THE COMEDY OF SMALL-SCALE CRISES: HOW HUMOR MEDIATES CHANGE IN MID-VICTORIAN COUNTRY TOWN NOVELS

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | ................................................................. | 3 |
| LIST OF FIGURES | ....................................................................... | 5 |
| ABSTRACT | ........................................................................... | 6 |

CHAPTER

1 LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD: HUMOR, CHANGE, AND THE COUNTRY TOWN ........................................................................................................................................... 8
   The Country Town and Change .......................................................................................................................... 10
   The Small Scale of Realism ................................................................................................................................. 13
   Theories of Victorian Comedy: Then and Now .................................................................................................... 15

2 SYMPATHETIC HUMOR AND TRANSGRESSIVE WIT: TROLLOPE’S MODERATELY PROGRESSIVE VISION IN BARCHESTER TOWERS ...................................................................................................................... 26

3 PRESERVING THE COUNTRY TOWN: GASKELL’S HUMOROUS OLD MAIDS........................................................................... 52

4 SCHOLARLY FELLOWS TURNED COURTING CLERGYMEN IN TROLLOPE AND OLIPHANT ................................................................................................................................. 78
   Bachelor Clergymen Behaving Badly in Barchester ................................................................................................ 89
   The “languishing transplanted Fellow of All-Souls” in Oliphant’s The Rector .................................................................. 96

5 “IT IS SO ODD I SHOULD HAVE NO SENSE OF HUMOR”: HUMORLESSNESS AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN OLIPHANT’S MISS MARJORIBANKS ........................................................................................................... 112
   “The sound principles of political economy” ........................................................................................................... 116
   “It is so odd I should have no sense of humor.” ...................................................................................................... 122
   Employing the “Lamp of sacrifice” ......................................................................................................................... 125
   Comic Deflations of Expected Proposals ................................................................................................................ 128

6 NEITHER COMEDY NOR TRAGEDY: PATHOS AND REALISM IN ELIOT’S PROVINCIAL NOVELS ........................................................................................................................................... 139

   LIST OF REFERENCES ................................................................................................................................. 168

   BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH ................................................................................................................................ 175
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4-1</td>
<td>“A Gallop Amongst the Bishops; or, a Rapid Act of ‘Horsman’-ship”</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-2</td>
<td>“Mother Church and Her Pussey-ites”</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-3</td>
<td>“The Pet Parson”</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-4</td>
<td>“The Puseyite Moth and Roman Candle”</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this project, I argue for the emergence of a subgenre that is characteristic of the mid-Victorian period, which I call the comic country town novel, and discuss the Victorian forms of humor that these novels employ. Though many of the texts I examine are canonical, little work has been done on their comedic techniques. Specifically, this work examines the roles of wit and humor in mediating both narratorial distance and the moral and political questions of the novels, which include Gaskell’s *Cranford*, Trollope’s *Chronicles of Barsetshire* and Oliphant’s *Chronicles of Carlingford*. My project is unique because it not only examines the literary and cultural framework of comic texts but also emphasizes the under-explored relationship between comedy and setting. I argue that authors use the country town to look back with nostalgia at a way of life that is disappearing at the same time that it allows them to look to the future and the inevitable changes it will bring. It is change that drives the comedy of the country town novel and that the novel ultimately, if cautiously, endorses.

The introduction situates my discussion in terms of the larger history of the novel and shows that the frequency of a comedy of small-scale crises coincides with the height of mid-Victorian realism and its focus on the quotidian. The introduction also positions my argument within both contemporary and current theories of Victorian comedy. Chapter 2 examines the
differences between wit and humor and the important role they plan in Trollope’s *Barchester Towers*. Chapter 3 considers how the figure of the old maid uses humor to mediate change in several works by Elizabeth Gaskell. Chapter 4 argues that, in works by Trollope and Oliphant, a clerical fellow must learn humor via marriage in order to be a successful clergyman. Chapter 5 discusses how in Oliphant’s *Miss Marjoribanks* the heroine’s humorlessness is a source of both humor and power. Chapter 6 offers a counterargument, showing how two of George Eliot’s provincial novels have great comic potential but ultimately veer toward the tragic.
CHAPTER 1
LOOKING BACKWARD AND FORWARD: HUMOR, CHANGE, AND THE COUNTRY TOWN

Writing about the novels of Anthony Trollope, American author Nathaniel Hawthorne famously describes them in an 1860 letter as “solid and substantial, written on the strength of beef and through the inspiration of ale, and just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business, and not suspecting that they were being made a show of” (qtd. in Trollope’s Autobiography 122-123). Not only is Hawthorne’s observation an apt description of Trollope’s realist aesthetic (Trollope certainly thought so, including these words in his Autobiography), but it also captures the perspective of both characters and readers in many mid-Victorian provincial novels (including Trollope’s Chronicles of Barsetshire) and the comedy that such a perspective yields. William Hazlitt, in his Lectures on the Comic Writers of Great Britain (1819), sounds as if he could be describing Trollope’s characters in the glass case when he notes that characters who are “circumscribed” often have “no idea of anything beyond themselves and their immediate actions,” leaving them vulnerable to what he calls the Comic Muse (289).

Characters in provincial novels by Trollope, Gaskell, Oliphant, and Eliot are so focused on their own doll’s-house world view that it is almost as if they are looking through a telescope. In other words, they magnify a tiny object or event into a large image, often making “crises” out of small events. The reader, in contrast, has a god’s eye (or giant’s) view of the same event, as if from the opposite end of a telescope, whereby nothing seems large, allowing her to laugh at events characters take seriously. Yet the reader begins to be drawn into the miniature
environment as the aesthetic distance that initially is built into these novels diminishes and sympathies are enlarged.¹

This “tempest in a teacup” comedy occurs frequently in novels with circumscribed provincial settings, published between the 1850s and 1870s. In arguing for the emergence of a specific sub-genre in the mid-Victorian novel, which I will call the comic country town novel, I will be contributing to discussions of the history of the novel by addressing why this type of comedy appeared frequently at mid-century and why it so often occurs in novels with provincial settings. I will be using “country town” as an umbrella term for all of the provincial settings I discuss including village (like Cranford) and cathedral town (like Barchester). These fictional places are all market towns and most are at a distance, though not too far a distance, from a large city, emphasizing the nearness of change. Trollope’s Barchester, for example, is a short train ride from London, while Gaskell’s Mary Smith in Cranford “vibrated” all her life between Drumble (Manchester) and Cranford (154).

I will argue that the country town allows authors to look back with nostalgia at a way of life that is slowly disappearing at the same time it allows them to look to the future and the inevitable changes it will bring. It is change that drives the comedy of the country town novel and that the novel ultimately, if cautiously, endorses. Readers laugh at characters who initially are resistant to change and who amusingly obsess about things that we are meant to find trivial. But as readers watch characters slowly adapt to change and as we realize that their trivial obsessions often represent larger issues, readers are more likely to laugh with the characters rather than at them. Elizabeth Gaskell’s Miss Pole in Cranford is a characteristic example of a

¹ While the mock epic treats a trivial subject in the grand style in order to diminish it or make it appear ridiculous, in the comedy of minor “crises” which I discuss, readers may initially see an object (or character) as small or trivial but gradually come to have greater sympathy for it.
character that learns to tolerate change. Shocked by the news of the impending marriage of Lady Glenmire to the less genteel Mr. Hoggins, Miss Pole makes jokes about the match. But her jokes represent not merely a desire to gossip about who will marry whom, but rather her wish to preserve class hierarchies in the town. Because Miss Pole’s jokes allow her to process change, she eventually comes to see the need for Cranford to be a bit less discriminating socially. It is humor, then, that becomes the means of mediating cultural change, in *Cranford* and in the other novels I discuss. I will show, however, that an exception occurs when characters are unable to change, often resulting in tragedy, as we will see in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*.

