Why You Can't Forgive Her: Vocational Women and the Suppressive Hypothesis

by Talia Schaffer

Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* is a marriage novel, with Alice Vavasor torn between her two suitors, John Grey and George Vavasor. But it is also (although this is much less discussed) a vocational novel and, in this article, I trace the intimate links between those two plots. Alice breaks her initial engagement to John Gray because she fears that marrying him will give her nothing to do. She engages herself to her cousin George because she wants to participate in his parliamentary career. Alice's marriage plans are indeed motivated by desire—not erotic desire, but vocational desire. In this marriage plot, Trollope makes Alice's marital tragedy turn on her capacity to do meaningful work. *Can You Forgive Her?* invites us to ask: what if we grant vocation a power, a logic, and a story at least equal to that of romance?

Can You Forgive Her? is one example of a genre of Victorian fiction, starting in the late 1850s, about women who married for work, a type of union that I call "vocational marriage." We can compare *Can You Forgive Her?* with two contemporary novels: George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865). In each, the main female character yearns for meaningful work and suffers when it is denied her. This craving leads her into a bad relationship, in which she learns the bitter lesson that one cannot get a career by allying oneself with the wrong man. Humbled by her failure, the woman eventually achieves a healthier love match, and her reward is a small post-marital job that is, this time, properly routed through the man, either supporting his philanthropic institution or ghost-writing his parliamentary speeches. In other words, Trollope, Eliot, and Yonge end up mapping the same kind of trajectory for the working women, even though they wrote from different political perspectives ranging from Eliot's cautious involvement with feminist

activism to Yonge's mistrust of secular female self-realization and to Trollope's uneasy ambivalence.

These stories converge because they were all influenced by a particular rhetorical formation, the outpouring of writings about women and work generated by the Langham Place group between the mid-1850s and the 1870s. Langham Place writing emphasized woman's urgent need for a meaningful career—but also predicted that she would fail. *Can You Forgive Her?* can be understood in the context of this period formation, and reading Alice as a vocational figure—a representative Langhamite—alters the way we read her capacities and her fate.

Victorian Women's Work, in Fiction and in Fact

In reality, many Victorian wives worked, regardless of their class. Starting in the seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries, according to Ivy Pinchbeck, "marriage was, in fact, as much a business partnership as it was among the small clothiers and the farming classes" (qtd. Jordan, *Women's* 26). The working class or middling sorts married (at least in part) to get help running a farm, staffing a shop counter, transcribing notes, working in a parish, manufacturing small items, taking care of a household. In the nineteenth century, middle-class and upper-class Victorian women engaged in multiple kinds of labor, from household management to philanthropy to participation in the family business, while of course working-class women participated in service, agricultural labor, factory work, or shopkeeping.[1]

Women habitually expected a life of work after marriage. M. Jeanne Peterson explains that "wives were assistants, colleagues, and partners in the work that men did. Their husbands took the public credit for the tasks performed—these were not 'dual careers,' nor was there any ideology of equality. These were 'single-career families,' but both husband and wife partook of that single career" (165-66). This was particularly true of clerical, academic, and business professions. Letters and diaries show that women managed parish work for clergy husbands, advised about personnel decisions, negotiated the husband's social status, transcribed the husband's correspondence and

[1] See Langland, Vickery, Davidoff and Hall, *passim.*

manuscripts, assisted with research, and negotiated on his behalf.[2] Peterson's view may be too rosy (those shared careers, after all, were ones in which women had no ability to choose or alter their work, no recognition, and no pay), but she makes an important point that, in the nineteenth century, middle-class women expected marriage to initiate a life of work. Being invited to run a household or operate a school or to work in a parish or help copy manuscripts was a perfectly legitimate part of courtship transactions.

