than that they should hesitate to supply her with such things as she desired to make her entrance into Mr. Gibson's house respectable. (692)

Though trousseaux are used to display a Victorian's family's wealth, the French family does not have the kind of wealth that can finance the preparations undertaken by the selfish and vain Camilla. In fact, her spending attracts negative attention from the town. Martha tells Miss Stanbury that Camilla has been "buying things all over Exeter, as though there was no end of their money" (625) even though, as Miss Stanbury replies, the Frenches "haven't more than

enough to keep body and soul together” (625). Nevertheless, Camilla is determined that the items in her trousseau be the most expensive and highest quality items available: when she is buying bed linen she buys “the finest they had, and that wasn't good enough” (624). Spending outside of her means while still in her mother’s household suggests she will have a hard time living on the budget of a clergyman; furthermore, it is indicated in the text that much of her preparation is unnecessary. The suggestion is that Mr. Gibson probably has much of what is needed to maintain his household, but Camilla, in her selfishness and obsession with her ‘reward,’ wants better things for herself. Though Miss Stanbury is not disposed to speak kindly of either Mr. Gibson or the French sisters, there is some truth to her comment that Camilla is spending “as though Mr. Gibson hadn't things of that kind good enough for her” (624).

Perhaps more injurious to Camilla’s prospects than her excessive spending is her refusal to curb her expenditure even after she is commanded to by her mother, her future husband and (eventually) her uncle to do so. Camilla’s spending draws the attention of the entire town, and finally requires intervention by Mr. Gibson himself. Pressured by Mrs. French, Gibson finally confronts Camilla, requesting that she “repress her spirit of extravagance” (692). His hopes of success in his request are suggested by his attitude: we are told he goes to Camilla “in fear and trembling” (692). As expected, Gibson fails to influence Camilla. She not only tells him to “mind his own business,” but goes even further by insisting that she is not “disposed to submit to any control in such matters from [Gibson] till he had assumed his legal right to it by standing with her before the altar” (692). While acknowledging a husband’s legal right to make demands on her, Camilla nevertheless displays her inability to submit willingly and peacefully to these demands—something that makes her an undesirable wife to any Victorian man, expecting to rule over his home with absolute authority and minimal debate. Certainly,

Mr. Gibson soon rethinks his decision to marry the headstrong Camilla, choosing instead the French sister who has already shown a willingness to please him.

Earlier in the novel, Arabella made a gesture of submission when she removed her chignon because of Mr. Gibson's disapproval. Though at the time this gesture seemed unsuccessful, it undoubtedly factors in Mr. Gibson's belief that Arabella, after all, would be a better wife to him than her younger sister would. She is willing to adapt herself to Mr. Gibson's needs and desires even before she is engaged or married to him: a strong indication of her submissiveness as a wife. Once engaged, Arabella continues to be obliging: her trousseau preparations, unlike Camilla's, are "modest" (783). Arabella's submissiveness is not defeat; because of her more modest and obliging behavior during her engagement, Arabella feels "more certainty of ultimate success than had ever fallen to Camilla's lot" (783). She is a better fiancée and presumably will be a better wife because she knows how to operate within both financial constraints and male authority.

The trousseau is not only a symbol of marriage, but also a symbol of marriageability or matrimonial prospects. Understanding this aspect of the trousseau allows us to see the cruelty behind the Frenches' comical struggle over Mr. Gibson. Once Arabella has been rejected by her suitor in favor of her younger sister, her position in her family lowers and her future becomes one of bleak uncertainty. When she realizes Mr. Gibson is now making a proposal to Camilla, not her, Arabella feels "[i]t [is] a death-blow to her last hope, and all the world [...] [is] over for her" (470). Unable to successfully secure a proposal (even after a lengthy 'courtship' with one of the only eligible males in her family circle), Arabella seems destined to live a single life of celibacy, dependency and loneliness. Her place in the world is substantially lowered as an acknowledgement of this limiting of possibilities. She becomes

as it were quite a younger sister in the house, creeping out by herself now and again into the purlieus of the city, to find such consolation as she might receive from her solitary thoughts. (613)

As Camilla cruelly observes, “her sister’s chance is gone” (471), and Arabella has to accept her new role. Even crueler is Camilla’s insistence that Arabella, who will never need a trousseau of her own, accompany her sister while she purchases her trousseau as well as help in the marking of the linens. Camilla “exact[s] from the unfortunate Arabella an amount of work equal to her own, of thankless work, as is the custom of embryo brides with their unmarried sisters” (612). The contrast between the two sisters is striking: Camilla has all the power in the family and Arabella must sublimate her will to that of her sister. Camilla abuses this power, but is nevertheless socially entitled to it; as she sees it,

any daughter of a house who proves herself to be capable of getting a husband for herself, is entitled to expect that those left at home shall pinch themselves for a time, in order that she may go forth to the world in a respectable way, and be a credit to the family. (613)

The strict distinction between marriageable and unmarried which is demonstrated by the French sisters reveals a harsh reality of Victorian womanhood; only a woman who has a hope to be married is given the responsibility and privilege of building her trousseau and planning her future.

This distinction becomes even more important when the situation of the two sisters is reversed: the sister who was to be married is now unmarried, and the sister who had no prospects is now the bride-to-be. The transfer of the trousseau is of course the most practical thing to do—“it was an absurdity that the unmarried sister should keep things that were wholly unnecessary, and that the sister that was to be married should be without things that

were needed” (780)—but symbolically the action is a distressing indication of the reversal of fortunes; a woman who is not going to be married does not have a right to the possessions of a wife. As Agnes Fine describes in her study of the trousseau, this transference of the trousseau from one sister to another indicated dire prospects for the sister without a trousseau: if the girl was “no longer marriageable [...] [she] no longer needed a trousseau” (139). Camilla’s trousseau, her reward for a successful courtship, is accordingly dismantled: “all the property that had been sent into the house at Camilla’s orders could not be allowed to remain as Camilla’s perquisites, now that Camilla was not to be married” (772). She must now see the items she purchased with “special reference to the glories of her anticipated married life” (930) worn and used by her sister. Furthermore, Camilla has already ‘marked’ her linen; Camilla embroiders her maiden initials on the items in her trousseau, an act that was highly symbolic of both menstruation and first sexual contact.<sup>iii</sup> In fact, Arabella has also been occupied with marking Camilla’s linens: an act that could only have further impressed upon her the hopelessness of her own situation as an older unmarried sister. However, once Camilla is no longer engaged to Mr. Gibson, she must “[pick] out her marks” (772), an act that would certainly be devastating to a girl who, until recently, had looked upon this linen not only as her own, but also as part of her future as a wife. Camilla’s shallowness might prevent her from fully realizing the implications of this act (if marking symbolizes first sexual contact, her picking out the marks reinforces the very real possibility that she will never experience sex), but the loss of her possessions deeply hurts Camilla. She has been given more power and authority over her own life than ever before, but this is all taken away when her proposal is revoked. This revocation of property, even more than that of the proposal itself, devastates Camilla: “she [has] been driven from one point to another till she [is] compelled at last to stand solely upon her possessions” (780).



Trollope's depiction of the French sisters seems to ridicule the husband hunting of uneducated and unattractive women desperate for marriage. Yet, as critic Rajiva Wijesinha argues in his book *The Androgynous Trollope*, the French sisters are not "simply figures of fun" (119). The reader is meant to sympathize with "Arabella's long-suffering hopes [and] Camilla's hysterical anxieties" (Wijesinha 119), particularly because of how undesirable Mr. Gibson is as a prospective husband. The fact that both women are eager to marry a man who is a "paltry" prize "underscores the desperation of their single state" (Wijesinha 119). As Trollope scholar Margaret Markwick describes, the French sisters are "entirely dependent creatures, and the only possibility of their situation changing is through marriage, which while having its own risks does offer the possibility of social position reflected from a husband's standing" (194). Trollope sympathizes with the French sisters' situation, which was unfortunately all too common, at the same time censuring the socially motivated (and encouraged?) phenomenon of husband hunting that results in marriages that are, if not destined to fail, certainly fraught with problems from the beginning. Indeed, the sisters' desperation has crucial consequences. The race to the altar than inevitably occurs when two sisters are both pursuing the same man leads to marriage without consideration of love or sexual attraction; as a result, the confusion and ignorance of Camilla (and presumably Arabella as well) about her sexuality and the symbolic meaning of her trousseau are not simply matters of personal weakness—they are indictments of a system that places such an overly high premium on catching a man and furnishing a trousseau, instead of focusing on the deeper concerns of attraction and compatibility.

## Part II: Possibility

*He Knew He Was Right* can be seen as a novel of sisters and sisterly relationships, in addition to being a novel about marriage. In his novel, Trollope uses pairs of sisters to explore

differences between women's temperaments (comparing Nora's response to Louis with Emily's) and also differences between women's prospects in Victorian society. John Sutherland explains in his introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *He Knew He Was Right*, "[t]here are four pairs of sisters: the Stanburys, The Spaldings, The Frenches and the Rowleys. In three of these pairs, one girl gets her man and the other is left on the shelf" (xix). The sections depicting the French sisters, as we have seen, are deeply involved with the idea of one sister's chance contrasted with the other sister's loss. This theme is also explored in the relationship between Hugh Stanbury's sisters, Dorothy and Priscilla, though without any of the comedy of the French sisters' rivalry and with much deeper reflection on how women's knowledge is limited and expanded by their prospects in marriage. Priscilla's determination to remain single is initially shared by the younger Dorothy—the closeness of the sisters includes the shared future of the spinster. When Dorothy is removed from her sister, however, her prospects are dramatically expanded by the courtship of two different suitors; suddenly, she not only considers being married as a possibility for her, but also grows to desire the possibilities that marriage offers the Victorian heroine—knowledge (carnal), companionship, childbirth, and family. By the end of the novel, the sisters are separated, much as the French sisters are eventually divided, by not only their physical situation and their positions in life as wife and spinster, but also by their vastly different futures and access to knowledge. Dorothy and Priscilla represent in *He Knew He Was Right* how marriage opens up unique experiences and possibilities, especially sexual, that the unmarried woman could never hope to have.

Dorothy Stanbury approaches marriage from an entirely different perspective than either Arabella or Camilla. Unlike the French sisters, Dorothy has spent her entire life considering herself as “among that company of old maids who are born and live and die without that vital interest in the affairs of life which nothing but family duties, the care of children, or at

least of a husband, will give to a woman” (482). Inherent in her belief that she will never be married is Dorothy’s belief that she is a “nobody” (481); for the Victorian woman, to be unmarried and unmarriageable was to be completely disconnected from the world and its interests. This fact of womanhood is inherent in both the French sisters’ desperation to become Mrs. Gibson, and in Dorothy and Priscilla’s view of themselves as “born to eat and drink, as little as might be, and then to die” (Trollope 280). Dorothy and Priscilla are ostensibly content with this limiting of their experiences; however, when it is suggested that Dorothy might marry Mr. Gibson, her view on this solitary life changes considerably. This suggestion “opens out to her altogether new views of life” (280). These “new views of life” are given to her by her change in status from unmarriageable (in her mind) to marriageable—suddenly she has prospects and possibilities.

Although the shift from marriageable to unmarriageable depends largely on the perceptions of others, there is a suggestion in the decisions of Dorothy and Priscilla, in a way that we do not see with the French sisters, that marriage is a chosen life, something for which not everyone is suited. This is a direct contradiction to the Victorian view of women as desperate for any husband they can find. Trollope rejects the conventional view that “girls are living in a state of breathless anxiety to catch husbands” (320). To many of Trollope’s readers the idea that “Dorothy should prefer a single life to matrimony with Mr. Gibson” is “unintelligible” (320), but that is clearly her choice—Dorothy, influenced by her sister, asserts a radical independence in her decision not to accept a respectable marriage proposal. As Markwick argues in her book *Trollope and Women*, in Trollope “[n]ot marrying can be a positive choice, an option to stay in control” (189). However, there are consequences to living a single life. Though both Priscilla and Dorothy seem to see spinsterhood as preferable to a marriage without love, the society in which they live does not yet share this view, and women

who remained single have to live with the limited range of possibilities and knowledge. Dorothy has “so strictly taught herself to look forward to a blank existence, that she had learned to do so without active misery” (542): though she can accept her future spinsterhood, she is not unaware of its hardships. Even Priscilla admits “that for most women a married life is happier than a single one” (324) but in the same letter advises her sister not to rush into matrimony without love. Patricia Thompson suggests that the fate of the spinster, for a married man like Trollope “seem[ed] irretrievably desolate,” going on to argue that “[c]onsidering them wasted women, he never had much time to spare for them in his novels” (117). His engagement with the Stanbury sisters, especially Priscilla, directly contradicts this view; Trollope, unlike many of his contemporaries, depicted both sides of the marriage choice—those who desperately seek marriage as well as those who decide they will not marry. So what, then, makes a woman choose to marry in this new and radical conception of womanhood that Priscilla and Dorothy share? Some women, according to Priscilla, are suited to marriage. She describes her sister Dorothy as “well adapted to be a wife and a mother” because her “temper was so sweet, she was so pure, so unselfish, so devoted, and so healthy withal” (323). Priscilla, on the other hand “should make any man wretched, and any man would make [her] wretched” (915). Just as important as the disposition of the woman is her feelings towards her future husband. Dorothy’s two courtships illustrate the vast difference between marrying out of expediency or practicality and marrying because of real physical and emotional attraction.