**The Country Town and Change**

The country town setting readily facilitated the discussion of change for mid-Victorian novelists because it was in a period of transition and was, in many ways, a world disappearing. A descendant of the novels of Jane Austen, the comic country town sub-genre subscribes to Austen’s advice to her niece, an aspiring author, that “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on” (Le Faye 275). But the early nineteenth-century world that Austen portrays is secure and stable; there is no doubt about its survival. In contrast, the mid-Victorian world of the comic country town genre is vulnerable and in flux. In an 1882 *Spectator* essay, entitled “From Miss Austen to Mr. Trollope,” Richard Holt Hutton argues that while Austen’s rural life is “above all things, mild and unobtrusive, not reflecting the greater world at all,” Trollope’s is “possessed with the sense of the aggressiveness of the outer world,” of the “rush of commercial activity, of the competitiveness of fashion, of the conflict of existence even in outlying farms and country parsonages” (509). Of course, the main reason for this change in the depiction of the rural between Austen’s novels and Trollope’s was industrialization, leading
more people to move to cities, the expansion of which caused the encroachment of the urban upon the rural.

The country town setting also nourished fantasies of “merry England,” not only at a time when England was becoming more industrialized but also during mid-century military campaigns. During and after such hostilities as the Crimean War of 1853-1857 and the Indian Mutiny of 1857, it was appealing to authors like Gaskell and Eliot to look back in their novels ten to twenty years earlier, prior to the First Reform Bill. In 1946 during World War II, V. S. Pritchett wrote that Trollope’s fictional county Barsetshire has been one of the “great Never-Never Lands of our times” and that it has been the “normal country to which we all aspire” (145). Just as it was appealing to the English during the Second World War to “escape” to fictional Barchester, so might we assume that Victorian readers felt the same way during their own wars about not only Trollope’s Barchester but Gaskell’s Cranford and Oliphant’s Carlingford.

But if comic country town novels were being written, in part, in reaction to industrialization, these novels certainly are not about industrialization. While authors of this sub-genre were grappling with change, they were not the violent changes that confronted writers in the early decades of the period. In her political history of the novel, Nancy Armstrong points out that no major domestic novels appeared between Austen and the Brontës, during the 1820s and 1830s, and that it was only in the 1840s after the intellectual battle over mechanization seemed to be over that significant domestic fiction resumed (163). Yet in these novels of the 1840s, Armstrong argues, history and violence seemed to have entered the household (177). For example, condition of England novels like Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and Charles
Dickens’ *Hard Times*, deal with violent change and class hostilities stemming from industrialization.

The comic country town novels are primarily domestic novels, focusing on the manners, eccentricities and mishaps of ordinary middle-class people. Histories of Victorian comedy generally agree that this domestic humor developed as a result of the relative stability of mid-century Britain, in contrast to the “Times of Trouble” in the 1830s and 1840s. The financial comfort and overall well being of the bourgeoisie at this time led to the perception that they had the luxury to worry obsessively about the minor and the trivial. Though the comic country town novel sometimes does deal with polemical social issues, these issues often are played out through a comical courtship plot. Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* and Oliphant’s *The Rector* and *The Perpetual Curate* highlight church politics, but to take one example, Trollope displaces the theological battle between High and Low Church factions with the rivalry between Arabin and Slope for the love of Eleanor Bold. Unmarried individuals are frequent targets of comedy, as if to suggest that they, in contrast to married couples, have more time to spend wrapped up in themselves and their courtships. Hence celibacy becomes a recurring source of comedy in the courtship plot and comes to represent a resistance to keeping up with the changing world. Accordingly, Arabin must learn to navigate courtship rituals and marry before he can fully integrate himself in Barchester, just as the single ladies of Cranford must accept a degree of

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2 Roger Henkle notes that beginning with Sterne’s Walter Shandy, the comic figure came to be more like that of the average man. “As one would expect, the tone of such comedy was modulated from ridicule and satiric observation to indulgent humor. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the favorite comic subject was a person much like us, doing the foolish or funny things that any of us might do, and the prevalent tone was soft and benevolent” (226-227).

3 Often-cited examples of domestic comedy are *Mrs. Caudle’s Curtain Lectures* and George and Weedon Grossmith’s *The Diary of a Nobody*, both appearing serially in *Punch.*
change in their lives before they acknowledge the marriage of Lady Glenmire and Doctor Hoggins.

**The Small Scale of Realism**

The rise of comedy dealing with the minor domestic “crises” of characters in the 1850s and 1860s coincides with the height of Victorian high realism, which routinely emphasizes the everyday, the trivial, and the mundane. Because scale is an important consideration when discussing the country town (and, as we shall see, comedy), George Levine’s *The Realistic Imagination*, which emphasizes the connection between realism and issues of scale, has most influenced my own thinking. Contrasting mid-century realism (as opposed to late-century realism) to the excesses of romance, Levine notes that realism marks a shift in interest from the “large to the small, from the general to the particular” (13). In the realist novel, furniture, clothing, food, and the countenances of ordinary men and women become fitting subject matters. Such a diminishment of scope, Levine tells us, can also be seen in the settings of Victorian realism, for in contrast to the sublime and uncultivated landscapes of romance fiction, typical realist settings include “country villages, gently sloping hills, fertile lands and, occasionally, urban clutter” (204). The obvious pleasure realist authors take in the details they describe helps ensure that the “primary form” in which nineteenth-century English realism manifests itself is comedy (Levine 21). In essence, the conventions of realism—attention to detail, domesticated settings, and a comic tone—made the comic country town sub-genre inevitable.

Despite attempts by realist authors to strive for accurate representation and verisimilitude, many scholars point out how often authors pushed the limits of realism. Mid-nineteenth century realists not only wanted to describe the ordinary; they strove to make the ordinary seem significant, which, Levine argues, involved a blending of the ordinary and the extreme, the known and the unknown (14). The consequence is that the particular, under the “pressure of
intense and original seeing,” gives back the “intensities” more often associated with a larger scale (Levine 13). This intensity, or realism’s habit of putting the quotidian under the microscope and yoking the large and the small, often yields the comedy of “minor catastrophes” that I trace throughout this project.

In emphasizing ordinary men and women, realism’s focus confines itself largely to the middle classes. Indeed, the comic country town novel usually revolves around the lives of the professional middle-classes: clergymen, doctors, their families, genteel single ladies (as in Cranford), and occasionally the “county” families (gentry) who reside outside the bounds of the country town. Clearly, then, the hierarchy has shifted since Austen’s novels where the gentry are both the focus and the holders of power and influence. In the mid-Victorian country town novel, focus has shifted from the country to the country town, inhabited and, in essence, ruled by the rising professional class. In fact, the bourgeoisie in the country town novels I examine, though solidly middle- to upper-middle class, tend to think of themselves as aristocratic and are thus examples of the “bourgeois aristocrat.” Elizabeth Langland describes the bourgeois aristocrat, a term that she borrows from Frederich Engel, as the middling classes who aped the behavioral rather than the economic practices of the upper-class, leading to the former’s gentrification (25-6). Though readers may smile at middle-class characters’ inflated views of themselves, such views finally are endorsed by the authors; for example, Oliphant’s Lucilla Marjoribanks, daughter of the town doctor, has every right to think of herself as “queen” of Carlingford because the titled gentrywomen, though above her socially, live outside the limits of Carlingford, thereby disqualifying them as rulers of the town.