After all, this was a culture that idealized work. In Trollope's *The Duke's Children,* one of the wealthiest aristocrats in England, the Duke of Omnium, tells his children that it is work "that makes the happiness. To feel that your hours are filled to overflowing, that you can barely steal minutes enough for sleep, that the welfare of many is entrusted to you, that the world looks on and approves, that some good is always being done to others,—above all things some good to your country;—that is happiness" (*DC* 196). The capacity for self-disciplined, unrelenting productivity in the face of adverse circumstances guaranteed moral probity and conferred spiritual benefits. Carlyle famously wrote in *Past and Present*: "For there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in Work. Were he never so benighted, forgetful of his high calling, there is always hope in a man that actually and earnestly works: in Idleness alone is there perpetual despair. . . . The latest Gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it" (264). Such exhortations must have felt peculiarly poignant to middle-class and upper-class women, supposedly consigned to Idleness for the duration of their adult lives. If work is the way that Destiny cultivates us, the potter's wheel whose pressure gives us form, the running stream that sloughs off the stagnant marsh (in Carlyle's metaphors), women too would have ached to be destined, cleansed, and shaped. If hard work proved middle-class subjects' moral superiority to an idle aristocracy, then women wanted to participate in it too.

In novels of the 1840s and early 1850s, female characters often work, both to make a living and to keep themselves occupied. Jobs were acceptable for women if the work took place in a domestic space, if the work was both clean and sedentary, and if the woman undertook it for

[2] See Dalley and Rappaport, *passim.*

higher goals (helping a husband, supporting a family, helping the poor, expressing her own genius) (Jordan, *Women's* 61-63). Such work might or might not continue after marriage, depending on the couple's needs and their class status. Work is as individuated as any other part of the characters' biographies. Some characters like it, some characters don't; marriage may initiate a vocational trajectory, alter it, or end it. [3]

Yet after 1855, depictions of working married women begin to fall into a predictable shape. These novels often passionately insisted on women's "calling" to exercise their talents, improve their society, and engage in meaningful occupation. However, they imagined women being punished for pursuing that drive. This trend extends from *Can You Forgive Her?*, *Middlemarch*, and *The Clever Woman of the Family* through novels of the 1890s; it is, indeed, acutely visible in New Women fiction, in which good work is both desperately wanted and extremely difficult to find. Mary Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage* (1899), Mona Caird's *Daughters of Danaus* (1894) and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1894) all depict women agonizing over the loss of their artistic careers. Women are made to crave professional work from which they are perpetually thwarted. It is a plot that is set up to fail.

Inventing the Vocational Subject: The Langham Place Campaign

The members of the Langham Place Group (named after the address of their headquarters) were a group of female activists who banded together to try to improve women's economic and political situation at mid-century. They were instrumental in getting the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 passed; after that victory, the Langhamites turned to employment issues. Bessie Rayner Parkes and Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon) decided that fighting to get women access to work was more pragmatic than trying to redress discrimination generally, and more likely to win public support than

[3] Major novels of the 1840s and early 1850s show great variation. In Dickens's novels, particularly *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Bleak House* (1852-53), many women want and expect to work (Sophy Traddles, Dora, and Agnes all seem to enjoy working; Esther, Caddy, and of course Mrs. Jellyby see themselves as inherently working subjects). In the Brontës' novels, women sometimes want work (Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, Caroline Helstone) but sometimes remain indifferent to the possibility (Isabella and Catherine) and sometimes take it for granted as part of daily labor (Agnes Grey, Helen Huntingdon).

fighting for divorce or suffrage (Jordan, *Women's* 156). Jessie Boucherett and Adelaide Ann Proctor set up SPEW, the Society for the Promotion of Employment for Women, in 1859. As part of SPEW's campaign to train women to work, Parkes bought a printing press so as to train women as compositors; in 1860, when Proctor retired in poor health, Emily Faithfull took charge, calling it the Victoria Press (Holloway 43-46). Using Victoria Press, the Langhamites trained women to typeset and print, producing the feminist magazines *The English Woman's Journal* (succeeded by *The Englishwoman's Review*) and *Victoria Magazine*. Previous activists had tried to reform the needlework industry and improve governesses' training, but the Langham Place group insisted that these two industries were massively oversubscribed and fought to open up new careers to women (Jordan, *Women's* 170-81).[4]