There is an undeniable undertone of sexual repulsion in Dorothy’s rejection of Mr. Gibson. When she considers him as a future husband, some of her first and most persistent thoughts are of his appearance. She considers him “a nice-looking man enough” (281) when the suggestion of marriage is first made. Her feelings soon change, however, when she considers more seriously the thought of matrimonial intimacy. Though she may not be *consciously*

thinking of sex, there “comes upon her, unconsciously, without work of thought, by instinct rather than by intelligence, a feeling of the closeness of a wife to her husband” (393). Dorothy probably does not have explicit knowledge of sex, but she certainly has a sense of the sexual intimacy of marriage, and at least some of the expectation of her as a wife to have a sexual relationship with her husband. When she remembers “that she would be called upon for demonstration of her love, that he would embrace her, and hold her to his heart, and kiss her, she revolt[s] and shudder[s]” (393). Her fear of sexual intimacy at first seems to apply to men in general, not only Mr. Gibson; she “believe[s] that she [does] not want to marry any man, and that such a state of things [will] not be good for her” (393). When Mr. Gibson finally makes his offer in person, however, Dorothy’s rejection of his physicality seems more personal:

his face offend[s] her; and the feeling was strong within her that if she yielded, it would soon be close to her own. She [cannot] do it. She [doesn’t] love him, and she wouldn’t do it.” (394)

Dorothy is sensitive and perceptive enough to know that she is not physically suited to Mr. Gibson, and it is this knowledge, more than any other objections, that allows her finally to reject his proposal of marriage. Her sister Priscilla, in her letter of advice, also seems to have a sense of physical attraction/repulsion as important to a marriage: she counsels Dorothy that if her heart revolts from the suggestion of being his wife and if she cannot prefer him to all other men, then she had better refuse his proposal (325). It is unclear how much knowledge Priscilla and Dorothy truly have about the conjugal duties of a wife—Trollope represents these considerations and fears in the highly coded language of intuition and feelings of the heart. Whatever their actual knowledge, Dorothy and Priscilla certainly seem to consider sex—both the physical act and the emotional aspect of sexual compatibility—as an important part of marriage.

If sexual repulsion is coded into Dorothy's thoughts about Mr. Gibson, the language of sexual attraction can certainly be read into Dorothy's feelings about Brooke Burgess. Perhaps more shocking than the idea of a Victorian woman thinking in a negative way about a sexual relationship with a potential suitor is the idea that a woman would be sexually attracted to a man, or even have sexual fantasies about this man before they were married. Trollope's description of Dorothy's physical distaste for Mr. Gibson is coded as unconscious; his description of Dorothy's attraction to Brooke Burgess is even more hidden in language acceptable to Victorian readers. It is, nevertheless, an important aspect of Dorothy's character and her relationship with Brooke. Despite Dorothy's initial feelings that she should not marry because physical intimacy would be distasteful to her, her relationship with Brooke reveals that this distaste was for Mr. Gibson, not men in general. When Brooke first proposes, Dorothy goes "to her bed to dream for an hour or two of Brooke Burgess and her future life" (488). Her dreams do not have to be sexual in nature to be erotically charged, but any vision of her future as Mrs. Burgess would invariably include that "closeness of a wife to her husband" (393) that made her marriage to Mr. Gibson impossible. Dorothy's thoughts about Brooke following his proposal are very physical and sexual in nature. She sees Brooke as a

man strong enough, and good enough, and loving enough to make straight for her her paths, to bear for her her burdens, to be the father of her children, the staff on which she might lean, and the wall against which she might grow, feeling the sunshine, and sheltered from the wind. (542)

Brooke's physicality and virility are invoked in this description, in terms which suggest Dorothy's desire to be close to Brooke and to be intimate with him. Brooke becomes Dorothy's "god" (488), a phrase that is often used by Trollope as a signal phrase for sexual attraction. Dorothy's belief that she could "[lean] on [Brooke] with a true worship" (542) suggests the

marriage vow “with my body I thee worship;” Dorothy is ready to vow herself and her body to Brooke—and though she is initially prevented from accepting his proposal, she knows that she could have grown against him as against a wall with perfect confidence, could have lain with her head upon his bosom, and have felt that of all spots that in the world was the most fitting for her. (542-543)

Dorothy is not only suited to marriage, she is sexually attracted to Brooke. This is good indication that Dorothy will be happy with Brooke—she goes into her marriage fully aware of her inclinations and ready to perform the duties of a wife.

The most important element of Dorothy’s sexual awakening is the social sanction it is given; as a woman who is engaged to be married, and even more so as a new wife, Dorothy’s sexual attraction to Brooke and sexual fantasies are acceptable. Her love for Brooke allows Dorothy to enter “from barren lands into so rich a paradise” (686), and her engagement opens this paradise to her, “with no apples which she might not eat” (688). Trollope uses this unmistakably Edenic imagery to represent carnal knowledge and sexuality as rewards of marriage, something that is no longer taboo or forbidden. When Dorothy dreams “that Brooke [is] holding her in Niddon Park, tighter than ever” (688), Trollope is showing his readers how Dorothy’s mind is transformed by her engagement to Brooke—new thoughts, new desires are awakened which are allowable and depicted by Trollope as healthy, not something to hide. Dorothy is altered in both mind and body by the influx of new possibilities and her newly sanctioned sexuality. She loses the “faded, wildered, washed-out look, the uncertain, purposeless bearing” (546) of her spinsterdom. Dorothy

become[s] changed, as does [a] flower when it opens itself in its growth. The sweet gifts of nature are visible, the petals [spring] to view, and the leaves spread themselves, and the sweet scent [is] felt upon the air. (911)

The language of botany is infused with sexual meaning. Dorothy must be “warmed by the sun of life” and “filled with the showers of companionship” (911) before she can flower—and then presumably be fertile and even *deflowered*. The “sun” of sexuality has “opened the bud, and now we see the fruit” (553)—Dorothy was barren, purposeless, but is now pregnant with sexual feeling and possibility.

What about Priscilla? Dorothy escapes the drudgery and constraint of the spinster, but her sister is clearly not interested in marriage. Priscilla labels herself “quite unfit for any other kind of life than this” (915), that is, unfit for becoming the wife and mother that Dorothy will become. Dorothy’s “future prospects” (912) take her out of her home and her life with Priscilla, which, it is assumed, she will now find “limited” (912). The separation between sisters with such different futures and range of experience, while necessary and inevitable, is nonetheless treated with a sense of loss by Trollope. Dorothy has “a tear in each eye” when she suggests that she and her sister “can sleep in the same bed, as [they] always did” (912) when she visits before her marriage. Dorothy is leaving her maiden bed that she shared with her sister, and will now sleep in her marriage bed shared with a husband, a symbolic as well as physical change of which Dorothy and Priscilla seem keenly aware. Priscilla tells Dorothy she “will not be so much [her] sister as he will be your husband” (913), suggesting that the shared experience that husband and wife will have will necessarily make their connection stronger than with the sister who is left behind. As Sutherland writes, Priscilla “is allowed finally to fade from view, her defiant stand against the unfairness of the marriage lottery blotted out by the rosy haze of three weddings” (xxii). Priscilla’s dire predictions are probably not far from the truth, but Trollope does mitigate the extent of the sisters’ separation by noting that Priscilla “was the first, after Brooke, to kiss” Dorothy (Trollope 918).



Markwick describes Dorothy as “the archetypal Victorian girl, not a thought of sex in her head” (191) and classes her among the “immaculate virgins” of Trollope’s novels who are “presented as models of virgin decorum, continuing unchanged in this vein through the story” (26). Though I do think Dorothy is a model of virgin decorum, she models Trollope’s more progressive vision of the virgin, not the “archetypal Victorian” ideal. She “refuse[s] to be mastered, and resist[s] marriage without love,” proving that she can “determine her own fate” (Morse). She knows enough about marriage and her own nature to know how important sexual feeling is for a married couple, preferring a life of celibacy to a marriage without these feelings. Indeed, her sexual awakening and Trollope’s explicit sanction of these feelings as natural and necessary for happiness in marriage, combined with the discourse on women’s choices introduced by Dorothy and Priscilla’s views on marriage, make up one of the most progressive plots of *He Knew He Was Right*.

### Part III: Reality

It is not surprising that Nora Rowley is hesitant about becoming a wife. She has seen the ruin wrought by the gross inequality of the Victorian marriage on her sister and her sister’s husband and has known what it is like to be under the control of a jealous husband—as Emily’s sister, Nora is also moved around England like chattel, and forced to submit to Trevelyan’s whims as his dependent.<sup>iv</sup> Despite the trauma surrounding her sister’s marriage, however, Nora seems very cool-headed when it comes to deciding her own fate in marriage. She is at first determined to marry a rich man, but when that rich (and titled) man comes seeking her hand she feels obliged to refuse him on two separate occasions. The reason for Nora’s refusal, much like Dorothy’s refusal of Mr. Gibson, is based on love and attraction. For Nora, a love

attraction to Mr. Glascock is impossible because she has already given her heart to another, less suitable bachelor, Hugh Stanbury, a writer for a penny newspaper. Markwick argues that

Nora Rowley is remarkable because she is actually changed by the events of the books [...] from an upper middle-class girl, who has accepted unquestioningly assumptions about her future and her responsibilities, to a young woman who has had the time and the occasion to examine closely the risks of marriage and dependence. (184)

Nora's transformation asserts a new view of womanhood: one that is capable and determined to make her own choices about marriage, but who is nevertheless obliged to maneuver within the restrictions of her society. With Nora, as with Dorothy, Trollope emphasizes the importance of love and sexual attraction in marriage, and hints at his heroine's sexual desires. Trollope also depicts through Nora's plot how the period between engagement and marriage is one of possibilities but also dangers. Finally, with Nora Rowley's marriage to Hugh Stanbury, Trollope attempts to show how an equal marriage based on attraction instead of duty or money can redeem the Victorian woman and the Victorian marriage.

The "bounden duty" (31) of a Victorian heroine is to marry well. Nora Rowley knows this perfectly well at the beginning of the novel, having been "properly brought up" (29) to know that "all the material prosperity of her life must depend on matrimony" (128). Her position is one that provides her with little options besides marriage and spinsterdom; for Nora, marriage is only possible if her suitor has enough income to support her comfortably. Spinsterdom, at the beginning of the novel, seems to Nora to be a better prospect than marriage to a poor man:

[t]o be poor alone, to have to live without a husband, to look forward to a life in which there would be nothing of a career, almost nothing to do, to await the vacuity of an

existence in which she would be useful to no one, was a destiny which she could teach herself to endure, because it might probably be forced upon her by necessity. (30)

Her considerations in this matter seem unselfish but realistic: Nora realizes that she has “been so little accustomed to poverty of life” and “acknowledge[s] to herself that she [is] not fit to be [a poor man’s] wife” (497). Nora thinks she might love Glascock “sufficiently for comfortable domestic purposes” and considers whether if “she were Mrs. Glascock, known to the world as the future Lady Peterborough, [...] it [would] not be within her power to bring her sister and her sister's husband again together” (150). Markwick notes how considerations such as these “highlights how meager are her choices” (187). Nora’s acceptance of the status quo is not without bitterness. Nora often finds herself disgusted with the choices which are made available to her as a Victorian woman. Rather than being excited about the opportunities which could be open to her as the future Lady Peterborough, Nora feels “sick of the prospect of her life” (30). She thinks

[t]he lot of a woman; as she often told herself, [is] wretched, unfortunate, *almost* degrading. For a woman such as herself there [is] no path open to her energy, other than that of getting a husband. (30, emphasis mine)

The mitigation “*almost* degrading” is intriguing because there seems to be something that to Nora’s mind could redeem a woman’s position in society—and it clearly is not marriage for money. As the novel progresses (and her sister’s marriage continues to deteriorate), Nora changes her mind about marriage and money. Money, it seems, does not a good marriage make: Trevelyan has more than enough money to support Emily (even in separate homes) and yet their marriage is disastrous. As Nora points out to her mother, “plenty of money has not made [Emily] happy” (604) and could not protect her from the gross injustice to which she is subjected throughout the novel. Moreover, although Emily did her duty by marrying a rich

man with a good position in society, her life seems destined for misery. When asked by her sister “what is a girl to do?”, Emily’s response is “[b]etter drown herself than do as I have done” (563). Although Emily’s bitterness is towards marriage in general, her advice could be taken as a warning against marriage for money or security, as she did in marrying Trevelyan. This seems to be the lesson Nora takes from her sister’s marriage—better to drown herself than to marry for a title or wealth. Marriage for money is degrading, but marriage for something else—love—could be redeeming.

Nora’s feelings for Hugh fly in the face of these ideas about making a respectable match. Nora knows what marriage she is expected to make, but “nevertheless, there [is] something within her bosom which [makes] her long for a better thing than this” (123). As with the Dorothy’s sexual attraction for Brooke, Trollope uses guarded and coded language to describe what this better thing might be. The language is remarkably similar: Nora “dreamed, if she had not thought, of being able to worship a man” (123), a sentiment that once again evokes the marriage vows and the sexual relationship that she would expect in marriage. Nora doesn’t have explicitly sexual feelings towards Hugh, as the distinction between *dreaming* and *thinking* suggests, but sexual attraction seems to be what sets Hugh apart from Mr. Glascock: she can “hardly worship Mr. Glascock” (123), but thinks of Hugh as “the appointed staff and appropriate wall of protection” (125) for her. Through love and sexual attraction, Nora’s “own views about life [are] changed” and she is determined that she “could eat a crust with [Hugh] in any garret in London” (497)—a romanticized vision of the life that Nora once thought was impossible for her, but now seems eager to embrace.