4 In Middlemarch, George Eliot frequently uses the analogy of the microscope, reflecting not only her desire to accurately describe “reality,” but also her interest in the latest scientific technology.
Theories of Victorian Comedy: Then and Now

At mid-century, one of the main issues Victorian comic theorists were debating was the relation between humor and wit, terms that recur frequently in the chapters that follow. Associated with the heart and with a sympathetic quality, humor is the comedy of character while wit is the comedy of intellect and incongruity; humor laughs with others and wit laughs at them. George Eliot captures the distinction in her 1856 essay “German Wit: Heinrich Heine” where she states that humor derives from “situations and characteristics” while wit “seizes upon unexpected and complex relations” (2). Furthermore, while wit implies a distance between the object and the perceiver of comedy (Martin 29), humor advocates a shrinking of that distance and an identification between the reader and characters.

Accounts of Victorian comedy generally agree that, in the early decades of the Victorian period, there was a shift from the wit of the eighteenth century to humor, but that by the later decades of the period, wit once again became popular. Therefore my sub-genre can be said to have emerged during this transitional period of the 1850s and 1860s. I will show that though the humorous mode dominates as these novels progress, authors of the comic country town novels nevertheless consistently balance humor and wit. On the one hand, readers (often represented by the narrator as “urban”) and witty characters themselves share a distanced view of country town residents and their “crises.” The initial relationship between readers and characters in these novels is akin to the relationship Freud discusses in his essay “Humor” (1928), where the reader takes on the attitude of an adult toward a child, “smiling at the triviality of the interests” which seem to the child so big (218). On the other hand, readers and some (though not all) witty characters are pulled into the humorous, sympathetic world of the country town. Thus, issues of scale and distance are important considerations not only when discussing the country town and realism, but also comic theory; the fact that sympathies are enlarged as the scale shrinks suggests
a linkage between a small scale, comedy, and sympathy. In George Eliot’s novels, by contrast, the enlargement of sympathies may lead to personal growth, as it does for Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, but these moments are rarely funny. In a famous passage from that novel, the narrator explains that too much sympathy would be like “hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat,” and that we should “die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (185).

A particularly good account of the sympathetic aspects of humor is Eileen Gillooly’s *Smile of Discontent: Humor, Gender, and Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (1999). In contrast to kinds of humor that usually are coded masculine (such as satire and irony), Gillooly investigates what she calls a “feminine humor” that is often overlooked because it does not fit into the “inherited nomenclature of the comic” (xviii). Because feminine humor is characterized by sympathy, passivity, and self-effacement, Gillooly argues that it allows nineteenth-century women a “socially acceptable means of voicing their discontent” (4). Not only does feminine humor allow women to voice their discontent, Gillooly suggests, but humor also acts as a coping mechanism, allowing women to avoid pain (24). While Gillooly often focuses on moments where humor allows female characters to deal with the frustration of living in a male-dominated society, I will show how humor allows characters to accept gradual change. Though there is some overlap in the authors whom we study, Gillooly does not focus on comedy and setting; her interest is in a “discourse of humor” (author’s emphasis xxiii) rather than comedy of character, and her readings are psychoanalytical. Nevertheless, her thorough characterization of humor has been enormously helpful in my own work.

Victorians inherited many of the questions and concerns about comedy with which their eighteenth-century predecessors were dealing. Two excellent accounts of British comedy are
Stuart Tave’s *The Amiable Humorist*, which studies comic theory in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and Robert Bernard Martin’s *The Triumph of Wit*, focusing solely on the Victorian period. Tave traces the “degradation of wit” (44) throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as writers and theorists began to reject the Restoration’s “profane uses of wit” (13). As the once popular wit (a term that often includes satire and ridicule) became less tolerated because of its tendency to make fun of virtue, laughter too was mistrusted because of its supposed connection to profane wit (Tave 43). Accordingly, weight gradually shifted away from Hobbes’ “sudden glory” theory of laughter, which argued that we laugh because of a feeling of superiority to someone. This theory anticipates Freud’s tendentious or hostile joke, the purpose of which is to make an enemy appear small or comic. The alternative to Hobbes’ theory was the incongruity theory of laughter. This theory argues that laughter is a response to seeing two incongruous things placed in juxtaposition; unlike Hobbes’ theory, the incongruity theory has the potential to be benevolent and hence paved the way for an alliance between harmless laughter and amiable humor (Tave 69). While Tave’s study ends with the early nineteenth-century, Martin’s *The Triumph of Wit* begins where Tave leaves off. Martin agrees with Tave that humor reigned in the early Victorian period (citing works by Dickens and Trollope as examples) but suggests that late century writers (such as Meredith, Butler and Shaw) turned increasingly to wit, justifying the shift by saying that comedy was neither sympathetic nor antagonistic, but impersonal. Martin makes sure to point out that this shift from humor to wit was not completely linear, and as George Eliot observed in her *Westminster Review* article, wit and humor often “over-lap” and “blend” with each other (3).

The Victorian change in preference from humor to wit is clear if we juxtapose two important works by Victorian theorists, Thackeray’s *The English Humorists of the Eighteenth*
Century (1853) and Meredith’s “On the Idea of Comedy, and of the Uses of the Comic Spirit” (1877). Despite his penchant for satire in his own work, Thackeray saves his praise for the English humorist, first in a series of six lectures (The English Humorists of the Eighteenth Century) and a year later in another lecture presented to an American audience and called “Charity and Humor.” In both works he likens the humorist to a “week-day preacher” (English Humorists 3, “Charity” 350) who awakens our love and pity as well as our scorn for hypocrisy and falsehood. Thackeray argues that humorous writing inspires us to be better people who are more disposed to be charitable. Disliking the “tawdry” comedy of the Restoration (“Charity” 357), which he associates with Congreve, Thackeray prefers the sentimental writing of Steele, Addison, and Dickens. As Martin and others critics have observed, it is clear from Thackeray’s fiction that his conception of comedy is much more complex than he indicates with the popular definition of humor that he uses in these lectures. But though Thackeray’s lectures may not have complicated our notion of humor, they do provide a “good litmus paper” to what Thackeray thought his audience wanted to hear (Martin 79).

In contrast to Thackeray, Meredith argues against sentimental humor in favor of wit, which he calls the Comic Spirit. Meredith states that the Comic Spirit has been misunderstood and that its true nature is not hostile and aggressive; rather, the Comic Spirit is characterized by the intellect and “thoughtful laughter” (140). Meredith therefore prefers a comedy of the mind and of incongruities, rather than the tears and sentiment associated with humor. The Comic Spirit exposes self-deceived and hypocritical individuals yielding, in one of the most famous phrases of the essays, “volleys of silvery laughter” (140). Though scholars often remark that this essay is not the easiest or clearest to read (Martin calls its prose “tortuous” 90), many still
consider “On the Idea of Comedy” one of the most important theoretical statements on comedy of the Victorian period.