Along with vocational training, the Langhamites mounted an unprecedented print campaign. It began with Anna Jameson's lectures of 1855, published as *The Communion of Labour* (1855-56). The extent and significance of the Langham Place's writings on work can scarcely be exaggerated. As Rosemary Feurer writes, "One need only read the titles of the books of leading early feminists to realize the centrality of the issue of work to them" (234). She cites Barbara Leigh Smith's *Women and Work* as well as Bessie Raynor Parkes' *Essays on Woman's Work* (1866); Josephine Butler's *The Education and Employment of Women* (1868) and *Woman's Work and Woman's Culture*; and Emily Faithfull's *Women's Work, With Special Reference to Industrial Employment* (1871). Even this list understates the number of people involved, since it leaves out Dinah Mulock Craik's *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (1858), which is centrally concerned with work for single women; Anna Jameson's formative *The Communion of Labour: A Second Lecture on the Social Employments of Women* (1855); important books by John Duguid Milne, Jessie Boucherett, and Mary Taylor; and numerous articles in the Langham Place Group's periodicals. Moreover, several of these books were worked on by different authors; thus, George Eliot helped her close friend Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon with *Women and Work*, and Butler's *Woman's*

[4] See also Butler (*passim*).

Work and Woman's Culture included articles by nearly a dozen different writers, including Frances Power Cobbe, Jesse Boucherett, Sophia Jex-Blake, and Elizabeth C. Wolstenholme.

In so large a movement, there was, of course, considerable variation, but the Langhamites shared certain key ideas. As Jordan notes, "It was during this brief period [from 1855 to 1857] . . . that the belief that women should earn their own livings ceased to be the odd cranky solution proposed on occasion by a number of people to diverse social problems, but coalesced into a discourse; a body of argument whose truth might be contested or defended, but whose existence *as* a discourse was known and acknowledged" ("Women's" 14). "Work" centralized all the disparate problems previously associated with the Woman Question. Coeducation? That would train women for jobs. Prostitution? That would be eradicated when women could do other kinds of work. Marriage property? The problem would be resolved when women could earn their own keep. In Jordan's words, the "features entangled in the diverse and contradictory debates over the woman question were melded together to form the coherent discourse of women's work in the world as it came to be promulgated by the Women's Movement, a discourse that argued a single structural cause for the various problems facing women, and proposed a social solution" (24).

However, the new advocacy included one important caveat: it constructed work as an activity that stopped at marriage. Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder argue that "in part this emphasis must have been a deliberate decision by feminists: to focus on work for single women was to avoid the threat to home and family perceived in the employment of married women" (111).[5] The Langhamites stressed that, once women wed, their primary career lay in caring for their homes and families. This position was taken by Bessie Rayner Parkes, Frances Power Cobbe, Emily Davies, Emily Faithfull, and even John Stuart Mill, who wrote: "like a man when he chooses a profession, so, when a woman marries, it may in general be understood that she makes choice of the management of a household, and the bringing up of a

[5] Jordan thinks the Langhamites were responding to W.R. Greg's anxiety that, if women could survive alone, they would never get married at all (*Women's* 163).

family, as the first call upon her exertions" (184-85). Even if a woman did find work, it was only for the limited and uncertain period before marriage, as Julia Wedgwood warned, making it impossible to settle down because everything might have to stop at any moment if the great event happened (262-63).

The campaign's decision to limit work to unmarried women also derived from the 1851 census, which found more women than men in Great Britain. The numbers were startling: "By 1851, for every one hundred women in Britain there are only ninety-six men; of every one hundred women over twenty, only fifty-seven are married—thirteen are widowed, and thirty have not married. Nearly one half of the adult women in Britain—two and a half out of six million—have no spouse to support them" (Helsinger, et.al. 135). Clearly some women would not be able to rely on men to support them and would be required to earn their own way. This demographic discovery, dubbed the "odd women" or "surplus women" debate, was a powerful argument for women's work. However, this argument tacitly defined work as something women did in lieu of marriage, the province of single women only. Thus, Langhamite rhetoric made vocational identity into something that competed with the marital state.

In Langham Place writing, work had a profound meaning—no less than the activity that validated existence. "To obtain a firmer footing on the earth's broad surface, to acquire some weight in affairs, to be taken into some real account as the half of humanity, women must work;" insisted one writer (qtd. Rivers 364). Similarly, John Duguid Milne wrote that "the mind is in its nature active, and can be formed only in activity; the character is in its nature active, and can be formed only in activity" (27). Work is the mechanism through which personhood forms. In 1855, J.W. Kaye wrote an article called "The Non-Existence of Women" in which he argued that married women's status as legal nonentities had a catastrophic ripple effect through the rest of their lives. "The effect of this [non-existence] is to limit the aspirations, to paralyze the energies, and to demoralize the characters of women," Kaye warned. "They are born and educated, as it were, for total absorption" (558). Deterred from working, they spent their lives in querulous idleness, having ceased to exist psychologically, socially, or legally.