Her love for Hugh is what allows Nora to revise her ideas about marriage from the accepted Victorian marriage, but she cannot completely embrace the more ‘bohemian’ marriage Hugh is offering. The distinction between what is respectable and what is allowable is

important for Nora: she embraces being a bohemian in abstract terms, but in her actions she insists on remaining within what is socially acceptable. Though her language may be transgressive and radical, her actions are decidedly conventional. Although Nora wants to marry for love, she does not want “to be a Lydia” or “do anything that anybody shall ever say that [Hugh’s] wife should not have done” (847). Furthermore, she insists that her parents give their consent to the marriage. While this may seem incompatible with Nora’s rebelliousness as a character, it matches the realities of her situation. Jane Nardin acknowledges Trollope’s understanding that “[w]omen, clearly, are one group whose ability to express themselves in action is highly circumscribed” (29). While Nora’s actions are restricted by society, she nevertheless attempts to unite her determination to act on what she believes with her sense of duty and social propriety. Nora wants to marry for love *and* operate within social norms—but always on her own terms.

The radical nature of Nora’s decision is not that she decides to marry for love instead of mercenary reasons (many Victorian heroines make a similar choice), but that she makes this decision on her own, taking charge of her life and her fate and defying the will of her parents. Though when she is first proposed to “there float[s] quickly across her brain an idea of the hardness of a woman’s lot, in that she should be called upon to decide her future fate for life in half a minute” (124), Nora never changes her decision to reject Mr. Glascock—indeed, she refuses him twice. Trollope allows the reader great access to Nora’s decision-making process and thoughts surrounding her two suitors, and it is clear that from the beginning her heart, and eventually her mind, is set on marrying Hugh. Moreover, Trollope shows how “honourable and generous and kind Mr. Glascock is” and makes us “believe in the value for [Nora] of what she has rejected” (Gatrell 101). Nora’s choice is not as simple as comparing a supercilious clergyman with an intelligent and handsome suitor like Brooke Burgess; both of

her suitors would make good husbands, but only one can truly be Nora's *lover*. Her choice is between two good men; it is what Ruth apRoberts calls a "classic Victorian" dilemma: "you can marry the approved suitor whom you don't love, or hope the poor man you do love will find you and find some income" (101). Trollope's depiction of Nora's complicated feelings concerning her decision is part of the realism of the novel—Nora does not wish she had married Mr. Glascock, but she regrets that she could not be the woman who *would* accept Mr. Glascock. As critic Simon Gatrell writes

almost always for Trollope the appropriateness of any decision depends in the end not upon logic, but partly upon circumstances, and to a greater extent on the nature of the individual making the decision: here Nora makes the choice she does because she is loving, honest and true. (101)

The complexity of Nora's decisions shows her to be an independent mind, determined to shape the course of her own life. Nora is determined, even in the face of the paternal authority of her father; she tells him "[t]here is a time when a girl must be supposed to know what is best for herself.—just as there is for a man" (658). Hugh thinks it ridiculous that Sir Marmaduke would "imagine that [Nora] could be locked up in a nursery or put into the corner" (664), but a woman less independent and strong than Nora might have easily suffered such a fate in a society where women were treated more like children and possessions than rational beings. The suggestion that she knows what is best for herself (despite her gender) is what sets Nora apart from characters such as Dorothy and the French sisters, who are willing to let others determine their matrimonial futures.<sup>v</sup> Her conviction is not the blind obstinacy or ignorance of a character like Camilla French, however. Nora makes her decision in full awareness of the sacrifices she has to make and the obstacles she will face. It is not easy for her to give up the way of life she has become accustomed to; she tells her father

[i]t isn't that I don't like carriages, papa. I do like them; and pretty dresses, and brooches, and men and women who have nothing to do, and balls, and the opera; but I love this man, and that is more to me than all the rest. (661)

Her strength of character is that she decides to marry Hugh in spite of the obstacles. Nora even scolds characters such as Caroline Spalding, who begin to doubt their decision to marry when faced with obstacles. She tells Caroline “[w]hen a girl has made up her mind to be married, she had better go on with it at once, and take it all afterwards as it may come” (756). Nora’s decision to marry for love is her “right”: as Wendy Jones argues “[m]arriage for love [...] legitimates a woman’s desires and autonomy, recognizing [a heroine’s] personhood and autonomy” (Jones). Marriage is her decision, and her commitment, and once Nora makes up her mind to marry Hugh despite obstacles, she never falters from that conviction. Nora recognizes what marriage should be, and trusts her judgment that Hugh is the only husband for her.

Nora’s situation after her engagement is unique because she is forced to find a home for herself in the interim between her parents’ departure from England and her marriage to Hugh. What is most important about this is how Nora *wants* to spend the time before her marriage—she

look[s] forward to sitting up at night alone by a single tallow candle, to stretching a beefsteak so as to last her for two days' dinners, and perhaps to making her own bed. (886)

Nora’s fantasy of independence suggests that she yearns for time to herself, where she is not depending on her parents, or Trevelyan, or even Hugh to make her decisions for her. Although Nora to some extent glamorizes poverty, she seems genuinely to want to live the life of a single, independent woman, if only for a few months;

Nora [is] somewhat touched with an idea that it would be a fine independent thing to live alone, if it were only for a week or two, just because other young ladies never liv[e] alone. (885)<sup>vi</sup>

This, of course, is unacceptable for a Victorian woman of her status. Instead, she is put into the “keeping” (897) of Lady Milborough, who believes young women are “fragile plants, that [want] much nursing before they [can] be allowed to be planted out in the gardens of the world as married women” (888). The idea of women as fragile and needing care is also bound up in the idea of women being sexually pure before marriage—Nora must be guarded or watched to make sure her reputation (and virginity) remains intact. In this sense, Nora is not an independent woman in the least. To Lady Milborough, and the society which she represents, Nora is an “article” that Hugh will “receive at the altar” and which has a “price put upon [it] by the world at large” (892). Nora’s price is reckoned based on her purity, and any scheme of single independence would put that value in jeopardy. For Nora, who has already been tainted by her sister’s supposed indiscretion, this period is also a kind of quarantine—time away from the scandal and disgrace of her sister’s marriage to prepare for a marriage that will (hopefully) be free of scandal. The period between engagement and marriage is a time fraught with this sort of danger: while the woman must prepare herself to become a sexual being, she must also guard her reputation and the value of her future husband’s “possession” (892). Though Nora anticipates her engagement to be a time of freedom and independence before becoming forever bound to a husband, it is in reality a time where she must be even more carefully watched. Lady Milborough’s house is a “intermediate resting-place” (892), just as the time Nora passes there and later at Monkams is an intermediate or liminal space where she must negotiate her desire for independence and the realities of Victorian womanhood and marriage. Markwick describes these events at the end of the novel as “a conventional



protective launch for her marriage” in which Trollope meets “the demands of the convention [he] writes in” (190). Markwick criticizes this “lip-service” (190) to Victorian social convention, but I would argue that Trollope’s treatment of the period between engagement and marriage for Nora and Hugh acknowledges just how crucial this time was in a young woman’s life. No longer the virginal daughter but not yet the faithful wife, a woman such as Nora had to be even more circumspect perhaps than she was either before or after the engagement period. Jane Nardin confirms this, explaining how “[o]nce a girl got engaged, new problems arose. Now she was authorized to love her fiancé, and she had to prove her womanliness by devoting herself to him wholeheartedly. Yet they were not yet married” and therefore “courtship required careful management” (5). However, despite the difficulty of the Victorian heroine in navigating this space, Nora has reasonable expectations that her marriage will be something different from the typical Victorian marriage. Nora marries “for liberty” and does not “mean to submit to [Hugh] at all” (897). While this is certainly an exaggeration of what Nora truly expects in marriage, it does suggest that Nora marries Hugh because she believes their marriage will be one of equality—not the unequal marriage that destroyed Louis and Emily Trevelyan.

## Chapter Two:

### A “Traumatic Ascension to Knowledge”: George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*

#### Part I: Fierce Maidenhood

Eliot begins the first book of her final novel with the title “The Spoiled Child”. This title immediately defines our heroine, Gwendolen Harleth, not only as a character who is used to having her own way and power over others, but also as a heroine who is still a child;

Gwendolen is naïve, immature and essentially ignorant of the ways of the world. Eliot's insistence on calling Gwendolen a child creates one of the major tensions of the novel: is Gwendolen, at twenty years old, ready to become the Victorian woman and wife she is expected to become? It is essential not to lose sight of Gwendolen's lack of experience despite her age; and although, for the Victorian (and perhaps even the modern) reader, Gwendolen's age suggests she should know something of the world in which she lives, she still lives in the highly guarded and essentially asexual world of her childhood.

One reason for Gwendolen's ignorance is obvious: her lack of education. Placing Gwendolen in the center of the ongoing debate about female education, Eliot describes her "two years at a showy school" (16) rather dubiously as primarily an arena for Gwendolen to show off her superiority, using quotation marks to surround the word "education" as if it was undeserving of that name (32). Worse than her practical ignorance, however, is Gwendolen's belief that her education has been adequate: "of all things, she was conscious of being sufficiently acquainted through novels, plays and poems" (32). Self-learning from novels and other reading was often the only option open to the Victorian girl, but with a girl such as Gwendolen, to whom there are "many subjects in the world—perhaps the majority—in which she felt no interest, because they were stupid" (32), self-guided learning gives her a high opinion of her intellectual power and judgment without any real scope of knowledge or understanding. Gwendolen is able to learn almost nothing about sex from the Victorian novels, plays or poems to which she is exposed. Although Mrs. Davilow considers Gwendolen's reading "dangerously instructive" (120), it is impossible for Gwendolen to receive this instruction without any practical knowledge of sex. When she learns of Grandcourt's illicit affair with Mrs. Glasher, she recognizes this gap in her so-called education: as Eliot explains

Gwendolen's uncontrolled reading, though consisting chiefly in what are called pictures of life, had somehow not prepared her for this encounter with reality. Is this surprising? It is to be believed that attendance at the *opéra bouffe* in the present day would not leave men's minds entirely without shock, if the manners observed there with some applause were suddenly to start up in their own families. (137)

Eliot acknowledges the limits of the novel, especially given the formal and informal censorship of the Victorian period, while also revealing how often life resembles art—for better or for worse. Gwendolen might have read about a fallen woman, but to have one standing between her and an advantageous marriage is something for which she is completely unprepared. And without actual knowledge of what made women 'fallen,' which was described in highly coded language, Gwendolen could not have possibly understood the sexual commentary of her reading. Her avoidance of all things unpleasant also guarantees Gwendolen will be unprepared for the less savory aspects of the human character such as those she will come to find in her husband.

Gwendolen's relationship with her mother maintains this definition of Gwendolen as child, while also shielding Gwendolen from her own sexuality and the possibility of sexual experience. Gwendolen's insistence on sleeping in the same room with her mother suggests a fear of male intimacy—sleeping in the same bedroom with her widowed mother, Gwendolen does not have to confront either her own sexuality or the possibility of male sexual contact. By arranging “when possible, that she should have a small bed in her mamma's room” (17), Gwendolen ensures that she is in no danger of being thought of as a sexual being. Mrs. Davilow willingly participates in Gwendolen's prolonged childhood, writing in a letter to her “dearest child” that she would “would save [her] from all trouble if [she] could” (8-9). Eliot explains that “Mrs. Davilow's motherly tenderness clung chiefly to her eldest girl, who had

been born in her happier time" (17). Moreover, Mrs. Davilow "dislike[s] what is called knowledge of the world; and indeed she wishe[s] that she herself had not had any of it thrust upon her" (298), which makes her a perfect protector for Gwendolen's ignorance and innocence.

Indeed, Mrs. Davilow's previous unhappiness in marriage makes her less likely than the average Victorian mother to speak about marriage or sex to her daughter. Mrs. Davilow was "indiscreet, or at least unfortunate in her marriages" (23) and as a widow seems burdened by the unhappiness of her choices. After being asked by Gwendolen why she married a second time after the death of her first husband, Mrs. Davilow's violent reaction prohibits Gwendolen from pursuing the topic (17). Eliot writes that "the difference [Mrs. Davilow's] own misfortunes made was, that she never dared to dwell much to Gwendolen on the desirableness of marriage" (81). Mrs. Davilow does not dwell much on the *undesirableness* of marriage either, because "whatever marriage had been for herself, how could she the less desire it for her daughter?" (81). To disclose all of the unhappy circumstances of her marriages would be to ruin any chance of Gwendolen making a good match and making a better life for herself. It seems as if Gwendolen's potential to make a good match is a major reason why Mrs. Davilow feels silenced on the subject of "the trials of matrimony" which is "the last theme into which Mrs. Davilow could choose to enter fully with *this* daughter" (266 emphasis mine). Gwendolen must gather information about marriage and husbands from observation because her mother does not want to give Gwendolen the knowledge that might make her decide against marriage.

Mrs. Davilow's bad experience of her second marriage serves as both a barrier to communication and an example to her daughter of the dullness of married life. Gwendolen's observation of matrimony ha[s] inclined her to think it rather a dreary state in which a woman could not do what she liked, had more children than were desirable, was consequently dull, and became irrevocably immersed in humdrum. (31)

She has been prepared for attracting a good husband since she was a child, but wonders “what is the use of [her] being charming, if it is to end in [her] being dull and not minding anything? Is that what marriage always comes to?” (22). What Gwendolen has observed is the reality of many Victorian marriages; she has perceived with amazing clarity and understanding how limited the life of a Victorian woman could be—she argues with her cousin Rex that she “never saw a married woman who had her own way” (59). Gwendolen acknowledges that becoming a wife entails wearing “the domestic fetters of that condition” (31). However, Gwendolen persists in her belief that a woman with her abilities and gifts will have a different fate. Gwendolen makes the fatal mistake of thinking that she will be different and “not do as other women do” (60) when she marries. Gwendolen believes that her “Mamma managed badly” and that “she herself [will] manage quite differently” (266). In this way, Gwendolen’s disillusioned attitude towards marriage does not seem to extend to the institution itself, only to the unfortunate women who “made poor use of” (318) their power in marriage. As Britta Zangen describes in her book *Our Daughters Must Be Wives*,

[t]here cannot be anything wrong with the institution of marriage as such, or with the way authority is divided in it, or with the way it hurts and thwarts women, or with the way they are made unhappy. The undeniable wrongs of marriage can merely arise when the man is the wrong partner. (188)

Gwendolen seems disillusioned about marriage, but not about her own ability to make the best out of her situation by choosing the *right* marriage. Yet none of her experience, despite her keen observation of her mother’s marriages, has prepared her to judge the man she will choose to marry.