In addition to inheriting debates about the merits of humor and wit from their predecessors, the Victorians also inherited notions about the connection between comedy and national character. In The Amiable Humorist, Stuart Taves shows that writers as diverse as Dryden, Sir William Temple, and Jonson argued that humor was a particularly English national expression, able to flourish in the country especially because of England’s climate, government and prosperity. Such reasoning is evident in a 1725 essay: “The pleasing Medley of Characters and Humours particular to Old England, make up together a very fine Scene; and the general Face of Peace and Prosperity that covers all, will well enough excuse a warm Englishman in thinking it the finest Country in the World” (qtd. in Tave 96). We find similar ideas in nineteenth-century periodicals, as in the 1871 British Quarterly Review, in which the writer associates humor with the English and wit with the French. Less typically, in her article on “Heinrich Heine,” George Eliot identifies humor as Germanic, though she too links the French with wit. Clearly, then, these comic theorists did see a connection between humor and setting (i.e. England), helping to explain why writers celebrating the distinctly English country town would turn to humor, also distinctly English. And if humor and the country town become linked, then it follows that wit will often be associated with the foreign and the urban. We will see the clearest example of this in Trollope’s Barchester Towers, where the cosmopolitan Signora

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5 John Bowen explains that Victorian theorizing about comedy is “driven and vexed by three issues: the relation of wit to humour; the nature of different national characters as seen in their comic writing; and the relation of comedy to ethical design or morality.”

6 The definition of humor has, of course, evolved over the centuries; though it first referred to one of the four chief liquids of the body affecting temperament, by the eighteenth century, it had come to mean a benevolent kind of comedy. See Tave’s The Amiable Humorist for a detailed discussion of the multiple definitions of humor.
Madeline Neroni arrives in provincial Barchester from Italy and proves a force of change through her witty and outspoken ways.

Discussing comedy and its associated terms was difficult for Victorians theorists and continues to challenge scholars today. In addition to the fact that comedy is not always taken seriously as an object of study, there is the lingering perception that the Victorians were not funny, despite the richness and wealth of comic works produced during the period. As Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor explains in *The Victorian Comic Spirit: New Perspectives* (2000), even Victorian scholars think of the “Victorian Sage” before they think of “Victorian Harlequin” (xiii). Another difficulty, identified in Roger Henkle’s *Comedy and Culture: England 1820-1900* (1980), is the challenge of terminology; he argues that we confusingly use broad notions such as “‘comic rhythm’” and “‘mythos of comedy’” and then struggle to adapt them to diverse works (3). Throughout this project, I am concerned with comic characters and incidents. It is important to distinguish this type of comedy from the classical distinction between comedy and tragedy, as defined by such scholars as Northrop Frye. While comedy generated from characters who make “mountains out of molehills” consistently targets similar social situations (such as men and women not paired up in courtship), this type of comedy does not necessarily conform to the structure of classical comedy that works toward reinstating the social order that existed before the chaotic events of the narrative middle.

Both Wagner-Lawlor’s and Henkle’s books are examples of studies that attempt to find new ways of approaching Victorian comedy, a field that certainly has been under-analyzed. By examining a range of texts including Gilbert and Sullivan’s operas, *Punch*, Gaskell’s *Cranford*, and Dickens’ *Hard Times*, Wagner-Lawlor’s collection of essays shows the “multiplicity” of Victorian modes, such as irony, parody, and burlesque, at the same time it reveals a variety of
approaches to the analysis of these texts (xvi). Collectively, Wagner-Lawlor notes, the essays show comedy’s political function, while stressing the relationship between a humorous text and its culture. Similarly, Henkle argues that the best way to understand comedy is within a “specific literary and cultural framework” (4). Though Henkle’s scope is much broader than my own and covers comic authors who are representative of the early, middle, and late Victorian period, including Thackeray, Dickens, Jerrold, Gilbert, Meredith, and Wilde, he likewise notices the rise of a gentle, domestic humor in the mid-Victorian period. Henkle accounts for this rise in many of the same ways I did earlier in the introduction, such as the dominance of the middle class and their corresponding ability to “muse idly on the social peculiarities” of the day (185).

As helpful as Henkle’s study is, he surprisingly fails to mention any female comic authors, not only in his mid-century chapter but in the book as a whole. Like Henkle, John Bowen, author of “Comic and Satiric,” a forthcoming essay in The Cambridge History of English Literature: The Victorian Period, creates a narrative highlighting comic writers throughout the period, though his chronology does include women writers. Most interesting for the purposes of my argument is Bowen’s characterization of Gaskell’s writing as “the most significant comic fiction of the mid-century” and, especially, the winning effect of the “consciously small scale” of Cranford’s actions. Bowen also discusses the comic contributions of two other authors whom I emphasize in my work: George Eliot and Anthony Trollope. My project will add to discussions about comedy at mid-century by showing that Gaskell, Trollope, Oliphant, and Eliot are not only alike in their employment, more or less, of a genial, domestic humor, but also in their use of a comedy of minor “crises,” best highlighted in the circumscribed country town setting. In other words, though I am interested in comedy within a cultural framework, as are Wanger-Lawlor and Henkle, I would also stress the need to pay attention to connections between comedy and setting.
In Chapter 2, I examine more closely the differences between wit and humor and the important role they play in Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* (1857). Trollope shows his engagement with the Victorian debate concerning wit and humor by reserving sympathetic humor for his narrator, a resident of the cathedral town of Barchester, while repeatedly depending on Madeline Neroni, a visitor to Barchester, to articulate an ironically-distanced, transgressive wit. While the narrator tends to sympathize with the residents of Barchester, Madeline Neroni provides an objective viewpoint and often laughs at the “crises” of the characters. Though Trollope shows the necessity of Madeline Neroni’s wit to effect change, he also warns that wit can be too cosmopolitan and therefore ensures that Madeline does not remain completely detached by involving her in the novel’s love plot. Thus, Trollope argues for the need to temper wit and humor, a position that parallels his moderately progressive political stance, which I will show through a brief discussion of his politics as he outlines them in his *Autobiography* (1883) and in *The Prime Minster* (1876).

Like Trollope, Elizabeth Gaskell also supports gradual change in her country town novels. In Chapter 3, I argue that in three of Gaskell’s “Knutsford stories,” *Cranford* (1851-53), *My Lady Ludlow* (1858) and *Mr. Harrison’s Confessions* (1851), the figure of the old maid acts as a preserver of the community, using humor to mediate change and defuse perceived threats to the country town. Though these old maids often joke about marriage, the jokes imply uneasiness over issues other than marriage, such as preserving class hierarchies. In *Cranford*, I focus on Miss Pole who is most likely to joke about marriage and is the preeminent gossiper. Her jokes about the marriage of Lady Glenmire to Mr. Hoggins signal her uneasiness about the disruption to Cranford’s class structure, though Miss Pole comes to realize that if Cranfordians do not learn to adapt, they will have no society at all. Next, I turn to Miss Galindo in *My Lady Ludlow* who,
in contrast to Miss Pole’s initial rejection of change, actively uses change to maintain village continuity. Finally, I examine how the unmarried ladies of Duncombe continually interrupt, through gossip and jokes, the story Mr. Harrison is attempting to narrate, showing their desire to control information and filter change in the town. One of the likely reasons for the success of, especially, *Cranford* is the presence of a caring humor throughout; Gaskell encourages us to laugh at the gossipy old maids who stress about supposed trivialities, but never in a cruel way. And in writing her stories of provincial life, Elizabeth Gaskell, like her fictional old maids, is a kind of preserver of the country town, despite her realization that it is changing and that a certain amount of change is necessary.