Vocationalist manifestos construct the denial of work as a health issue. Virtually every writer on the subject asserts that failure to work destroys the body and the mind. Frances Power Cobbe warned that idle women became tiresome and incompetent, while Wedgwood claimed that such women saw their powers wither away (Cobbe 13-14; Wedgwood 262-63, 270). Bodichon warned that "she will surely be ill, miserable, or go mad if she has no occupation" (29). The articles vividly warned of dissipated idleness, wasted years, and withered abilities. "Doomed to such death in life, for these long and dreary adult years," Milne stated, "the pain suffered, the diminished energy, the sleepless nights and useless days, are a serious drag on women's usefulness and happiness" (107).[6]

Thus readers were most frequently exhorted to imagine—not the pleasure of achievement, but—the pain of being denied self-determination, being unable to support one's self, and experiencing one's body and mind failing. These publications depict vocational need thwarted (whether by marriage or by a cruel world) and the woman suffering as a result.

It was understandable that feminist advocates focused on current suffering instead of future hope. Most middle-class Victorian women did not have paid work outside the home, so it was easier to critique the current situation than to imagine a different future. This choice also opened up rhetorical options. Readers of melodrama, sentiment, and Gothic fiction enjoyed weeping over novels depicting middle-class women as people doomed to "die young, cramped, and thwarted," condemned to misery as "a hostage in the home" (Woolf 70; Vickery 384). Sentiment had a history of mobilizing political involvement; it was invoked on both sides of the slavery debate in the Romantic period, and it was intended to move people towards right action (Rowland 199-200; Festa 17). It made sense to mobilize the sentimental tradition to arouse readers against women's unemployment. However, this rhetorical choice had long-reaching consequences.

[6] See also Taylor (97) and Cobbe, "Little Health" (414). .

The Suppressive Hypothesis

To be a woman who wanted to work (but was doomed to fail) was to occupy a particular model of subjectivity, and one way to understand this is through the model of Foucauldian sexuality. In *The History of Sexuality,* Foucault noticed that, in the nineteenth century, belief in sexual repression offered an excuse for talking about it constantly: "sex became something to say, and to say exhaustively" (32). The "repressive hypothesis," then, named the notion that repression was damaging and had to be evaded by increasing spurs to more complete revelations. The result was a "discursive explosion" by the 1890s that sustained multiple medical, psychoanalytical, and juridical institutions. Sex gained a privileged status as the truth of a person, the basis of an identity, most notoriously in the invention of the homosexual: "The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43).

For 1860s Langhamite writers, work operated much like sex did for 1890s Foucauldian subjects. Like sex, work was the subject of a discursive explosion, conferring new importance on what had previously been seen as an ordinary practice—and not a particularly dignified or interesting one. It offered a new template for a different understanding of identity: a person who worked became a person fundamentally different from one who did not. Middle-class women often regarded their desire for work (like sex) to be a source of shame—the work itself hidden from strangers, done in odd hours, denied by families—so that work for women was associated with a furtive, embarrassing, private drive.

Work and sex, both vitally important, had to be performed correctly. Fiction showed what might happen if one got it wrong. Female vocationalism had its perversities, its forbidden pleasures associated with queer individuals (perhaps we should call them vocational inverts): people like Sally Brass, Judy Smallweed, or Cornelia Carlyle. It had its version of erotomania (employomania?) in work-obsessed figures like Mrs. Jellyby or Mrs. Clennam. Yet one couldn't opt out, either, since eschewing this activity inevitably caused dysfunction: hysteria, dullness, apathy, emotionalism, failure to concentrate. Experts were necessary to guide the middle-class subject

in the right ways of doing what had previously been done without too much thought.