Gwendolen has had a distinct lack of male relationships. Her father died when she was still “in long clothes,” and her “unlovable step-father whom she had been acquainted with the

greater part of her life while her frocks were short" (17) had "for the last nine years joined his family only in a brief and fitful manner" (16) before his own death. Gwendolen's memories of her stepfather are overwhelmingly negative; although Eliot never explains explicitly why he was so "unlovable," she does write that Mrs. Davilow is always "in an apologetic state of mind [to Gwendolen] for the evils brought on her by a step-father" (33). The exact nature of these evils is unknown; at the very least he is guilty of neglecting his family and carrying "off his wife's jewellery and dispos[ing] of it" (246), but Mrs. Davilow's silence and Gwendolen's negative ideas about marriage and men in general suggest that his crimes may have been of a much darker variety. Some critics have suggested he might have been sexually abusive of either Mrs. Davilow or Gwendolen, something which would explain Gwendolen's intense fear and avoidance of sexuality and marriage.<sup>vii</sup> Indeed, Gwendolen tells Daniel she "did not like [her] father-in-law to come home" as a child (631), a memory which is somehow bound up with her murderous hatred of Grandcourt. Whatever the reason, Captain Davilow is an undoubtedly negative male figure in Gwendolen's life—both as a father figure and as a husband to her mother.

Despite her negative experiences with men, Gwendolen still seems to want a positive father figure in her life and is genuinely receptive to the attentions of her uncle, Mr. Gascoigne. When she moves to Offendene, it is "a matter of extreme interest to her that she [is] to have the near countenance of a dignified male relative, and that the family life [will] cease to be entirely, insipidly feminine" (24). Mr. Gascoigne feels an obligation to his niece, but he feels his duty lies primarily in having her married well. As a man, he has access to information that Gwendolen desperately needs in order to make an informed decision about Grandcourt, but chooses not to share it. As Eliot describes, "Mr. Gascoigne had not heard [what kind of man Grandcourt is]; at least, if his male acquaintances gossiped in his hearing, he was not disposed

to repeat their gossip" (84). He is more concerned with Grandcourt's "birth, wealth and consequent leisure" than his "venial" habits, "which under other circumstances would have been inexcusable" (84). He judges Grandcourt man-to-man and considers him a good match, but never gives Gwendolen (or, for that matter, his wife or his sister) a chance to judge Grandcourt based on his (male) knowledge of Grandcourt's unsavory reputation. His failure to help Gwendolen make an informed decision about Grandcourt is another example of the Victorian "sexualization of most forms of knowledge" (Michie 166), which disadvantages women like Gwendolen whose male relatives withhold knowledge either by their absence or by their commitment to preserving gender distinctions. When Grandcourt's relationship with Mrs. Glasher is posthumously revealed, Mr. Gascoigne's "masculine soundness" is once again called into question—he assumes, based on his knowledge of "what maidens and wives were likely to know, do and suffer" (688-689), that Gwendolen did not know about her husband's long-term affair. However, as Eliot notes, he has had "a most imperfect observation of the particular maiden and wife in question" (689). Mr. Gascoigne's ignorance of Gwendolen's struggles is excusable—he has his own family and rectory to occupy his time, not to mention the financial wellbeing of his sister's family to consider. His failure as a father figure, however, substantially diminishes Gwendolen's ability to judge men and establish healthy relationships with them.

As a result of this alienation from male contact, especially positive male contact, Gwendolen feels antipathy towards men—especially those who threaten her with their sexuality or sexual advances. She finds men in real life incompatible with the men she has encountered in her reading; moreover she could certainly not experience sexual or physical attraction through a novel. Gwendolen says that she "wonders how girls manage to fall in love. It is easy to make them do it in books. But men are too ridiculous" (67). This lack of sexual attraction as expressed to her mother increasingly appears to be an active hatred of men.

After she learns the truth about Grandcourt and Lydia Glasher, Gwendolen says she “believe[s] all men are bad and [she] hate[s] them” (136). Yet this hatred of men is not only connected to Grandcourt and his secret—she repeats this sentiment after she returns from Leubronn: “men were hateful. Yes, men were hateful. Those words were filled out with very vivid memories” (204). One of the “vivid memories” could very well be the shocking revelation at the Whispering Stones, or perhaps the uncomfortable and tense moments of her courtship with Grandcourt, but I think it likely the vivid memories of hateful men concern other men (perhaps all men)—not only Grandcourt, whose relationship with Gwendolen has been fairly recent. Gwendolen’s antipathy for men seems to be of a much earlier date, and therefore more deep-rooted than any hatred that Grandcourt could have caused. This may support the idea that we are invited to assume that Gwendolen herself was sexually abused by her stepfather, or at least suffered some sort of abuse (physical, psychological, sexual) at his hands. It could be a hatred rooted in her ignorance of men—perhaps even a hatred of the system that has kept her from such knowledge. Whatever the source of her hatred, it translates into an intense fear of what she cannot understand or control: male sexuality and physicality.

The first indication of her fear of sexuality comes when her cousin, Rex, is attracted to her. Gwendolen shrinks away from being made love to: “[t]he perception that poor Rex wanted to be tender made her curl up and harden like a sea-anemone at the touch of a finger” (70). Gwendolen’s revulsion is highly physical—not only is Rex’s tenderness described in terms of touch, Gwendolen tells Mrs. Davilow she “can’t bear anyone to be very near” (71) except her mother. Bonnie Zimmerman explains her “mixture of fear, revulsion and loathing” in response to men as a fear of losing control—Gwendolen “curls around her centre to prevent any penetration of her self” (210). Eliot writes that “the life of passion had begun negatively in her. She [feels] passionately averse to this volunteered love” (71). The fact that Rex is non-



threatening reveals how extreme Gwendolen's fears are. She is "subject to physical antipathies" (106) for men such as Lush as well, which is more understandable given his low character. Repulsed by touch and shrinking from men, Gwendolen has little chance of becoming a sexually complying (and perhaps desiring) Victorian wife. Her repulsion also lacks discrimination: both Rex and Lush (whom the reader can see as vastly different characters) are objectionable to Gwendolen, suggesting that she is unable to judge properly the men she encounters.

## Part II: Gwendolen's Choice

Given that Gwendolen is a child, who knows little about men, marriage or sex, to what extent can we call her decision to marry Grandcourt informed? Once again it is useful to look at the name of the book in which Gwendolen's courtship, culminating in a tense proposal which is literally a trial for Gwendolen, takes place. Eliot calls this book "Maidens Choosing," which refers to the maidens who make choices in this section of the novel; Gwendolen, Mirah and Catherine Arrowpoint all make enormous decisions during this portion. However, a slight change in punctuation could make this title read "Maiden's Choosing," suggesting both the limited nature of a maiden's choice as well as the peculiar nature of that choice. It is a choice that all maidens must make—indeed it is a choice that only maidens make: whether or not to accept a proposal of marriage. In her examination of the maiden's choices, Eliot harshly critiques the social system that has not only filled Gwendolen with illusions about marriage but also left her completely ignorant about men and marriage. Zimmerman compares Eliot's attitude with Eliza Lynn Linton's "Girl of the Period" and sees Gwendolen's decision-making process as a response to the idea that girls were "making poor choices and needed a clear example of where the unbridled desire for transcendence may lead" (197). This comparison

seems especially apt when one considers that *Daniel Deronda* is the only one of Eliot's novels set in the present day<sup>viii</sup>—suggesting that the girl of the period faces new dangers and challenges in courtship and marriage. In Gwendolen's case, the new danger is the traditional female ignorance of sexuality combined with a relatively new idea of the possibility of female power and choice. When Gwendolen finally accepts Grandcourt, Eliot writes “[h]er ‘Yes’ entailed so little at this moment” (271)—revealing what I think is the central issue of Eliot's marriage plot: Gwendolen, like so many other maidens, says ‘Yes’ to marriage without any conception of what she is agreeing to.

For Gwendolen, marriage is a “vexatious necessity” (31). Unlike Trollope's progressive heroines Priscilla and Dorothy Stanbury, Gwendolen can “not look forward to a single life” (31). Gwendolen does question “whether she need take a husband at all—whether she could not achieve substantiality for herself and know gratified ambition without bondage” (225), but her dreams of being a singer and having an independent income are unrealistic and perhaps more uninformed than her ideas about marriage—as Herr Klesmer makes clear in his interview with her. Her thoughts on remaining single are parenthetical and fleeting: during her first meeting with Grandcourt,

Gwendolen reflect[s] that the life of an unmarried woman who [can] not go about and ha[s] no command of anything must necessarily be dull through all the degrees of comparison as time went on (98).

However, this is a reflection made during the distraction of courtship, not a serious consideration made in a reflective state of mind that is comparable to Nora Rowley's debates about remaining single in *He Knew He Was Right*. In some ways, Gwendolen's thoughts on her marriage status are in dialogue with some of the ideas on spinsterdom and matrimony expressed in Trollope's novel: Dorothy argues that spinsters are “nobodies” (Trollope 481) in

their society, while Gwendolen marries to fulfill her “girlish dreams of being ‘somebody’” (320). Mrs. Davilow shares this view of matrimony, despite her negative experience with the institution: she can “think of welfare in no other shape than marriage” (82), explaining to Gwendolen that “[m]arriage is the only happy state for a woman” (22). The refusal to accept spinsterdom as preferable to marriage (which has negative connotations for both Mrs. Davilow and Gwendolen) is not a failing on the part of either woman, however: it is a failure on the part of society. As Zangen explains, “their inability [to reject marriage as the only possible future] is not due to a lack of inspiration but due to a correct evaluation of reality: within Eliot’s fictional universe there is no other role that a middle-class woman could play” (188). Although Trollope was able to imagine women who would be willing to choose a single life, they are clearly the minority: the typical Victorian would probably agree with Gwendolen, not with Priscilla Stanbury.

In fact, Gwendolen’s ideas about marriage fly in the face of Trollope’s conception of marriage as depicted in *He Knew He Was Right*. In his novel, Trollope argues that love and sexual attraction are essential components of a happy and successful marriage. For Gwendolen, “the desirability of marriage [...] [has] always seemed due to other feelings than love” (267). Despite her “momentary phantasmal love” (270) for Grandcourt, she is more in love with what he (and marriage) seems to offer her than with him as a physical or sexual being. Eliot describes how Gwendolen’s considerations of Grandcourt as a lover have more to do with how he will affect her life than about *who* he is as a person. She wonders briefly whether “he had ever been in love or made love” (120) but her ability to answer that question is not only impossible, but also ultimately unimportant. He does not exist for Gwendolen as a sexual being; therefore he is not a sexual being. Gwendolen has “not observed husbands to be companions” (98) and therefore does not seek a companion—sexual or intellectual—in

Grandcourt. Indeed, her fear of intimacy continues with Grandcourt, of whom she has “no alarm lest he meant to kiss her” (272). This reluctance to share physical intimacy with her future husband does not bode well for the Victorian heroine, who will be expected to perform her sexual duties in marriage and provide children. She tells Grandcourt during their engagement that he is “not to ask for one kiss” (293). Gwendolen’s engagement is a failure in this way; unlike Trollope’s heroines, her suitor creates no awakening of sexual feeling in Gwendolen, who is therefore ill prepared for the sexuality of a wife. Instead of marrying for love or sexual intimacy, Gwendolen marries for material reasons—like Camilla French, she is more concerned with what she can gain from marriage.

Gwendolen desires power, preeminence, and freedom and believes the only way for her to attain these things is through marriage. Viewing marriage as a “deliverance from the dull insignificance of her girlhood” (278), Gwendolen is vulnerable to the allure of wealth and position that marriage offers her. In her world, marriage is “social promotion” (31)—an idea that is given weight by the advice of her uncle. He tells her that

marriage is the only true and satisfactory sphere of a woman, and if [her] marriage with Mr. Grandcourt should be happily decided upon, [she] will probably have an increasing power, both of rank and wealth. (126)

Gwendolen is encouraged by her society and by her family to focus on the “the dignities, the luxuries, the power of doing a great deal of what she liked to do” that she can only attain through marriage, as well as her “duty” (125) to accept the proposal of a man with such a large fortune and rank, who could possibly help her family. These mercenary reasons for marriage are practical, but the temptations of money and rank cause Gwendolen to overlook the more pressing question of her own suitability for marriage with Grandcourt. Calder writes that Gwendolen “sees marriage as trading freedom for material advantage” (155). The truth is

something in between: Gwendolen is making her decision based on the material advantages Grandcourt offers her, but at the same time deludes herself into believing she is (as Nora Rowley declares) marrying for liberty.

In addition to her increased standing in society, Gwendolen believes she will have “empire of her own life” (261). Gwendolen is determined to do “as she like[s]” (120) and is profoundly dissatisfied with being a girl in the Victorian patriarchy. She complains that “[g]irls' lives are so stupid: they never do what they like” (59), which means she must become a woman (wife) in order to follow her own guidance and have control over her life. As she tells her mother, “I see now why girls are glad to be married—to escape being expected to please everybody but themselves” (85). She imagines herself “entering on a fuller power of managing circumstance” (318) instead of having her situation dictated to her by others. In a way, Gwendolen is correct: the Victorian maiden’s biggest power was often in her choice of husband. Once the choice is made, however, the autonomy of the wife was not guaranteed. This “imagined freedom she would create for herself in marriage” (278) is just that—an illusion. She seems to have forgotten the powerlessness and dullness she has observed in other married women, or is perhaps once again trusting that she will be able to “exercise her power” (267) in a way that other women cannot.