In Chapter 4, I look at another celibate figure, the bachelor clergyman, and specifically a former fellow at the all-male Oxford University who was inadequately prepared by that sheltered institution to interact with women or perform parish duties once established in the country town, often the site of a fellow’s first living. Hence this figure is awkward when it comes to courtship and often makes much ado about nothing when interacting with women. Because an Anglican fellow often spends his twenties and thirties at Oxford, he is in the atypical and highly comic position of establishing a family at the time of life when most men already have a wife and children. I will argue that Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* and Margaret Oliphant’s *The Rector* (1863) and *The Perpetual Curate* (1864) all comically portray a fellow’s participation in the courtship plot to show that a clergyman who has failed personally (as a suitor or husband) ultimately fails professionally (as cleric). Just as Trollope involves the witty Madeline in the love plot of *Barchester Towers* so that she is not too detached (see Chapter 2), so do these novels reveal that only by relinquishing bachelorhood and marrying can a fellow fully integrate himself into the fictional country town. In other words, after leaving the serious, scholarly environment
of Oxford, a fellow must learn humor (sympathy) via marriage in the country town in order to be a successful cleric. By discussing these three novels in addition to several *Punch* cartoons and Trollope’s *Clergymen and the Church of England* (1866), I will show that humor emphasizes the need for Victorian clergymen and the church to keep up with the changing times.

Just as the clergymen in Chapter 4 (initially) are humorless, so is Lucilla Marjoribanks utterly humorless, and ironically her humorlessness is a great source of comedy in Margaret Oliphant’s 1866 novel, *Miss Marjoribanks*. While some scholars suggest that the seriousness with which Lucilla takes her plan to organize provincial Carlingford only diminishes her and makes her appear silly, I will argue in Chapter 5 that it is precisely Lucilla’s humorlessness that is the means of her success in bringing about change in the community. While the wit of some characters is divisive and disqualifies them from being leaders, Lucilla has no “sense of humor” (or wit) and so never laughs at her neighbors, allowing her to be impartial and objective, qualities necessary in a ruler. Readers, meanwhile, cannot laugh *with* Lucilla (as humor usually encourages us to do) because she herself is not laughing. But because Oliphant encourages readers to feel amused affection for Lucilla rather than detachment, she is positioned as if she were an object of humor. Lucilla changes very little as a character, though when her father dies, the only true crisis she faces, she does become more sympathetic. Thus, though Lucilla does not have a sense of humor and never comes to possess one, she increasingly becomes sympathetic and an *object* of humor.

While there is a sustained comic tone in the novels of Trollope, Gaskell, and Oliphant, we are less assured that all will turn out well by the end of George Eliot’s provincial novels. In Chapter 6, I investigate how and why novels like *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871) begin with great comic potential but eventually veer toward the
tragic or near-tragic. In contrast to the other authors I focus on in this project, Eliot’s purpose is not primarily to make readers laugh, but as one of the foremost realists of the nineteenth century, to extend our sympathies and our moral sentiment, usually through a tone of high seriousness.

Reading Eliot’s writing about realism (both her fiction and non-fiction prose) for what it has to say about comedy reveals her belief that life is made up of an unavoidable mixture of comedy and tragedy; furthermore, she argues that another mode besides comedy and tragedy is of even more importance: pathos, by which she means sympathizing pity. I will show that Eliot erases the distance between characters and readers to a greater extent than the other authors of this dissertation, allowing her to achieve sympathy for her subject matter, though often at the expense of comedy. In the last section of the chapter, I turn to Eliot’s short story “Brother Jacob” (1864) where, by way of contrast, we have the pleasure of laughing at the petty characters because we are never asked to sympathize with any of them, showing, meanwhile, that Eliot was capable of sustained comedy.

The comic country town novel is a dominant popular sub-genre in the mid-Victorian novel. It is significant that many of the novels I highlight in this project are part of a series: *Barchester Towers* is the second volume of Trollope’s *Chronicles of Barsetshire*, Oliphant’s *Miss Marjoribanks* is one of six novels that make up *The Chronicles of Carlingford*, and though Gaskell and Eliot are not chroniclers, they often set their fiction in provincial towns. Clearly, the chronicle format was not only profitable for writers but enormously popular with readers, who surely felt at home when reading about familiar characters and settings. By not only celebrating the country town but, through humor, showing that incremental change was possible and necessary, these authors achieved a balance likely appreciated by mid-Victorian readers, who themselves often felt nostalgia for the past and excitement about the future.
CHAPTER 2
SYMPATHETIC HUMOR AND TRANSGRESSIVE WIT: TROLLOPE’S MODERATELY PROGRESSIVE VISION IN BARCHESTER TOWERS

During her first social outing in Barchester, a reception at the palace of Bishop Proudie and his wife, La Signora Madeline Vesey Neroni Stanhope “laughed loud, and sent the sound of it ringing through the lobby and down the stairs after Mrs. Proudie’s feet” (94). The narrator describes Madeline’s laughter as “revenge” against the uptight, rigidly Evangelical hostess (94). In contrast to Madeline’s outright, audible laughter at Mrs. Proudie, the narrator avoids directly laughing at or ridiculing his characters, which explains his saying early in the novel that his intention is “not to breathe a word against the character of Mrs. Proudie” (19). Scholars of Barchester Towers (1857) have noted that both Trollope’s narrator and his character Madeline Neroni use comedy in different ways to effect change. Joseph Wiesenfarth notes that Madeline’s function is similar to Trollope’s because she “promotes actions based on truth” (52), and Robert Polhemus argues that Trollope allows the Stanhopes to express “unpopular ideas” so that Trollope’s narrator is free to make “inoffensive remarks” (Comic Faith 197). I would like to add to these ideas by showing that Trollope, by implicitly distinguishing between the comic tactics of his narrator and those of his characters, reveals his engagement with issues with which many Victorian writers grappled. Namely, is detached wit or sympathetic humor the more acceptable form of comedy to Victorian readers, and which is more useful in allowing a writer to convey his message?

Amanda Anderson’s excellent The Powers of Distance examines how Victorians were ambivalent about liberal detachment because they were aware of both the virtues and the limits of such an outlook. The ideal of critical distance, Anderson explains, provided the foundation for many Victorian aesthetic and intellectual projects, including the human sciences, ideals of cosmopolitanism, literary forms such as omniscient realism, and the cultivation of character (4).
One “project” that Anderson’s book does not address but that also illustrates a “dialectic between detachment and engagement” is comic theory (6). In this chapter, I will show how Anderson’s thesis can be applied to the realm of comedy to argue that Trollope maintains a balanced vision by reserving sympathetic, engaged humor for his narrator while depending on Madeline Neroni, a reader-substitute, to articulate an ironically-distanced, detached and transgressive wit. Furthermore, as a function of wit in this novel, laughter must also be moderated, in Trollope’s view, so that it is neither too loud nor too soft.¹

Anderson reveals that, on the one hand, Victorians valorized liberal distance because of the objective viewpoint it allowed while, on the other hand, they understood that too much detachment could lead to moral insensitivity, indifference, and cynicism. As we shall see, questions about the appropriate levels of distance and engagement similarly surface in discussions of comic theory and certainly influence Trollope’s comedy in Barchester Towers. Much has been made of the narrator’s asides, which create a “rhetoric of intimacy” (Kincaid 597) and emphasize his “first hand contact with the characters” (Lyons 47). While some, most famously Henry James, find Trollope’s narrator too intrusive and chatty, it is important to note that his sympathetic, engaged humor is necessary to balance the equally important, though more distanced, wit of Madeline Neroni.² If we realize that Madeline’s wit is needed alongside the narrator’s humor, then the characteristics associated with her wit, including her foreignness and distanced perspective, are less a matter of what many critics have called her moral depravity than

¹ Trollope’s view is, in many respects, Chesterfieldian. In a letter to his godson, dated December 12, 1765, Lord Chesterfield says that “those things that are generally called comical may excite a momentary laugh, though never a loud nor a long one among well bred people” (qtd. in Dobrée). Lord Chesterfield also warns his son against the vulgarities of “loud” and “audible” laughter in multiple letters (see letters from March 9, 1748; October 19, 1748; October 29, 1748; and June 13, 1751 in Bradshaw).