We might call the vocational rhetorical explosion the "suppressive hypothesis," for it claims that women's natural urge to work gets suppressed, just as the repressive hypothesis posits that a natural erotic drive gets repressed. The suppressive and the repressive hypotheses are both policed by medical threats. Foucault argues that the sexual drive was justified in the name of physical and psychological health, while the vocational drive was similarly invoked for the sake of women's mental and economic health. Just as reproductive heterosexual sex became the norm, from which all divergence was pathological, so too was feminized professional work (particularly artistic and philanthropic work) defined as the ideal for women, from which divergence was problematic. Just as sexualized medicine threatened anyone who diverged from heterosexual reproductive marital intercourse with a diagnosis, so too did failure to work "properly" create a pathology. In both cases, it was the same convenient illness. Jessie Boucherett confirmed that women's feeble health and nervous complaints were caused by prudishness—not sexual prudishness, but vocational prudishness: a social voice that prohibited women from exercise and work (7-8). Bodichon wrote that "Idleness, or worse than idleness, is the state of tens of thousands of young women: in consequence . . . that one terrible disease, hysteria, in its multiform aspects, incapacitates thousands" (26). At the same time, vocational desire could move and rouse youths; in Bodichon's peroration, in fact, arousal to vocational desires replaces susceptibility to marital hopes: "Oh young girls! waiting listlessly for some one to come and marry you. . . . Arouse yourselves! Awake! Be the best that God has made you" (27). Unmarried women were essentially comatose, needing to stir their deeper drives if they were to become fully healthy.

To modern readers, Bodichon's peroration may seem inherently erotic, but I want to question our hastiness to assume that sex constitutes the real truth of any discussion of thrilling feelings. Work desire and erotic desire coexist in nineteenth-century writing, but they are almost always separated, running on parallel tracks. Sometimes one stands in for the other, sometimes they act in unison. We need to make

sure we privilege neither sex nor work as the real story to which the other always points.

In the early 1860s, then, as he composed *Can You Forgive Her?*, Trollope was learning to see work as a fundamental drive that women shamefacedly, privately, and desperately wanted, something that competed with marriage (because marrying debarred women from work) and at which they were fated to fail, in the process ruining their mental and physical health. If this sounds like Alice Vavasor's plot, it is for good reason: Alice embodies the Langhamite model and, in turn, her novel popularized and perpetuated it.

Can You Forgive Her?

Anthony Trollope's attitude towards women's work was deeply ambivalent.[1] On the one hand, he had a very close relationship with reformer Kate Field, who fought for women's access to employment; and he contributed to two Victoria Press publications produced by Langham Place (King 311; Nardin 13-14). On the other hand, his articles on female employment describe work as a temporary solution to female boredom. Deborah Denenholz Morse sums up "Trollope's divided mind on the question of England's redundant women—his sympathy for them, but his conviction that the answer to their difficult position in Victorian society was marriage rather than professional careers" (*Women* 4). His "divided mind," however, changed slightly but importantly over the period that includes *Can You Forgive Her?*.

In "The Rights of Women," published in *North America* fourteen months before he began *Can You Forgive Her?*, Trollope praises his friend, Langhamite Emily Faithfull, and confirms that single women ought to be able to earn their own living. However, he fears that if women are allowed to work, they might not marry, and that self-supporting women will undermine male chivalry. Describing the situation from the perspective of an amused external observer, "The Rights of Women" concludes: "That women should have their rights no man will deny. To my thinking, neither increase of work nor increase of political influence are among them. The best right a woman has is the right to a husband, and that is the right to which I would recommend every young woman here and in the States to turn her best

[1] See also Corbett (forthcoming).

attention" (293). Not surprisingly, the Langham Place's *English Woman's Journal* gave *North America* a negative review ("Notices").[2]

Five years later, in the article "On the Higher Education of Women," Trollope expresses the same position but enters more closely into the psychology of women, sympathizing and worrying about his audience's feelings. As in "The Rights of Women," he begins by agreeing with mid-century feminist claims: women are frittering away their time, "those faults of frivolity and languor" continuing "till the mind, intelligent as it is, becomes vague, loose, and unfitted for settled occupation. . . . What we want is, I think, employment,—mental employment and material employment also" (69-76). This is the classic suppressive hypothesis: women deteriorate when they are denied employment. Yet Trollope then takes an unexpected turn. While acknowledging the need for employment, he condemns women who urgently advocate work; he concludes that jobs and education are bad ideas, for what women really need is internal self-discipline and renewed attention to domestic duties. Marriage, again, is a separate and better track than work.