Part of Gwendolen’s illusion of power in marriage is connected to her impression of Grandcourt as someone “over whom she was going to have indefinite power” (281). Her previous experience of “domestic empire” (33) over her mothers and sisters, as well as the courtship convention that allowed her to “[play] at reigning” (282) lead Gwendolen to think that she will be able to be master in all situations, especially over such a man as Grandcourt, a man “of extremely calm, cold manners [who] might be less disagreeable as a husband than other men, and not likely to interfere with his wife's preferences” (97). Gwendolen interprets

Grandcourt's lack of passion as lack of opinion, which would allow her more ability to follow her own opinions:

the less he had of particular tastes, or desires, the more freedom his wife was likely to have in following hers. Gwendolen conceived that after marriage she would most probably be able to manage him thoroughly. (120)

Gwendolen is confident that her relationship with Grandcourt as her husband will be "altogether a manner of matter of management in which she would know how to act" (281).

Gwendolen risks her freedom on her ability to judge Grandcourt as manageable and asexual; by trying to gain more power and freedom, she gambles the little power she has as an unmarried woman. As is the case with her gambling at the very beginning of the novel, she does not consider the possible losses; Eliot writes "[p]oor Gwendolen had no awe of unmanageable forces in the state of matrimony" (281).

Gwendolen's lack of experience with men makes her a poor judge of their character. Eliot describes Grandcourt as "a handsome lizard of a hitherto unknown species" before explaining that "Gwendolen knew hardly anything about lizards, and ignorance gives one a wide range of probabilities" (120). In the absence of definite knowledge or criteria on which to judge him, Gwendolen tries to make her observations of Grandcourt fit her ideas of a man whom she could marry. In the end, she convinces herself that Grandcourt "suit[s] her purposes" (121).

Ignorance of men and of the reality of marriage undermines Gwendolen's ability to make a good decision about Grandcourt. According to Eliot, this is a common situation for women because "[s]uitors must often be judged as words are, by the standing and the figure they make in polite society: it is difficult to know much else of them" (280). Judging a man by his public behavior alone, however, tells the prospective bride nothing about the private

behavior that she will be primarily involved with as his wife. Marlene Tromp sees Grandcourt's respectability and position in society as "screens" (201) whereby he can hide his true nature—further complicating the idea that true knowledge of a man can be gained without intimate experience (perhaps sexual). Helena Michie examines this element of *Daniel Deronda* as a critique of sexualized or gendered knowledge in her study *Victorian Honeymoons*. Gwendolen's lack of knowledge about the man she chooses to marry, "suggests [...] the narrow register in which knowledge and experience can be gained and applied for by the heroine of a marriage plot" (162). Eliot writes that

Gwendolen has about as accurate a conception of marriage—that is to say, of the mutual influences, demands, duties of man and woman in the state of matrimony—as she had of magnetic currents and the law of storms. (266)

It is important that Eliot compares knowledge of marriage to scientific knowledge, which was typically gendered as male. Is it only men who have an accurate conception of marriage before it happens to them? The Victorian sexual double standard seems to ensure that that is the case.

Gwendolen is given a very short period of time (her courtship is said to have lasted three weeks before her encounter with Mrs. Glasher and her flight to Leubronn) in which to judge Grandcourt and his suit; indecision on Gwendolen's part is perceived as coquetting and could reflect negatively on her should she ultimately refuse Grandcourt. Zangen explains Gwendolen's dilemma, writing

[a]fter two weeks of marked attentions by a suitor a respectable young woman is as good as engaged if she lets him go on with it. By reverse conclusion, had she had the slightest doubt about the man in question she would have to stop his courting her almost as soon as it began. How was she to find out anything about the man with

whom she would have to share home, table, and bed for her life once she accepted him?  
(192)

Time and reflection are major factors in the happy marriages of both Nora Rowley and Dorothy Stanbury; without these two essential elements, Nora could have easily ended up with Mr. Glascock and Dorothy would have accepted Mr. Gibson's suit. In addition, Gwendolen's exigent financial situation tips the balance in favor of marriage—she is not only concerned with her own position, but also the well being of her family (especially her mother). The fatal combination of ruined finances, haste, ignorance and confused motivations ensures that Gwendolen will make the wrong choice and marry a husband who is, we shall see, completely unsuited to her and essentially unsuited to marriage.

The revelation that Grandcourt is not the man he seems to be comes when Gwendolen is confronted with his sexual history in the persons of Lydia Glasher and her children. Gwendolen's conception of Grandcourt as asexual and therefore safe is shattered by the images of "Grandcourt and his relations with [Mrs. Glasher]" (278). Michie describes Gwendolen's encounter with Mrs. Glasher as an "opportunity for carnal knowledge before the honeymoon" (165). Though a meeting with her suitor's mistress and children is a disillusioning initiation and enlargement of knowledge, it is unclear whether or not Gwendolen is able fully to understand the knowledge she is given. Her illusions of Grandcourt's asexuality are destroyed, but without experience and personal connection to Mrs. Glasher's situation, Gwendolen's shock remains mental. Many of her most illusory ideas about marriage occur after she learns about Lydia Glasher—indeed, some of those reflections center around Gwendolen's potential influence on Grandcourt's relationship with his clandestine family. Gwendolen is able to change the knowledge she is given to suit her purposes—perhaps once again trusting her extraordinary power over men or perhaps completely blocking the undesirable facts in favor of



focusing on the possibilities of her marriage with Grandcourt. Because her knowledge is secret, and internal (not spoken), Gwendolen recasts the facts in a way that fits her world-view, a worldview that does not include sex, men or practical knowledge. Only through experience, specifically consummation, can Gwendolen possibly understand what it is to be a sexual being, or to be married to a sexual being.

### Part III: Consequences

The marriage between Gwendolen and Grandcourt occurs near the middle of *Daniel Deronda*. Their marriage is not comic closure; it is the beginning of a nightmare for Gwendolen, who has married without realizing her husband's cruelty or her duties as his wife. Gwendolen's marriage is not her "final scene" and there is no "fall of the curtain" (252); instead, Eliot reveals what happens in the private life of a marriage, including the immense cruelty and abuse that can occur even in socially advantageous marriages such as the one between Gwendolen and Grandcourt.<sup>ix</sup> Eliot ventures into the "less traveled territory beyond the pale of the happy ending" (Boone 66), defying the Victorian convention that saw marriage as the climax of a woman's life. As critic Joseph Boone suggests,

a more acute assessment of the patriarchal implications of marriage and of marriage-plots led to an abandonment of the closed structures and stabilizing 'ends' of contemporary fiction and to the development, ultimately, of open-ended narrative in order to replicate the vicissitudes of uneasy wedlock. (66)

However, much of what transpires in the Grandcourt marriage remains concealed, or hidden in subtext. Indeed, Eliot does not describe the honeymoon or the first months of the Grandcourt marriage, leaving the reader to fill the gaps. These gaps, as well as the ambiguous nature of the

resolution of Gwendolen's story, lead to a nuanced, complex and ultimately ambivalent view of marriage.

Gwendolen's honeymoon occurs "in the ellipses between one volume or named book of the novel and another" (Michie 161). The last vision of Gwendolen before her honeymoon is a vision of trauma: having read Lydia Glasher's letter, Gwendolen becomes hysterical. In this moment, she loses both her sense of herself and her strength: "she could not see the reflection or herself then: they were like so many women petrified white" (322). Michie sees this as a scene of the Gothic, where "the glass panels simultaneously refuse to reflect Gwendolen to herself and produce endless reiterations of the terrified woman Gwendolen has so long resisted becoming" (167). Locating Gwendolen's wedding night and honeymoon in the Gothic tradition allows Eliot to suggest more evil, insidious sources of terror than simply Gwendolen's moral horror of gaining from another's loss—the Gothic villain, the evil other woman, possible incest, cursed diamonds and past secrets all threaten the heroine with harm that far transcends what one would expect to find in civilized Victorian society or, indeed, in the novel of manners.<sup>x</sup> However, unlike the fantastic and extraordinary plots of the Gothic novel, this scene of horror and displacement was all too common for a Victorian girl suddenly thrust into the adult world of sexuality. Michie, whose study of Victorian honeymoons includes archival and literary sources, transcribes a diary entry where a new bride writes of her honeymoon as "a period I should think the most unpleasant in a girl's life... I don't know what have become of me with anyone other than David, he has been very kind and good and considerate" (4). Michie locates in this entry a sense of shared experience—all women must go through the same ordeal on their wedding night. Gwendolen's case is more traumatic because of her husband's cruelty, but her fear and ignorance are not unique.

Concerning what exactly happens during Gwendolen's honeymoon, Eliot remains silent. Andrew Dowling sees this narrative silence as a suggestion of actions that are too terrible to be described. The bedroom is kept private; not only for reasons of Victorian censorship, but also because of the effect of silence on the imagination of the readers. In the most recent screen adaptation of the novel, the bedroom is also kept private. However, though the film never explicitly shows sex, it does imply Gwendolen's first sexual experience with Grandcourt is forced. It is not difficult to find textual evidence to support this inventive change, however. Because Gwendolen has no sexual feelings for Grandcourt, and is indeed averse to any physical contact, it is unlikely she would have consented to sexual relations. The development of sexuality that should have occurred during her engagement never takes place, and Gwendolen cannot have the sexual awakening and desire that heroines such as Dorothy Stanbury and Nora Rowley experience. In the film, after Grandcourt finds Gwendolen on the floor, screaming in distress, he begins to kiss her on the neck and fondle her breasts under her dress. She pulls away, horrified. His reaction is chilling: "Don't be such a damn little coquette. It's my turn now. Don't you understand? You're my wife now." Grandcourt then drags Gwendolen by the arm into the opposite room and pushes her down on the bed. The scene ends thus abruptly, but the implication is clear. What actually occurs on this first night and the first months of marriage can only truly be inferred from its effect: as Michie writes, the wedding night's "transformative powers are rendered by a stunning orthographic blankness" (161).

When Gwendolen reemerges as a married woman, her transformation is evident. She is "conscious of an uneasy, transforming process—all the old nature shaken to its depths, its hopes spoiled, its pleasures perturbed, but still showing wholeness and strength in the will to reassert itself" (382). This is the opposite of what the honeymoon period is supposed to enact.

Instead of becoming the sexually aware and active woman whose marriage has completed the maturation process, Gwendolen becomes stunted—a frightened child whose pleas for help are as unanswered as they are pathetic. As Eliot writes “the poor thing’s belief in her power, with her other dreams before marriage, ha[s] often to be thrust aside now like the toys of a sick child” (374).

Only in marriage can Gwendolen know the true nature of the man she married, and what her “Yes” entailed. Marriage is for Gwendolen “a traumatic ascension to knowledge” (Bilston 195). Knowledge is almost instantaneously achieved upon marriage, but not soon enough to save the heroine from making a lasting error: the “cruel paradox of female sexual knowledge” is that “knowledge about marriage can only be gained through experience when, by definition, it is too late to make an informed choice” (Michie 164). The uninformed and rushed choice made by the maiden seals her fate for life: Gwendolen learns “how quickly might life turn from expectancy to a bitter sense of the irremediable” (365) and sees too late her failure to read her husband and the marriage state. Eliot’s emphasis on the speed of Gwendolen’s disillusion underlines how dramatic her transformation is and how difficult it is for the heroine to cope with such a sudden overhaul of her life and future; the “swift travel from her bright rash girlhood into this agony of remorse” (630) leaves Gwendolen in an unfamiliar world with almost no ties to her old life. Gwendolen has never had a real home, but she nonetheless feels the “sudden change from home” (383) as something unsettling and frightening. Marriage separates Gwendolen from her old life, her home, and even her family: as with many Victorian women, marriage represents a complete renunciation of her maiden identity. Although Gwendolen seemed to desire this transformation, she had no notion of what identity she would be adopting as wife, and begins to wish for a return to her fierce maidenhood, and perhaps even the dullness of her girlhood and her family life. Gwendolen tells Deronda “[t]hings have

changed in me so—in such a short time. What I used not to like, I long for now. I think I am almost getting fond of the old things now they are gone” (410). Reversion to the unappreciated girlhood signals a total failure of Gwendolen’s transformation: she is no longer looking forward to new experiences and knowledge, but instead longing for an existence without those things.

Contrasting Gwendolen’s pre-marriage hopes and expectations with her marital reality allows us to see how utterly her ideas of marriage fail to correspond to her husband’s. To Gwendolen, horses are “symbols of command and luxury” (272) before her marriage, but afterwards she sees how her husband “delights in making the dogs and horses quail: that is half the pleasure in calling them his” (386). Gwendolen’s love of horses suggests her desire to be strong and free; her cherished dream is to “mount the chariot and drive the plunging horses herself” (120). Grandcourt, on the other hand, sees horses as animals that should be mastered. He delights in thinking how Gwendolen has been “brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena” by her circumstances and looks forward to making her “submit” (286) when they are married. He is pleased that Gwendolen has “answered to the rein” (387) by only the seventh week of their marriage. The idea of breaking a spirited horse pervades the marriage, and makes an intriguing metaphorical link between training a horse and the wife’s transformation; the girl’s dream of reigning and power as a coquette is transformed into the submission of a spirited horse to a master who has absolute control and ownership over its body and soul.