² Trollope’s narrator/character anticipates Henry James’ use of characters he calls the “reader’s friend,” explained in his Preface to The Ambassadors.
they are alternative ways of viewing the world around her.\textsuperscript{3} I also see Madeline’s character as more positive and constructive than do many scholars because her viewpoint and those of readers often overlap; they share an ironic distance that allows them to see Barchester residents and their “crises” as small and amusing.\textsuperscript{4} Trollope, however, prevents Madeline’s distance from collapsing into cynicism by deeply involving this character (and the reader) in the love plot and ultimately using her to bring about the plot’s happy ending before she and her family leave Barchester to return to Italy.

Many scholarly debates about Trollope’s comedy in \textit{Barchester Towers} revolve around whether it is conservative, and therefore siding with High Church characters such as Archdeacon Grantly and Mr. Harding rather than the Low Church Proudies and Mr. Slope who represent change and reform, or whether Trollope offers a more tempered approach, poking fun at both High and Low Church members. To George Eliot, Trollope certainly was a “Church of England man” (qtd. in apRoberts 13). In “\textit{Barchester Towers} and the Nature of Conservative Comedy,” scholar James R. Kincaid argues that \textit{Barchester Towers} is a “profound protest against the competitive mode of life,” and that the novel “establishes its comedy in direct hostility to the major progressive movements of the period” (600). Robert Polhemus, in contrast, emphasizes that the “Victorian compromise” is clear in the Barsetshire novels (\textit{Changing World} 25). But none of these analyses have differentiated between wit and humor in the novel; by doing so, it

\textsuperscript{3} The publisher’s reader for Longman’s argued that Madeline’s sexuality makes “sad havoc of the virtuous feelings of the clergymen” in the novel and concludes that she is a “great blot on the work” (qtd. in Sadleir’s \textit{Trollope: A Commentary}). Though recent critics may not use the language of morality, many continue to have such perspectives and prejudices regarding Madeline.

\textsuperscript{4} In his splendid \textit{The Changing World of Anthony Trollope}, Robert Polhemus discusses the importance of the title \textit{Barchester Towers}, noting that Trollope wants his readers “to get a detached view of this world, to look down on it—from a tower, as it were—and see honestly its failings, its realities, its hypocrisies, its ridiculousness, as well as its promise. From the detached point of view of comedy, or from a tower, people sometimes look very small” (50). But Polhemus also reminds us that cathedral towers not only look down but point up, representing “men’s aspirations for moral purpose” (50).
becomes abundantly clear that Trollope does in fact offer a balanced view of conservative and liberal positions.

In fact, the novel’s comic structure parallels Trollope’s political ideology, which I will call “moderately progressive.” In his *Autobiography* (1883), Trollope famously wrote that he is “an advanced, but still a Conservative-Liberal,” though when he ran for Parliament it was as a Liberal (243). For Trollope, the hallmark of being a Conservative-Liberal seems to have been the principle of gradualism. A Liberal, he says, realizes that distances between social classes are shrinking and is even willing to help the many rise a bit, but importantly “lest he be tempted to travel too quickly,” he is glad to be accompanied by a Conservative opponent (245). Trollope believes that to be useful in Parliament, a man must above all be satisfied in doing a “little bit of a little thing at a time” (247). In stressing Trollope’s tendency to stress moderate reformist impulses, I am thinking of his “liberal” ideas rather than an affiliation with the Liberal political party.\(^5\)

Trollope had earlier outlined many of these same political creeds in *The Prime Minster* (1876) when the eponymous hero, Plantagenet Palliser (the Duke of Omnium), “labeled [his] own thoughts” (II, 263). As he talks to Phineas Finn, the Duke seems to be a mouthpiece for Trollope himself as he differentiates between the Conservative and Liberal position, namely that the former desires to maintain differences while the latter works to lessen them. The Duke, however, like Trollope in the *Autobiography*, acknowledges the strengths of both positions and understands the need for them to balance one another, though he finally is able to verbalize why he is a Liberal and why that party is sounder: “You are a Liberal because you know that it is not all as it ought to be, and because you would still march on to some nearer approach to equality”

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\(^5\) For more about liberalism and *The Chronicles of Barsetshire*, see Bo Earle’s “Policing and Performing Liberal Individuality in Anthony Trollope’s *The Warden*."

29
(II, 265). In other words, unlike the Conservative position, the Liberal one is “compatible with continual improvement” (II, 264).

Importantly, Trollope admits in his *Autobiography* that he frequently has used Plantagenet Palliser and Lady Glencora “for the expression of my political or social convictions” (151). In *The Prime Minister*, the husband and wife disagree about how to be a successful prime minister and, most interestingly, Trollope often expresses their differing opinions in terms of their contrasting senses of humor. In other words, these characters help illuminate both Trollope’s political position and his comic ideology. Plantagenet is a decent, honorable liberal, but he also is earnest and utterly humorless. He needs his wife’s wittiness and cosmopolitanism to prop up both himself and his government. While the Duke scrupulously performs his professional duties, he takes no interest in mingling socially with his political patrons, friends, and neighbors, in large part due to his shyness. He therefore misses crucial opportunities for cementing bonds with his business associates. Lady Glencora wishes her husband were “brighter, more gay, given to pleasures, and fond of trifles” (I, 179), while the old Duke, Plantagenet’s mentor, sums up the problem when he says, “The fault is that he takes things too seriously. If he could be got to believe that he might eat, and sleep, and go to bed, and amuse himself like other men, he might be a good Prime Minister” (II, 4).

To make up for her husband’s neglect in wining and dining his colleagues, Lady Glen gives elegant parties and makes sure her home is always open to guests. But if Glencora’s social events satisfy an expectation of her husband’s party, her witty jokes get her into trouble with these same people more than once. To take one instance, in the chapter titled “Sir Orlando’s Policy,” she makes a joke that is seen to be in bad taste, thereby offending some of her guests (I, 186-7). Trollope therefore shows that just as the Duke must form a coalition of both
conservatives and liberals in order to forge power and become Prime Minister, so must he and Glencora find an appropriate balance of earnestness and wit. In *The Prime Minister* we see the husband and wife gain in sympathy and love for one another as they acknowledge their own and each other’s flaws at the same time they realize how much they depend on one another.

Trollope, of course, expressed his political position in fiction prior to the Palliser novels. Before turning to Trollope’s balancing of humor and wit in *Barchester Towers*, it will be instructive to turn briefly to the first Barsetshire novel, *The Warden* (1855), which clearly illustrates Trollope’s ability to see both sides of a political question. As Polhemus explains, *The Warden* introduces the Trollopian theme of “conciliation” that will remain constant in his writing (*Changing World* 26). The novel tells the story of kindly, retiring Septimus Harding, whose charitable income exceeds the purpose for which it is intended. When a young political activist, John Bold, discovers this, he sets out to reform the matter with the help of the press. Though Bold ultimately withdraws his suit, Mr. Harding’s conscience has by this time been awakened and he therefore feels it his duty to resign the wardenship. In his *Autobiography*, Trollope discusses his plan for *The Warden* in detail, noting that his original aim was to deal with two evils: the possession of the Church of funds meant for charitable purposes and the “undeserved severity” of the newspapers toward the recipients of such incomes (79). Because Trollope understands that matters are usually not black and white, he refused to create a saint-like warden or, alternatively, a “bloated parson” who neglected all of his duties, but instead delineated the admirable but flawed Harding (79). Similarly, Trollope failed to believe in the “venomous assassin of the journals” (80). Trollope wrongly comes to the conclusion in his *Autobiography* that his combining of the income and press issues in one novel was ineffective; however, modern scholars generally disagree with Trollope on this point and believe that the originality of the
novel rests on its balanced perspective. In *The Warden*, Trollope is able to convey an admiration for many of the traditions and “goodly grace of cathedral institutions,” while also showing the need for some of those very institutions to be reformed (57).