The move from "The Rights of Women" to "On the Higher Education of Women" reveals Trollope's growing ability to empathize with women caught in a situation without work. Although his conclusions have not changed—from 1863 to 1868 he opposes giving women increased access to employment, education, or politics—Trollope moves from a prognosticatory external stance to an internalized, personalized, sympathetic sense, in which the women-and-work issue becomes less about predicting future trends and more about controlling one's feelings. I suggest that Trollope learns this perspective through writing *Can You Forgive Her?*, in which he imaginatively inhabits the character of a woman who wants work, making the vocational subject feel real.

Alice Vavasor is a woman under the influence of Langham Place. Margaret F. King writes that "Alice's story is partly a narrative response to a specific 'flock of learned ladies,' headquartered by late 1859 in London's Langham Place" (308). This "flock of learned ladies" asks, "what should a woman do with her life?" (*CYFH* 92). Indeed, Trollope locates Alice and her father in Queen Anne Street, only a few

[2] See also King (311) and "Notices" (*passim*).

blocks away from Langham Place itself (King 308). As a result of seeking for a meaningful life of work, Alice "had by degrees filled herself with a vague idea that there was a something to be done—a something over and beyond, or perhaps altogether beside that marrying and having two children—if she only knew what it was" (*CYFH* 92). What she knows is that she wants real work—an urge no doubt fed by watching her father's unsatisfactory, unproductive career.

Alice's vocational yearning is carefully constrained so as to make her a somewhat generic subject, representing the average woman. First, Alice is an ordinary middle-class woman, not a radical; she is "not so far advanced as to think that women should be lawyers and doctors, or to wish that she might have the privilege of the franchise for herself; but she had undoubtedly a hankering after some second-hand political maneuvering" (*CYFH* 93). In this respect she can remain normative. She is neither a genius requiring an outlet for her heaven-sent skills nor a perishing woman desperate to support herself, two extreme cases in which readers might be willing to countenance work. She is simply an average woman who wants a meaningful career.[3]

As we have seen, vocation and marriage get conceptualized as competitive drives in both Langham Place rhetoric and in Trollope's own writings. In *Can You Forgive Her?*, Trollope formalizes this dual track through Alice's two suitors, "the worthy man" John Grey versus "the wild man" George Vavasor (*CYFH* 21). Alice feels romantic desire for John Grey and vocational desire for George Vavasor. By setting romantic and vocational urges in competition, Trollope concedes that they are parallel feelings of comparable strength but incompatible inasmuch as they are vested in different men and associated with divergent futures. Moreover, both are shameful: just as Alice cannot comfortably articulate her erotic desire for John Grey, she also cannot bring herself to pronounce her vocational needs. Alice feels an "undefined ambition that made her restless" (92), asking herself, "what had she wanted in life that she should have thus quarreled with as happy a lot as had ever been offered to a woman?" (124). It is clear that what Alice wants is "'a husband whose mode of thinking is congenial to my own . . . a husband who proposes to himself a career in life with which I can sympathize'" (287). However, Alice herself often seems too

[3] See Cameron (in this issue) for a more Darwinist reading of Alice's "ordinariness."

ashamed to articulate this motive. John Grey is so fundamentally skeptical of her wish for work that he simply decides she is mentally ill and refuses to break off the engagement, indeed surreptitiously managing her monetary affairs as if he is already her husband in an act that infantilizes Alice, undercutting her belief in her own independent will (97-98; 306). Alice's father and the members of Alice's social circle are equally incredulous. *Can You Forgive Her?* shows how misapprehension, skepticism, and disapproval (including her own) would undermine a vocationally driven woman at every turn.

Trollope sets up a plot in which Alice starts by wanting meaningful work but must end up with a solution to a different problem: marriage. It is as if she buys a ticket to one station, but midway through, her train switches to a different depot. As Morse points out, "Trollope seems both to depict her rebellion sympathetically, as an understandable effort to create an identity, and to treat her struggle for independence as a delusion which must be cured by marriage to the right suitor" (*Women* 26). Alice is allowed her vocational drive—but, by the end of the novel, she must learn to redirect her desires away from work and into a marital home.

George Vavasor offers Alice a business partnership under the name of marriage, precisely the kind of arrangement that she initially wants. She will be the producer and facilitator of his career. This vocational project is not relevant to romantic life: "As for that girl's dream of the joys of love which she had once dreamed,—that had gone from her slumbers, never to return. How might she best make herself useful,—useful in some sort that might gratify her ambition;—that was now the question which seemed to her to be of most importance" (*CYFH* 263). For women at mid-century, vocational satisfaction might quite legitimately be more compelling than erotic fulfillment. As Alice tells George, "without passion, I have for you a warm affection, which enables me to take a livelier interest in your career than in any other of the matters which are around me. . . . I do feel that I can take in it that concern which a wife should have in her husband's affairs" (274).