Indeed, although Gwendolen marries Grandcourt to escape bondage, her marriage is described in terms of slavery and colonial empire. Eliot, according to Gillian Beer, “turns to the analogy with slavery” (17) to describe the position of women in Victorian society. The archery contest, which Alison Booth terms a “disguised marriage market” (258) is really a kind of slave auction. Gwendolen is flattered by her preeminence among the other marriageable

girls, but Eliot explains her pleasure in more insidious terms: Gwendolen's happiness is that of "a slave [who] has been proud to be bought first" (87). Gwendolen may recognize the slave-auction nature of the marriage market, but imagines herself as the buyer, not the slave. She wants Grandcourt to "declare himself [her] slave" (62). She also considers there is some choice in becoming a slave, again imagining that "[o]ther people [allow] themselves to be made slaves of" (31). Contrasting this as Eliot does with Grandcourt's desire for empire and enslaving, it is impossible not to recognize Gwendolen's misjudgment and misreading.

Marriage begins Grandcourt's "empire of fear" (384); Gwendolen has sold herself for material gain and increased status, but as a result loses her freedom to do as she likes. Instead, Gwendolen is "his to do as he like[s] with" (607). In the privacy of marriage, Grandcourt's mastery is complete and "unmolested by social demands" (607). The home, and especially the bedroom, is Grandcourt's unquestioned domain. Eliot writes "if this white-handed man with the perpendicular profile had been sent to govern a difficult colony, he might have won reputation among his contemporaries" (539). Here Gwendolen is like a colonial holding, both owned and ruled. Grandcourt's "white hand" is an image of terror to Gwendolen: she imagines that this "white hand of his which was touching his whisker was capable [...] of clinging round her neck and threatening to throttle her" (386). Grandcourt's whiteness suggests colonial empire and mastery as well as a kind of vampiric deadness and predation, once again connecting the Grandcourt marriage to the Gothic tradition. The Grandcourt marriage is therefore a critique both of empire and marriage, where a "remnant of a human being" (or empire) can rob a "young creature" of her "unused life" (364).<sup>xi</sup>

Underlying these metaphors and descriptions of marriage is an insidious sense of what is not, and perhaps cannot be, described. The reason for Gwendolen's fear and total subjection is displaced, never completely revealed but ever-present, or, as Dowling states

[t]he concealed yet constant sexual tyranny that seems to pervade Grandcourt's and Gwendolen's relationship is signified by the unspeakable acts that are positioned just below the narrative surface of silence. (334)

Eliot, who is unequivocal about Gwendolen's fear of sexuality and fear of Grandcourt without explicitly connecting the two, does not describe Grandcourt's sexual abuse in the text. Indeed, some critics, such as Wijesinha, fail to locate the source of Gwendolen's terror; he finds it "odd that Gwendolen's own previous self-sufficient dominance should have been quelled so thoroughly as to make her totally submissive to [Grandcourt] emotionally as well as physically," concluding that her remorse upon her marriage is "not immediately and entirely credible" (265). Wijesinha's reading is based on what is explicitly stated in the novel about Grandcourt's cruelty; based on the text alone, Grandcourt's crimes are little more than imperiousness and a demanding and controlling nature. This has to do with what Marlene Tromp describes as "the screens in Henleigh's cruel behavior" which, once exposed, "flood the discourse" (201) with a sense of violence, especially sexual violence. The first indication of Grandcourt's perverse sexual nature occurs during the engagement period. When Gwendolen refuses to kiss her fiancé, Grandcourt is "contented to pay a large price for this new kind of love-making, which introduced marriage by the finest contrast" (293). Grandcourt actually prefers that Gwendolen be inexperienced, ignorant and even averse to sex, because it makes his domination of her novel and presumably more exciting. Deflowering the fiercely virginal Gwendolen is something that arouses the normally "flaccid" (96) Grandcourt, suggesting that his marital relations with Gwendolen will be based on sadism and dominance rather than (mutual) pleasure. Grandcourt's "sexual brutality" (334) can be inferred both by Gwendolen's extreme reaction to marriage, as well as by Eliot's use of sexual language to describe Grandcourt's influence over his wife. She writes that "his habitual want was to put collision out

of the question by the quiet massive pressure of his rule” (540), a sexually charged description that provides a key for his power, as well as Gwendolen’s reactions to him. The film adaptation again makes this element of *Daniel Deronda* more obvious to the modern viewer: directly after a scene in Gwendolen’s boudoir where she requests that Grandcourt not come to her bed that night, we see Gwendolen lying alone face down on her bed, her clothes in disarray, crying in despair. Gwendolen seems to be the victim of sodomy; her green dress pulled up around her legs, and Lydia Glasher’s cursed diamonds still around her neck, Gwendolen has clearly been violated both sexually and psychologically. The film adaptation overtly depicts what is only hinted at in the text, but the end conclusion is the same: Gwendolen is the victim of marital rape in a period where wives had no right to refuse sex to their husbands—no matter how brutal or abusive their husband turned out to be.

Gwendolen’s murderous hallucinations and hysteria are responses to the extreme sexual abuse Grandcourt inflicts on her. The yacht Grandcourt takes to Genoa is his “absolute domain,” where he can withdraw “Gwendolen from those she gives pleasure to and from the sources of her own pleasure” (Fisher 221) and instead indulge in his own sadistic pleasures. Gwendolen is literally trapped by Grandcourt when they are yachting; unable to legally escape his demands in England, Gwendolen now finds herself physically unable to escape or refuse his demands, especially, it is suggested, his demands on her body. The cabin is described as kind of harem: “soft-cushioned, hung with silk, expanded with mirrors” (608). The cabin’s sexual purpose becomes clearer when Gwendolen imagines Grandcourt as a “dangerous serpent ornamentally coiled in her cabin without invitation” (610). Ostensibly shattered by this arrangement is the safety of separate bedrooms—something which could not save Gwendolen from sexual abuse but allowed the pretense of protection. Here there is no room for pretense or for dispute; Grandcourt’s enjoyment of the yachting is partly because of the “small scale” where



“everybody must do what was expected of them whatever might be their private protest—the protest (kept strictly private) adding to the piquancy of despotism” (610). The enclosed space of the yacht also makes it impossible for Gwendolen to ignore or deny the full terror of her marriage to Grandcourt: “the medium that now thrust itself everywhere before her view was this husband and her relation to him” (610). Combining Gwendolen’s enslavement with her sexual abuse in a kind of harem or sexual slavery creates an atmosphere of desperation in Gwendolen, which precipitates her murderous intent, if not outright culpability, in Grandcourt’s drowning. The drowning, like the acts of sexual cruelty and mastery which occur in the subtext of the narrative, is only experienced from the outside, described by Deronda and later confessed by Gwendolen, but never depicted in the text. In this final way, Grandcourt’s death and his sexual sadism are explicitly connected: both are unspeakable crimes shrouded in the narrative silence surrounding marital abuse.

Marriage robs Gwendolen of her subjectivity and much of her narrative power in *Daniel Deronda*. After her marriage, Eliot portrays Gwendolen’s subjectivity less and less—choosing to let us see her through the eyes of others or, for long periods, not at all. It seems as if Gwendolen has—as Daniel’s mother is said to have done—“married [herself] into silence” (396). According to Kate Flint, “George Eliot’s commentary on marital relations is also suggested by the way the narrative organization is used to reinforce the emotional dynamics of the plot” (175). Many critics, including Flint and Boone, notice that, from the point of her marriage on, “the segments of the Gwendolen plot alternating with the Daniel plot become much shorter, fragmented, like her now-diminished existence” (Boone 76). Carole Stone locates Gwendolen’s “lack of utterance” about her experience of sexual cruelty as a kind of hysterical “self-censorship” of an “unsayable feminine” discourse.<sup>xii</sup> As Gwendolen loses power over her life, she also loses control over her narrative, becoming at the end of the novel “reduced to a

mere speck" (730). Sharply contrasted to the power and narrative possibility of her courtship and engagement, her choice to marry Grandcourt diminishes her role in her own life and in the novel itself.

The Grandcourt marriage is barren. If marital sexuality was sanctioned for reproductive purposes, the failure of the Grandcourt marriage, in Victorian terms as well as modern, is complete. Gwendolen does not desire to become pregnant even before her courtship; she hopes she will "have no children" (280), ostensibly because she does not want to take away Lydia Glasher's son's inheritance, but more likely because of her fear of sexual contact and hope that her marriage will be unconsummated. After her realization of the kind of man Grandcourt is, Gwendolen would be even less willing to have children. There is also a suggestion, made explicitly by the film adaptation, that Gwendolen and Grandcourt's sexual practices are based around sodomy and other non-reproductive sexual acts (in the text, Grandcourt's desire to make Gwendolen kneel down has sexual meaning that is hard to overlook). David sees Gwendolen's failure to become pregnant as failure in another sense: she writes that it represents the inability of "class fusion as doing anything to invigorate a morally flaccid culture" (194). Moreover, it is "as if a marriage which is partly founded upon gratification of sado-masochistic compulsions can only end in sterility" (David 194).

Despite the trauma and destruction caused by Gwendolen's marriage to Grandcourt, Eliot suggests that Gwendolen has become a better person—or, more exactly, a better woman—because of her experiences. She writes that

Mrs. Grandcourt was handsomer than Gwendolen Harleth: her grace and expression were informed by a greater variety of inward experience, giving new play to her features, new attitudes in movement and repose; her whole person and air had the nameless something which often makes a woman more interesting after marriage than

before, less confident that all things are according to her opinion and yet with less of deer-like shyness—more fully a human being. (615)

This is a common theme in Eliot's writing, which acknowledges the power of suffering to bring knowledge and spiritual expansion: as Daniel Deronda explains, "[l]ives are enlarged in different ways" (398), sometimes through positive experience, but often through pain. Susan Ostrov Weisser writes that "Gwendolen's narrowness is expandable by suffering" (4)—something that sets her apart from characters such as Rosamond Vincy, whose narrowness remains intact at the end of *Middlemarch*. Gwendolen's transformation, although painful and destructive, does change her from an ignorant girl to an experienced woman. At the end of the novel, Gwendolen is a widow, free from sexual demands but at the same time aware of her sexuality. Eliot places Gwendolen back in the domestic sphere, returning to her role as the daughter and sister she once was, but with more knowledge and power over her life than she ever had as a maiden. There is hope that Gwendolen's expansion has made her more sympathetic and generous, two cardinal virtues in Eliot's fiction. Additionally, her interaction with Daniel Deronda presents Gwendolen with a new vision of men, and of male relationships. Daniel's kindness to her, which Gwendolen is especially receptive to in her weakened state following Grandcourt's drowning, rehabilitates Gwendolen's trust in men. Without Deronda's influence, Gwendolen might have thought all men were like Grandcourt; he offers her a new vision of manhood, and hope that she can have a relationship with a good man. Her future—which, it is suggested, contains a marriage to Rex Gascoigne—will include a second chance at transformation: one that Eliot seems to hint will be more successful than her disastrous alliance with Grandcourt.

## Chapter Three

A Worthy Goal: *Our Mutual Friend* and Dickens' Domestic Ideal

## Part I: The Mercenary Wretch

Bella Wilfer is a character whose transformation has created fierce debate among Dickensians, especially those interested in feminism and gender in Dickens' final novel. John Rokesmith/Harmon is seen as either tricking Bella into marrying him or saving her from her mercenary impulses—either as policing feminine desire or channeling her desire away from the destructive force of money into the reconstructive force of marriage and motherhood. The ambivalence felt by readers is indicative of a resolution that is incomplete, or at least, in process. Dickens' vision of Bella as a domestic goddess is somehow viewed as both progressive and regressive: a victory that is in some ways also a concession.

At first, Bella Wilfer, like Gwendolen and Nora, feels her best chance at happiness lies in marrying money. Living on the edge of the lower classes, constantly trying to keep up a pretense of middle class respectability, Bella has grown up to hate her condition, and dream of better things. This is partially prompted by the constant complaining of her mother, who carries on elaborate displays of wealth despite their utter lack of it. As Bella describes in her first appearance in the novel, her family is “degradingly poor, offensively poor, miserably poor, beastly poor” which she “hate[s]” (45). The fact that Bella's family is poor but puts on a façade of being middle-class creates an environment where Bella is constantly thinking of money, while also being constantly confronted with her lack of it. In this way, she is “spoilt first by poverty” (305). Moreover, she is taught from a young age by her mother to see marriage as the key to either poverty or wealth; Mrs. Wilfer constantly bemoans the “better marriages she might have made” (445), teaching Bella that it is in marriage that a woman secures the money

she so desperately wants, or resigns herself to the poverty she so bitterly hates. As with Gwendolen, employment and remaining single are never seriously considered by Bella: she knows how society works, and is determined to manipulate it to get what she wants. She is not willing to subvert society (particularly middle class society) by removing herself, as a spinster or working woman would do, she wants to become part of society on its own terms.

Bella is being a realist when she decides to marry for money rather than love. *Our Mutual Friend* illustrates how important money is in the world she lives in; indeed, very little seems to be accomplished without being directly related to and described in terms of money. Human relationships have been degraded to mere transactions in many of the sub-plots of the novel; even adopting an orphan is compared to speculating on stocks. Bella compares love to fiery dragons: both are fairy-tales in her mind. She sees “poverty and wealth” as the only “realities” (318) worth speaking about. Money is worth something in her society, whereas love seems completely disregarded. The only thing Bella loves at the beginning of the novel is wealth (45): she is quite willing to do without love if she can have riches. Marriage for money presents no real horror for a girl brought up to see love as something that is ridiculous, even impossible. She makes “up [her] mind that [she] must have money” and because she can’t “beg it, borrow it, or steal it” she must “marry it” (317). She is “up with the pace of the world” (459) inasmuch as she knows that her beauty can be translated into money and comfort, and is perhaps her only way out of her dreary life of poverty: as Hilary Schor states, “by knowing her own value [Bella] will at least sell herself intelligently in the marriage market” (180). This viewpoint seems very reasonable in the environment Dickens describes in *Our Mutual Friend*. However, as John Harmon realizes later in the novel, “reason has nothing to do with” love (366). He understands that love cannot be bought—he refuses to purchase Bella “caring nothing for [him], like a Sultan buys a slave” (367). This is a testament to his character; other

men in the novel do not scruple to buy their wives like slaves, and, as we saw, Grandcourt actually prefers his wife to be a slave, and treats her as such.