It is clear from contemporary periodical essays that Victorians were thinking through issues relating to wit and humor as Trollope was preparing to write his Barchester novels. In an 1872 *British Quarterly Review* article, the anonymous author defines wit and humor in the following way: “Roughly we may affirm that wit requires a good head, humour a good heart” (44). Humor usually is sympathetic in tone and focuses on the eccentricities of character while wit is associated with the intellect and incongruities and can include satire and wordplay. Robert Bernard Martin explains in *The Triumph of Wit* that in the 1860s and 1870s (when Trollope was working on his *Chronicles of Barsetshire*) there was a growing acceptance of wit rather than humor as the basis of comedy (17). Martin associates humor with such writers as Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope, in contrast to more witty writers like Meredith, Butler, and Shaw (vii). But Martin is careful to caution against notions of a linear shift from humor to wit, instead stressing that what actually occurred was a “jerky, back-and-forth movement” (42), since many Victorian wits had more in common with writers of the eighteenth-century than with their contemporaries (vii). It is interesting to note that, according to Martin’s schema, Trollope’s writing of the Barsetshire novels occurs at the cusp of a Victorian change in thinking about comedy. Though Martin implies that Trollope simply is a humorist, I would like to complicate his reading to emphasize that, writing at mid-century, Trollope performs an important balancing act by using both wit and humor.

Like Trollope, George Eliot also stresses the importance of tempering wit and humor in an 1856 *Westminster Review* article entitled “German Wit: Heinrich Heine.” For the purposes of
this discussion, the publication date of Eliot’s review is important, falling in the year between Trollope’s publication of *The Warden* and *Barchester Towers*. After defining the terms wit and humor and giving a brief history of them, Eliot stresses that wit and humor “over-lap and blend with each other,” and that some kinds of comedy are a “hybrid” of the two (3). Eliot sounds as if she is describing Trollope’s comic structure when she observes that “we rarely find wit untempered by humour, or humour without a spice of wit; and sometimes we find them both united. . .in the same mind” (4). She explains that because wit tends to be “cold,” it should be balanced with the warmer, more sympathetic humor. Similarly, the “broad-faced, rollicking humour” needs the “refining” influence of wit, which is an enemy of “exaggeration” (4).

Significantly, in Robert Bernard Martin’s characterizations of Victorian definitions of wit and humor, he often uses language similar to Amanda Anderson’s discussion of the cultivation of detachment in Victorian England. Humorous or sentimental comedy advocates the “eradication of. . .distance and an identification between perceiver and perceived” (my italics, Martin 29). Like Eliot, Martin argues that, unlike humor, wit is associated with the intellect and correspondingly implies a greater coldness and, Martin says, “distance from the object of comedy to see how it is out of joint” than is possible for a humorist (29). It is the witty characters who, in *Barchester Towers*, are more likely to laugh or cause others to laugh because of the distance they have from the object of their laughter.

However, as Anderson’s book shows us, being too detached can be pretentious, just as someone who is overly witty can be charged with “intellectual arrogance,” to use Martin’s term (23). Not only is wit associated with distance and detachment but also with foreignness. The writer of the *British Quarterly Review* article admits that though there always will be exceptions, “wit may be considered as the distinctive feature of the French genius, and humour of the
English” (45). In her Westminster Review article, George Eliot also associates the French with wit and, interestingly, the German with humor. But she faults Voltaire for limiting himself to witticisms, leaving his readers feeling the “want of humour,” just as she objects to German humorists failing to provide the necessary “concomitant of wit” (4). Her brief remarks on wit and humor introduce Eliot’s main subject, Heinrich Heine, whom she celebrates for not only being humorous, but having “an amount of esprit that would make him brilliant among the most brilliant of Frenchmen” (6). Though Barchester Tower’s Madeline Neroni lives in Italy, not France, the notion of the witty foreigner is still very applicable to her. Indeed, I would like to broaden the English humor / French wit dichotomy and suggest that, in Trollope’s second Barsetshire novel, humor is a phenomenon of the country town while wit is a product of the city, with the narrator representing the former and Madeline Neroni representing the latter.

Before turning to Barchester Towers, it is worth noting that wit also has a “foreign” origin in The Warden, namely the city of London. Robin Gilmour writes that in Trollope’s Barchester, the rural gentry face challenges in part coming from the “power of London and of metropolitan opinion, brought suddenly closer by the technological and social innovations of the first half of the nineteenth century” (xvi). At times, it appears that Barchester maintains the myth of a provincial idyll, while at other times the forces of London seem all too close. Based on Mr. Harding’s calculations about the train schedule in The Warden, it appears that Trollope envisions Barchester as being about 5 ½ hours by train from London; this means a bit of a journey for Barchester residents but still a feasible one. In this novel, Trollope gives London mainly

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6 The 1996 film Ridicule is relevant here. Set in 1783, the film centers on the court of France’s King Louis XVI where “wit is King.” One must prove to be witty to win favor at court. The film makes clear that the “savage sting of aristocratic ridicule” is far inferior to the more compassionate English humor.

7 Eliot notes that Heine is “essentially a lyric poet” (28). But she also cites “Deutschland” as his most “charming” specimen of “humorous poetry” because “its wit and humour grow out of a rich loam of thought” (29). The most “poetic and specifically humorous” of Heine’s prose writings, argues Eliot, is the “Reisebilder” (31).
negative connotations including dingy buildings, the polluted River Thames, and thick smoke. It
is the journalist Tom Towers and the lawyer Sir Abraham Haphazard (both residents of London
who become deeply engaged in the case against Harding) who are men of wit. In luxurious,
secluded Temple chambers where “wit and wine” abound, Tom Towers lives and works, writing
scathing articles about Mr. Harding and others whose “abuses” must be reformed (186). Towers’
physical separation from the people about which he writes (he literally is in a kind of tower)
corresponds with his detached wit. Trollope uses a mock-epic tone to describe Towers as a kind
of god on Mount Olympus who self-importantly reflects on the fact that all are under his power
because of the mightiness of his pen. Towers does not know Mr. Harding nor all the particulars
of the case, having never been to Barchester, but he still pronounces “truth” and what is “right”
and “wrong.”

Similarly, Sir Abraham Haphazard has a brilliant, sparkling wit, but as is the case with
wit, he is a cold person, so much so that no “cold heart was ever cheered by warmth” from him
(231). Though Sir Abraham discovers a technicality in the lawsuit brought about by the
opposing side that would, in effect, allow Mr. Harding to remain unhindered as warden, the
lawyer is unable to tell Mr. Harding that he is legally entitled to the ample warden salary.
Because Mr. Harding wants to be right rather than merely proved right, he explains to the lawyer
his intention to resign, a decision that causes Sir Abraham to doubt the clergyman’s sanity.
Trollope faults both of these witty men for their lack of sympathy and failure to see the shades of
grey that so often arise when dealing with questions of what is just and unjust, right and wrong.