There is no reason to consider a marriage contracted out of helpful affection, like the one Alice and George project, to be inferior to one based on erotic desire. If anything, a non-erotic marriage could be more flexible, pragmatic, and liberating for women. Sharon Marcus argues

that Alice "rejects one kind of marriage in order to embrace another; she turns from John, an indomitable superior who insists on the permanence of marriage promises, to George, who allows Alice to define marriage as dissoluble, egalitarian, and contractual" (233). As Marcus points out, the fact that Alice would keep her own last name symbolizes her continued sense of self in marriage (234). The Vavasor cousins work out a characteristically liberal arrangement, involving two equal and separate subjects entering into a well-defined partnership, negotiated in writing and predicated on economic exchange rather than emotional need. Alice decides that "love meant a partnership, in which each partner would be honest to the other, in which each would wish and strive for the other's welfare, so that thus their joint welfare might be insured" (*CYFH* 25)

The problem is that the vocational suitor will not stay in that role. George, horrifyingly, insists on an erotic relation with Alice, demanding that she kiss him: "Was she to give herself bodily,—body and soul, as she said aloud in her solitary agony,—to a man whom she did not love? Must she submit to his caresses,—lie on his bosom,—turn herself warmly to his kisses? 'No,' she said, 'no,'—speaking audibly, as she walked about the room; 'no;—it was not in my bargain; I never meant it" (*CYFH* 309). Having envisioned their relationship as a pure partnership, she is appalled by the idea that it will turn into marital relations.

Alice's attempt at vocational marriage is a disaster. George shows himself to be a vicious, violent, dishonest man who attacks his sister, attempts to murder John Grey, and then flees to America under a false name. Alice finds herself entrapped in a kind of seedy mock-marriage, giving away her property without getting any influence or say in the man's career in return. Instead of a career, she is fleeced—ransacked for property, her own wishes disregarded. Instead of being an egalitarian liberal subject in a contractual relation, as Marcus had optimistically noted, Alice becomes the victim of a tyrannical or savage marriage, the anthropological notion of the 1860s in which a strong man essentially kidnaps a passive, silent woman for his own purposes.[4] The futuristic form of marriage reverts to the most prehistoric.

[4] See Psomiades, *passim*.

Compared to the cruelty of George Vavasor, the absolute rule of John Grey, which is at least conducted courteously, seems preferable. Christopher Herbert and Kathy Psomiades have both argued that Trollope's marriage plots end with the woman's willing subservience to the man's patriarchal authority—a way of keeping traditional male rule while masking it as a voluntary, enjoyable relation, instead of tyrannical. As Psomiades dryly remarks, "now the woman gets to choose who carries her off" (44). The outrageousness of George Vavasor functions to make John Grey's despotism relatively palatable, so that Alice can "choose" him.

Meanwhile, the happiest marriage at the end of *Can You Forgive Her?* appears to be one between two men. As Plantagenet and Glencora Palliser travel with John Grey and Alice, the women discuss their prospective lives as wives and mothers, and the men achieve "close intimacy . . . intent upon politics" (*CYFH* 643). It is Palliser who convinces Grey to go into Parliament. Nervously, Palliser tells his partner, "'I hope you'll like it,'" and assures him that once he takes to the work, he will "'get to feel it as I do'" (674). This is the vocational equivalent of the wedding scene, companions who will share work—or, to use Alice's earlier description, "a partnership, in which each partner would be honest to the other, in which each would wish and strive for the other's welfare, so that thus their joint welfare might be insured" (25)