Bella's mercenary nature is partly a rebellion against a society that has attempted to speculate upon her. She is "left to [John Harmon] in a will, like a dozen of spoons" (45). Understandably disgusted with a society that leaves women to men in wills, Bella is outspoken about how society has treated her. When John Rokesmith proposes to her, Bella feels as if she is being once used for another's gain, saying

[a]nd was it enough that I should have been willed away, like a horse, or a dog, or a bird; but must you too begin to dispose of me in your mind, and speculate in me, as soon as I had ceased to be the talk and laugh of the town? Am I for ever to be made the property of strangers? (371)

More than anything, Bella wants control over her life, and the ability to make sure that the person who benefits from her marriage is herself. It is something that Victorian women were not supposed to admit, but Bella sees the hypocrisy of her society and, instead of obeying the rule that said women were supposed to marry for money but only marry for love, she reveals the truth behind the ideal, becoming the husband-hunter that women were at once required to be in order to secure their position but also required not to *seem* to be.<sup>xiii</sup>

Nevertheless, her self-proclaimed avarice often seems teasing, as, for example, when she tells her father she is the "most mercenary little wretch that ever lived in the world" (316). Bella's most shocking revelations about her mercenary manners are told to her father, who can safely be assumed to know better of his daughter. She is reluctant to make the same kind of assertions to John Rokesmith, evading his question of whether "money is better than anything" (204) and also pretending not to understand what he means when he says she will be required to do nothing but enjoy herself and "attract" (205).

It is clear that her attitude towards marriage is not as simple as the “mercenary wretch” would have her father believe. Although she is looking for a rich husband, she never seems close to accepting one. The Lammles parade eligible bachelors in front of her, but she is unable to find one that she feels she could marry; in other words, she is unable to commit to the mercenary ideals she professes. Although she says it is not a question of “a man, but an establishment” (464), neither the man nor the establishments of the men she encounters please her. Part of the problem is the men she is presented with, surely, because Bella has a quick perception and sharp observation (464), but a truly mercenary creature would be willing to marry money in whatever form it presented itself, as Sophronia Lammle has. She tells her father that she is “always avariciously scheming” and “looking out for money to captivate” (317), yet Dickens does not give the reader a single instance of her scheming or husband-hunting—her only truly mercenary plot is imposed upon her by Old Harmon when she is only a child, a plot with which she is never called upon to collaborate or accept. Though she perhaps wants, like Nora Rowley, to be the woman who *would* accept purely materially motivated proposals, she is not that woman—at least, not completely.

Unlike Gwendolen, Bella is very unsure of herself and constantly questioning her motives. Bella’s feelings are often “dark to her own heart” (116), something Michael Slater praises in his study *Dickens and Women*. Slater recognizes “the skill with which [Dickens] is depicting [Bella] as having a plausible emotional immaturity” and also appreciates how Dickens “excellently dramatizes her confusion in all her dialogues with Harmon” (283). Dickens does not censure Bella for her uncertainty, explaining that “at Miss Bella’s time of life it was not to be expected that she should examine herself very closely” (304). Bella’s “inconsistent” (371) nature provides the conflict necessary to keep her from making an overly-hasty and disastrous decision about marriage. If Bella lacked inner conflict about her

mercenary motives or was even unaware of her own internal struggle, she could easily fall prey to the Lammles or another avaricious scheme which would condemn her, like Sophronia Lamble or Gwendolen Harleth, to a loveless marriage based on selfish motives and perhaps abuse. Bella is highly aware of the conflict within her, asking “[w]hy am I always at war with myself?” (466).

One of the things that saves Bella from a disastrous marriage is her relationship with her father, who is aptly called a “cherub.” He understands her “amiable, delicate and considerate affection” (374), and is troubled by Bella’s profession of greed. His conversation with Rokesmith about the new suit she has bought him seems to suggest that this cherub has some idea of Rokesmith’s love for his daughter. He reveals Bella’s true nature to Rokesmith, just when Harmon/Rokesmith has decided that his cause may be lost. Moreover, he describes Bella’s mercenary spirit in such a way that is almost impossible for Rokesmith to ignore. Although he describes Bella as “ambitious” (375), he never uses the word “mercenary.” Mr. Wilfer predicts she will marry “fortune” (375) not, significantly, *a* fortune. He seems purposefully ambiguous about this point; his choice of words suggests that perhaps he does not believe that Bella, when finally forced to make a decision, will value money over the character of her husband, or the fortune to be found in mutual love. Instead, she “will have the person and the property before her together, and will be able to make her choice with her eyes open” (375). I would argue that Mr. Wilfer is here offering encouragement to Rokesmith, suggesting that Bella will learn to judge better of her situation if she loved someone enough to take them without a fortune. Knowing his daughter to be “adaptable” (314), Mr. Wilfer is implicitly asking Rokesmith to open her eyes, something that he will eventually set about doing. Cupid’s work is the work of love, and Mr. Wilfer seems to know Mr. Rokesmith and his daughter better than they know themselves or each other. When Bella reveals to him that Rokesmith



has proposed to her, he does not seem surprised. His reactions are telling: he speaks “quietly” and meditates when he learns she has refused him, saying that he “suspect[s] [Rokesmith] always has admired [Bella]” (453-454). Bella’s male influence, protecting her and guiding her and her lover through the trials of love, is exactly the kind of help Bella (and Harmon) needs to make the right decision about marriage—an influence Gwendolen Harleth desperately needed in her own marriage plot.

Another element of Bella’s relationship with her father is her ability to display affection for him, which not only redeems her in the eyes of Harmon and the reader, but also allows her a proper outlet for her burgeoning sexuality. Slater describes her relationship with her father in terms of a transitional stage between asexuality and adult sexuality with her husband. Her “innocent mock-flirtation” and “mock-mothering” (Slater 282) with her father makes her “sexually attractive and attracting while preserving her virginal innocence” (Slater 282-283). She is shown as capable of loving, physical displays of affection and nurturing—attributes that qualify her to become a good wife and mother. Without this vital male relationship before marriage, Bella could have easily become like the frigid Gwendolen or Camilla, but instead she is a “sexual presence” (Slater 282) before her marriage, while still remaining chaste.

Another central figure in redeeming Bella is Lizzie Hexam. Lizzie, the other “Boofer Lady” (beautiful lady) of the novel, asks Bella if “a woman’s heart [...] seek[s] to gain anything?”, a question that is “so directly at variance with Bella’s view in life” (518) that she becomes ashamed of herself and her selfish view of love. Bella begins to feel that she is a “shallow, cold, worldly, Limited little brute” (520). Suddenly money offers not possibilities, but actually *limits* her, presenting her with only one vision of the world and of love. Money seems to offer her less than the unselfish love and spirit that Lizzie Hexam represents. We can believe it when Lizzie, one of the visionaries of the novel, sees Bella’s heart as one “well worth

winning, and well won. A heart that, once won, goes through fire and water for the winner, and never changes, and is never daunted” (520). Bella begins to believe this, too, trusting her heart when her maxims about money fail.

The deception of John Harmon and the Boffins—in which Boffin, the Golden Dustman, adopts a miserly and avaricious character in order to test Bella’s motives—is central to revealing Bella’s better nature. Placing Bella in situations where her organic sense of right and wrong will assert itself, Harmon and Boffin act as reminders of what she truly is, despite her changed situation. Reminding her of her duty to her family, Harmon leaves Bella “with a penitent air upon her, and a penitent feeling in her heart” (308) where before she was full of resentment towards her old life, abandoning it in favor of her more glamorous and luxurious life with the Boffins. At first she blames Rokesmith for making her feel something that is not a true feeling, but later she realizes her blame is (at least partially) misplaced. She says “I hate the Secretary for thinking it of me, [...] and yet it seems half true” (313). Her reactions make her think differently of her situation, and of her own judgment; the arguments with herself which have hitherto been internal, are suddenly vocalized by Rokesmith, and Bella’s part in this dialogue revives her inner debate, and makes it more real and relevant than it seems before she is tested.

Bella’s ideas about money also start to change. Seeing how Mr. Boffin is corrupted by money, she begins to fear it rather than think of it as the only thing she desires in life. She explains to her father,

how terrible the fascination with money is! I see this, and hate this, and dread this, and don’t know but money might make a much worse change in me. And yet I have money always in my thoughts and desires; and the whole life I place before myself is money, money, money, and what money can make of life! (455)

Bella begins to question how much degradation is really worth, asking herself whether Rokesmith, who is constantly humiliated by Boffin but unable to respond, can “be so base as to sell his very nature for two hundred a year” (467). When she is pressed (or tested), she decides that “she must not sell her sense of what was right and what was wrong, and what was true and what was false, and what was just and what was unjust, for any price that could be paid to her by any one alive” (594). The contradiction between her thoughts and her professed mercenary motives finally becomes clear to Bella when she hears her mercenary arguments, and hears the counter-argument coming from her own heart and mind.

When she hears her own arguments said back to her in (what seems like) perfect earnest, Bella is horrified that she considered those sentiments even in jest, if not more. Boffin describes her as “lying in wait (as she was qualified to do) for money” (578) and accuses Rokesmith of trying to marry Bella for her marriage settlement. Going so far as to call Bella “Pounds, Shillings and Pence” (581), Boffin pretends to be defending her against Rokesmith’s insolence, but his arguments about Bella’s price actually make her realize how empty and wrong-headed her previous motives were. Seeing herself in a “pitiful and poor light,” Bella is finally forced to admit that the sentiments attributed to her by Mr. Boffin are “detestable” and “shocking” (585). Deception here is vital, because Bella would likely not respond to being reproached for her mercenary schemes; she is more likely to object to interference in her life than to accept advice or admonishment, however well meant or wise. Because the “reproach [is] within herself” (577), Bella trusts it more than she would a lecture or even a heartfelt speech. Her transformation is not, therefore, what Syd Thomas describes as an articulation by John Harmon, making Bella into something she is not; the transformation comes from *within*, and is therefore genuine.

Seeing what mercenary decisions lead to, Bella makes what she feels is an informed decision not to follow in the Golden Dustman's footsteps. Bella is determined to "begin again entirely on [her] own account" (588). Indeed, Bella's decision to leave the Boffins and their promise of a marriage settlement seems to be the moment that Bella fully renounces her mercenary plots and becomes transformed. She is "not in an avaricious vein" as she returns to her father, instead thinking of "half-formed images which [have] little gold in their composition" (589). She is, in John Harmon's words, a "gallant, generous, disinterested, courageous, noble girl" (592).

Her departure from the Boffin home, an act of defiant self will, signals what many critics see as Bella's "disappearance" from the text. When she accepts Rokesmith, Bella "seem[s] to shrink to next to nothing in the clasp of his arms, partly because it was such a strong one on his part, and partly because there was such a yielding to it on hers" (592). This "appearance of vanishing" (593) in the embrace of her lover is troubling, especially given the textual disappearance of Gwendolen which signaled inner trauma. Thomas argues in his article on Bella that her disappearance is death, and that she is re-articulated and replaced by Mrs. Rokesmith "a life-like copy of her former self" (15). This seems to me an extreme interpretation, one that completely mistakes Dickens' purpose in making Bella disappear. Instead of having her disappear in order to die and be replaced by something that is only "life-like," Bella disappears to complete her transformation from something that was bound both to the dead in John Harmon's will and to the ideals of a dead society into something that is alive and gives life.

Bella's disappearance may be clumsy, but it serves an important purpose: it is, in effect, her transformation from girl to woman, which occurs in the text yet must somehow remain private. Unlike Gwendolen, whose honeymoon provides the physical and textual time and

distance for this transformation, Bella's journey from maiden to matron must occur within the highly constrained time and space of the novel—she is never formally engaged *per se* (or, if she is, she is for only a very short time), and there is no honeymoon during which this transformation can occur. Indeed, as Humble describes, Dickens often uses “silent discourse, where the plot is structured so as to effect an absence or removal of the young woman” (18), as a narrative strategy to depict the time between girlhood and womanhood. Dickens employs the term disappearing to describe an actual physical phenomenon (that is, being embraced by her future husband) and a metaphorical disappearance of Miss Bella Wilfer, who reemerges as Mrs. John Rokesmith/Harmon.

#### Part II: Home Goddess or A Doll in the Doll's House?

Bella marries for love, fully knowing the hardships and constraints of being the mendicant's bride,<sup>xiv</sup> yet ironically completely ignorant of whom she is marrying and what is going on behind the scenes. As problematic as it is for Bella to be living in an imagined poverty to a duplicitous husband who demands her total and unquestioning trust, Dickens seems to see Bella's situation as idyllic and wholly positive. Whether or not he convinces his reader that Bella's transformation is positive, it is vital to understanding Dickens' vision of marriage that Bella becomes first “a doll in the doll's house” (663), and then becomes an exalted and rewarded “home goddess” (368).