We should not read this scene as an encoded enactment of homoerotic desire, because that would be treating vocation merely as a cover story for sex. That is the mistake George Vavasor makes about Alice, assuming her offer of professional partnership stands in for a coded erotic desire. The men show no signs of an erotic attraction but a genuine shared bonding experience in talking about Parliament. Indeed, vocation is as strong as sex. The women are consigned to sex—becoming wives and mothers—while the men are assigned to vocation. Both urges, having been strongly evoked in *Can You Forgive Her?*, require narrative resolution. But because Trollope is conservatively unwilling to sate a woman's urge for work, he has to generate, suddenly and at the last minute, a heretofore unsuspected readiness to change in a character whose primary quality has always been his utterly unyielding self-satisfaction. This necessitates a somewhat fairy-tale

opportunity ("you might easily find some quiet little borough . . . if you like to spend a thousand pounds, the thing isn't difficult" [*CYFH* 618]) in a series that is profoundly committed to depicting the realistic difficulties of electioneering. John Grey's happy ending violates probability, the character, and the work of the rest of the Palliser series that was to come. It can only be justified by the inexorable logic of the vocational urge, which requires to be resolved, much as a story that begins with romantic desire must, in the nineteenth-century novel, move towards a marriage. John Grey is the fortunate recipient of the satisfying career Alice wanted, while Alice ends up with the peaceful estate in Cambridgeshire John had enjoyed. In a rather unhappy irony, John and Alice each get the other's ideal ending.

In an even worse irony, Alice's ending undercuts her original goal. As King remarks, "at the end of the novel, as Alice accepts Grey's forgiveness and his offer of marriage, the punishment and extinction of her desire for autonomy are completed" (316). When Grey tells Alice that he plans to go into Parliament, she "was afraid to speak" lest she show an excessive degree of enthusiasm. She finally asks, "'oh, John, what right can I have to say anything?'" (*CYFH* 644). Tellingly, Alice's last words are: "'I hope nothing that I have ever said has driven you to it'" (675). Renouncing her influence, doubting her right to express wishes, Alice ends in a place of radical self-doubt. The novel ends when Grey "put his face over her" which, Morse points out, "perhaps suggests more than a posture for kissing; Trollope's words convey a sense of the obliteration of identity, a figurative effacement" (*Women* 33).

One might say that *Can You Forgive Her?* does offer Alice a vocational happy ending, for she does get her wish after all, becoming the wife of a Member of Parliament in London. The spousal parliamentary ghostwriter becomes the final job of the energetic, dissatisfied, and talented women in many novels for the next few decades: Glencora in the rest of the Palliser series; Dorothea in *Middlemarch*; Lucilla in *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866); Phoebe in *Phoebe Junior* (1876); and Angelica in Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893). Silenced themselves, they speak only through their husbands' voices. They are allowed some kind of political agency, but indirectly, not through political representation. Without the vote and without being

elected, they are present in Parliament—the object of their most driving, primal wishes—only through the ghostly form of their influence, filtered through and acting via the voices of their men. This, ultimately, is the compromise formation that is the best anyone can do with the vocational woman.

Alice Vavasor is a textbook case of the suppressive hypothesis. Afflicted by idleness and uncertainty, she tries to find meaningful work via marriage, an attempt that ends disastrously. Reformed and reunited with her romantic lover, she gets silence and failure as her portion, except for the minor, mediated role of the political ghostwriter. By the end of the novel, Alice's characteristic mode becomes inarticulateness. From her inability to speak her vocationalism to her final denial of a "right to say anything" and renunciation of anything "I've ever said," Alice is finally suppressed. King comments that "Trollope first voices and then attempts to silence the discourse of mid-century feminists" (312).

Scholars of Victorian marriage usually see the 1860s in a hopeful light, as the beginning of the end of coverture and the start of increased freedom after the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857; but this vocational narrative should remind us that the 1860s saw a different story of marriage as well. Alongside a legal progression that enhanced women's marital liberty, we have a cultural trend denigrating women's vocational opportunity. The suppressive hypothesis settled on the fiction of the 1860s, consigning female characters to cruel men when they try to work and making them deteriorate into hysteria until they could be reconstructed into properly grateful domestic supporters of their men. Work became the thing women most needed—and yet women who tried to achieve it through marriage were depicted as doomed. There was no way out of this trap. To be a Langham Place proponent, one had to depict women's suffering when denied work. Yet if one opposed Langham Place, one had to show the catastrophes that ensued when women sought work. Whatever the author's political position, then, s/he would almost inevitably be showing suffering women debarred from work. We have yet to think about the way this bending of women's narratives might have impacted both the emergent feminist movement and the history of the novel—the way that the failed

female subject that started to form in the 1860s cast its shadow over subsequent stories.

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