Bella begins her married life in the “charming—ingest of doll's houses, de—lightfully furnished” (663) and completely (except for one “de—cidedly pretty” servant) under her domain. Bella's wedding presents are “a bunch of keys, commanding treasures in the way of dry-saltery, groceries, jams and pickles” (651). The miniature house, which becomes almost like a microcosm for Bella herself, is necessarily small. As Frances Armstrong describes in

*Dickens and the Concept of the Home*, “[w]hile the illusion of the dolls’ house can be maintained, [Bella] is seen coping happily with problems scaled to her ability” (51). Marriage, an overwhelming experience even when accompanied by love, is made manageable by a change in scale. In this light, Harmon’s decision to remain in the dolls’ house seems more like a decision to avoid the problems of the full-sized world as long as possible, not a prolonged and unnecessary test. His reason for keeping Bella ignorant is that he “can’t afford to be rich yet” (753) because they are so happy with their marriage, their home and their baby, suggesting that both he and Bella will lose something when they become rich and move to the larger world outside their domestic circle. Yet it is something that Bella is prepared for, and desires. She wants “to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll’s house” and asks John to “try [her] through some trial” (663). Bella must “face the problem of transition to the full-sized world” (Armstrong 51), her final transformation from a doll to an adult.

The first stage of this transformation is mastery of her current, scaled-down sphere. As Dickens describes, Bella “develop[s] a perfect genius for home” (665). Bella begins serious study of her housewife duties,

[f]or Mrs. J. R., who had never been wont to do too much at home as Miss B. W., was under the constant necessity of referring for advice and support to a sage volume entitled *The Complete British Family Housewife*, which she would sit consulting, with her elbows on the table and her temples on her hands, like some perplexed enchantress poring over the *Black Art*. (666)<sup>xv</sup>

Bella “learns to cope with household matters with the help of advice manuals” (Zangen 150), an occupation that perhaps also helps her cope with the novelty of marriage and sexual experience. However, the occupation of keeping house is not the lavish, selfish and unnecessary operation that Camilla French’s trousseau becomes; instead, Bella’s homemaking reflects her love for her

husband. She is “inspired by her affection” (667) and her “desire to be in all things [John’s] companion” (666), leading her not only to make a haven for John to come home to, but also to read the newspapers in order to provide topics of conversation.

These activities might seem limited to the modern reader, but to Dickens, they were the height of feminine achievement. As Basch describes “the image of the good household fairy in her strictly domestic role [...] plunged Dickens into such ecstasy” (58). Catherine Waters calls Dickens a self-proclaimed “prophet of the hearth” and “a purveyor of cozy domestic bliss” (120); it cannot be surprising, given these roles, that he uses *Our Mutual Friend* to re-establish “the role of woman as repository of domestic virtue” (Cheadle 185).<sup>xvi</sup>

The second phase of Bella’s transformation comes when she is tested and becomes more than the “doll in the doll’s house.” John Harmon asks Bella to “put perfect faith in [him]” (726) as her husband, which she does. In a world where religion and faith have been replaced by commercial interests, Bella and John’s marriage becomes a model of transcendent and transformative faith and love. Even when her husband (John Harmon) is accused of killing John Harmon (himself), Bella says that she “can trust [John] with all [her] soul” (740). Bella’s unquestioning belief in her husband’s goodness is the epitome of fidelity; she has fused her identity with that of her husband, and believes that she “should fall dead at [John’s] feet” if she cannot trust him. Her devotion to something outside of herself—John and, later, her inexhaustible baby—completes Bella’s transformation from the “wordly shallow girl whose head was turned,” who is “unable to rise to the worth” (585) of returning Rokesmith’s love, to the woman who has made her home a sanctuary of domesticity, love, regeneration and virtue.

Although critics such as Slater, Thomas and Schor tend to view Bella’s transformation as incomplete or flawed, there are persuasive arguments for the kind of positive transformation Dickens intended. As Ross Dabney argues,

[h]owever inadequate the figure evoked by his rhetoric may seem to us as a vision of human excellence, [...] we should admit the logic of his asserting the qualities of complete trust and immersion in another person as the opposites of the selfishness and separateness of the mercenary person. (164)

Bella's mercenary qualities and her rebelliousness are immature. Moreover, it is unclear what the desired outcome would be had Bella not lost those elements of her character. Sophronia Lammle and Georgiana Podsnap offer visions of women who either willingly or unwillingly become entangled in that kind of scheme, which makes it difficult to idealize the situation as one that would allow Bella more power than her role as wife and mother. The argument of maturation and transformation is made by Basch, who states that Bella (unlike many Dickensian heroines) "matures[;] the spoiled child becomes the devoted wife-mother, the doll becomes an adult" (60). This ending is not only appropriate for Bella, but also for the novel as a whole. Old Harmon's will, a site of corruption, death and destruction, is undermined, as is his purpose. Dabney writes "[Bella] becomes the perfect wife, not only defeating Old Harmon's malicious intentions, but working them to an opposite result" (160). Although Bella's perfect domesticity may be a regression for gender roles, it is progress for the Victorian society of *Our Mutual Friend*: away from the mercenary and brutal instincts of the city, and toward values of home, regeneration and love.



## Conclusion

No period of a Victorian girl's life was fraught with more danger or possibility than the time between her engagement and the beginning of married life. During this phase, as we have seen, heroines must negotiate their sexual desires, duties to their family, desire for independence and dominance, and expectations of married life, in order to make choices and create lasting, loving marriages. In this liminal stage between girlhood and womanhood, novelists were able to critique the nature of women's lives directly; as the heroine re-defines herself as woman and wife, the novelists attempt to re-define what a Victorian woman and wife should look like.

The discourse on knowledge in these novels directly contradicts the Victorian ideal of innocent ignorance, championing instead a system that gives women the guidance and time they need to make an informed decision about marriage. Withholding knowledge, especially carnal knowledge, is destructive, resulting in marriages that are destined to be loveless, barren and even abusive. As Nicola Humble writes

[f]ar from upholding the stereotype of the sexually ignorant female as ideal, the Victorian novel treads a moral tightrope: attempting to provide heroines with knowledge and experience of sexuality without compromising them and so invalidating them as role models. (14)

Conversely, authors such as Trollope and Eliot also show how heroines deprived of knowledge and experience make decisions based on false assumptions and selfish reasoning, which leads them on a path of regret and unhappiness in their married life.

Examining women's choices inevitably leads to speculation on gender inequality. Trollope tackles this question most prominently in his depiction of Emily Trevelyan's lack of rights in her marriage, but also portrays with great depth this element through assertions by

Nora Rowley, and Dorothy and Priscilla Stanbury of a woman's right to choose her husband and to marry for love. In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot critiques the limited nature of women's education, while also examining the elements of slavery and abuse in marriages where the husband had complete empire over his wife and her body. Bella Wilfer's refusal to be commodified and sold in *Our Mutual Friend* is a major argument against not only the commercial nature of the marriage market, but also the treatment of women as objects to be sold or left in wills.

Essentially a period of definition, the engagement and early marriage provides the heroine with a chance to define herself, either in accordance with societal ideals or at variance with such conventions. Desiring power, many Victorian heroines attempt to find a sense of autonomy in their new identity—either by reforming their character, like Bella Wilfer, or by choosing a husband who is easily managed, as Gwendolen Harleth attempts to do. Camilla French looks to possessions to define her new sense of autonomy, finding that her acquisitiveness ruins her chance at any real power in a married state. Transforming herself from a 'nobody' to a somebody through her love for Brooke Burgess, Dorothy Stanbury redefines her ideas about herself and the possibilities of her life. Nora Rowley, by affirming her choice in her marriage, creates an independent and autonomous vision of womanhood that creates a new model for liberty and equality in marriage.

What is the goal of envisioning a more progressive period of courtship, engagement and marriage? If girls are given more knowledge to make choices about their life, women can achieve more equality with men, both in marriage and in society. The truly egalitarian marriage is envisioned by all three novelists, with varying degrees of success. Dickens' vision of equality entails endowing the domestic role of his heroine, Bella Wilfer, with redemptive, reproductive and even religious power. Harmon (and Dickens) value Bella's role in the home,

which becomes in *Our Mutual Friend* a safe haven from the depravity and death in the modern city. Bella's perfect faith in her husband, moreover, gives her the moral superiority that makes her a better wife, and ultimately a better woman. For Eliot, her heroine must learn from the pain of her mistaken marriage to Grandcourt, maturing and growing outside the marriage state to come to an understanding of herself and of love. Her second marriage, it is suggested, will be made with knowledge where the first was made in ignorance, and will be successful because of this. Trollope offers several examples of marriages that may provide the heroine with spousal equality. The men of these marriages are, as Deborah Morse writes, "united in wanting women to be equal partners in love, with the implication that they will be equal partners in the marriage bed as well" (Morse). Dorothy Stanbury and Brooke Burgess share an affectionate bond that the reader hopes will lead to equality in marriage. Charles Glascock, who finally finds love with the American Caroline Spalding, has feminine qualities that suggest a more gender-neutral vision of love than the image of heightened (and affronted) masculinity that we recognize in Louis Trevelyan. Finally, the marriage between Nora Rowley and Hugh Stanbury seems the most likely to succeed at the egalitarian partnership Trollope envisions: Nora's independence in her choice of husband, combined with Hugh's deep love and respect for his wife, combine to make this marriage the most successful, and therefore progressive, of *He Knew He Was Right* and, indeed, of many of the Victorian novels of the time.

The departure from Victorian convention in these novels, made explicit in the depiction of the transition from girlhood to womanhood, contributes a new vision of Victorian women and heroines. Later in the century, authors such as Thomas Hardy would take this discourse into more radical directions. Hardy's depiction of Tess Durbeyfield in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* transgresses the ideal of female ignorance and sexual purity. In her marriage to Angel Clare, Tess attempts to define herself, not as the fallen woman, but as a wife whose love, if not body, is

pure. Radical re-definition gives the heroine power over her destiny and identity. Out of her knowledge and experience (not out of her lack of those things), Tess forges an idea of womanhood and marriage that is progressive and transcendent.

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- <sup>i</sup> Bilston's study also focuses on non-canonical and peripheral texts, which are often more explicit and radical than the canonical, mainstream texts of authors such as Dickens, Trollope and Eliot.
- <sup>ii</sup> Considering Trollope's extensive study of politics, 'elected' is an interesting word to use for a bride. It is as if for women it is the highest office that they can aspire to—and perhaps also involves clever (and ruthless?) campaigning.
- <sup>iii</sup> The marking of linen in Victorian literature has not yet been explored by critical inquiry, but its presence is significant. In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Mrs. Tulliver is distressed when her sister suggests that "the linen, with your maiden mark on, might go all over the country." In *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell, Mrs. Thornton reluctantly begins to pick out her own marks so that her son can have the best linen when he marries Margaret Hale.
- <sup>iv</sup> See Deborah Morse's most recent article on Trollope, "Some Girls Who Come From the Tropics': Gender, Race and Imperialism in Anthony Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right*," for more on the imperial aspects of Trollope's novel and the marriages it contains.
- <sup>v</sup> Perhaps this is what singled out Nora for censure in the June 1869 unsigned notice in *The Spectator* that deemed her "uniformly vulgar and uninteresting" (Smalley 325).
- <sup>vi</sup> Ruth apRoberts calls Nora "something of a New Woman" (113).
- <sup>vii</sup> See Judith Wilt's "'He Would Come Back': The Fathers of Daughters in *Daniel Deronda*." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 42.3 (Dec 1987), in which she argues that Grandcourt's identity is a continuation of Captain Davilow's abusive personality: they are "one continuous presence" (314). More recently, Margaret Loewen Reimer argued in "The Spoiled Child: What Happened to Gwendolen Harleth?" *Cambridge Quarterly* 36.1 (2007): 33-50 that Gwendolen's abuse and incestuous relationship with her stepfather is the key to the novel and to Gwendolen's character.
- <sup>viii</sup> See Alexander Welsh, "The Later Novels."
- <sup>ix</sup> Dowling argues that the increase in the number of divorces and the sensation of Divorce court made readers "desire to know in greater detail the intricacies of a previously invisible topic" (329). The revelation that marriages that seem happy from the outside could actually be full of cruelty and abuse made Victorian readers more receptive to stories that transgressed the privacy of the marriage bed.
- <sup>x</sup> Marlene Tromp in *The Private Rod* sees this element of *Daniel Deronda* as part of the Sensational novel tradition.
- <sup>xi</sup> See Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- <sup>xii</sup> Using the Freudian case studies of hysteria, Stone argues that Gwendolen's silence corresponds to "the gaps and absences in a hysteric's tale" (58). Although Stone locates the source of Gwendolen's hysteria as Gwendolen's unresolved sexual feelings towards her (birth)father, it is useful to realize how psychological ideas about hysteria (no matter what the cause) connected silence with trauma.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Another Victorian heroine who verbalizes this hypocrisy is Lady Mabel Grex in Trollope's *The Duke's Children*. She tells the man she loves, Frank Tregear, that if girls go husband hunting they feel as if they are sinning against their sex. Of love, such as a man's is, a woman ought to know nothing. How can she love with passion when she should never give her love till it has been asked, and not then unless her friends tell her that the thing is suitable? Love such as that to me is out of the question. But, as it is fit that I should be married, I wish to be married well. (82)
- Moreover, she finds it "so difficult" to be "pure and good and feminine, and at the same time wise" (84). Mabel's story ends unhappily, which is perhaps a testament to Trollope's realism in portraying how a woman who is aware of the machinations of the marriage market becomes unable to participate (in other words, there is no Dickensian plot to save her from her fate).

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<sup>xiv</sup> This is Bella's chosen title after marriage, which reflects her desire to re-define her identity. Bella's willingness to embrace the relative poverty of her married life suggests Bella's transformation is a genuine renunciation of her previous avarice.

<sup>xv</sup> Compare to Dora Spenlow in *David Copperfield*.

<sup>xvi</sup> Reading *Our Mutual Friend* as a revision of *Great Expectations*, Cheadle sees Bella as a reformed Estella figure, who chooses money (or is rather saved from money) and embraces her domestic role.

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