Trollope mobilizes our sympathy and engagement in *Barchester Towers* primarily
through the humorous narrator, a long-time Barchester resident. The numerous asides and
intrusions of Trollope’s chatty narrator are, of course, signs of this high level of engagement not
only with readers, with whom the narrator wants to move along in “full confidence,” but also
with characters (127). An examination of the critical reaction to the narrator of this novel reveals
that “sympathy,” a hallmark of humorous comedy, is one of the words most frequently
associated with him. To take one example, Paul Lyons describes the narrative tone as “a likeable
combination of sentiment, good sense, and sympathetic alertness” (41). Victorians, including
Trollope, understood that excessive distancing, as Anderson explains, could lead to the
underdevelopment of moral faculties like sympathy, and that “close observation” was needed to
“activate the sympathies of the reader” (11). In his Autobiography, Trollope declared that “no
novel is anything, for the purpose either of comedy or tragedy, unless the reader can sympathize
with the characters whose names he finds upon the pages. Let an author so tell his tale as to
touch his reader’s heart and draw his tears, and he has, so far, done his work well” (191).
Another goal, then, of humorous literature is to appeal to the emotions (the “heart”) of readers.

In order to put these theories into practice, Trollope uses Madeline’s character to pull out
all of the comedic stops so that his narrator is free to keep on his “kid gloves,” to use Polhemus’
phrase (197). The narrator avoids laughing at, ridiculing, or satirizing his characters, and instead
consciously strives for impartiality, reminding readers of both the good and bad qualities of
Barchester residents. A few characteristic examples include: “the author must beg it to be
remembered that Mr. Slope was not in all things a bad man” (120), Mrs. Proudie is “not all
devil” (237), and Eleanor Bold “cannot altogether be defended; and yet it may be averred that
she is not a hoyden” (385). The above reference to Mrs. Proudie reveals that many of the
characters possess both angelic and demonic qualities, and the narrator strives to be honest about
that fact.
As critics have pointed out, the narrator himself is a resident of Barchester and consequently has certain biases that often lead him to contradict himself (Lyons 47). For example, the narrator cannot avoid admitting that “we” (narrator and readers) “hate” Mr. Slope (151). Though the narrator’s primary comic mode is engaged, tolerant humor, I do not wish to imply that humor necessarily excludes the technique of ironic distancing that I wish to focus on in my discussion of Madeline Neroni. The narrator certainly is capable of using irony for comic effect thereby distancing himself a degree from the characters. But because the narrator is a Barchester resident, he will never be able to have the kind of detachment enjoyed by the outsider, Signora Madeline Neroni.

Daughter of Dr. Vesey Stanhope, the absentee clergyman who has been residing for years in Italy prior to moving his family back to Barchester at the novel’s beginning, Madeline is an outsider who has the luxury of a witty, distanced perspective. As a newcomer to Barchester, the detachment she enjoys aligns her with readers who likewise are not part of the fictional community. The signora’s plans while residing in Barchester merely include creating a “sensation,” rather than forming any emotional, permanent attachments (76). An advantage of such detachment is a reflective, objective viewpoint that is not always available to the partial narrator. Instead of being too emotionally involved, the signora (like readers) sees people around her and their “crises” as small and amusing. As William Cabdury argues, the “kind of irony implicit in [the] contrast between the values of characters and audiences is one of Trollope’s favorite devices for making characters ridiculous” (514). Madeline is as much a member of the audience as she is part of the cast of characters.

In contrast to the provinciality of Barchester, Signora Madeline Vesey Neroni Stanhope represents the exotic and cosmopolitan. Madeline, the narrator tells us, went to Italy when she
was seventeen and made the most of her great beauty in the saloons and operas of Milan. Referring to the Stanhope family, Mr. Harding declares, “they certainly do look more like foreigners than English people, but I dare say they are none the worse for that” (153). Harding’s words indicate a bit of uncertainty about those who possess a cosmopolitan outlook and reflects what Anderson calls Victorian “ambiguity” about kinds of distance like cosmopolitanism. Nineteenth-century writing on the latter subject, when it was “not warning against the dangers to national cohesion, was naively optimistic: cosmopolitanism was typically seen as an ideal of self-cultivation enabled by European travel and cultural exchange” (Anderson 90). Such an international lifestyle surely played a role in the development of Madeline’s wit.

Madeline Neroni’s wit primarily functions to expose and deflate the pretensions of the residents of Barchester, many of whom make easy targets because of their professed high moral and religious purposes. Not only does the signora’s wit take the form of wordplay and keen intellectual perception, but it almost always ends in her audible laughter (Schaub). As Karen C. Gindele notes, “laughter’s meaning comes from its sound” (142). Laughter involves a kind of physical “seizure, a rapture” for the laughor, and it also places the hearer in a passive position (Gindele 142-3). Thus, Madeline’s loud laughter is another component of the transgressive nature of her wit. When the signora is first introduced to Barchester society at Mrs. Proudie’s reception at the palace, it is not long before we hear the sounds of Madeline’s laughter aimed at Mrs. Proudie. Ethelbert (Bertie) Stanhope, Madeline’s brother, accidentally pushes his disabled sister’s sofa, on which she is carried around, into Mrs. Proudie, destroying part of the latter’s dress. Mrs. Proudie’s rage and Bertie’s mock apologies move the signora to laugh at first “not loud indeed, but yet audibly,” thereby offending her hostess (86). It is when Mrs. Proudie
attempts to prevent Mr. Slope from showering attentions upon Madeline that the latter laughs so
that the entire house vibrates.

By this point in the narrative, Trollope’s narrator has developed Mrs. Proudie’s character
to the extent that readers judge her to be, at the very least, unlikable. Furthermore, she is an
enemy of the characters with whom we are supposed to most sympathize with (Dr. Grantly and
his party). Therefore, we condone—even cheer on—Madeline’s appreciation of the comic
during this episode. Mrs. Proudie scolds the signora, telling her that she (Mrs. Proudie) is
“always equally averse to impropriety of conduct of every description” (94). The abundance of
modifiers here (always, equally, and every) further reveals Mrs. Proudie’s inflexibility and even
fanaticism. The narrator makes it clear that Mrs. Proudie, despite her lecture, has lost this round
with the signora, whose laughter has shaken the entire palace.

Madeline uses her wit as a tool against men as well as women, including the occasion
when she sets about to expose the discrepancy between what the manipulative villain Mr. Slope
practices and what he preaches by making him her plaything. In a chapter ironically titled “A
Love Scene,” Slope declares his love to Madeline despite the fact that she is a married woman
and despite his ongoing campaign to win the hand and money of Eleanor Bold, thereby
reinforcing his falseness. She accordingly “jeered at him, ridiculed his love” in order to expose
the truth of his hypocrisy. This unsuccessful love scene ends with Madeline Neroni again
laughing loudly.

However, a fine line exists between exposing and wounding through wit as we see when,
toward the end of the novel, the signora uses laughter to put down Slope once and for all, this
time in front of an audience rather than in private, as she usually does. To avenge Mr. Thorne, at
whom Slope had been laughing, Madeline Neroni begins questioning the clergyman about his
forthcoming marriage to Eleanor Bold, knowing all the while that Eleanor likely turned him down. The signora’s pressing insistence that Slope reveal before Mr. Thorne, Mr. Arabin and her sister Charlotte how Eleanor replied to his proposal is an example of what Freud, in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, called a “hostile” joke, a type of the “tendentious” joke (115). James R. Kincaid notes that Madeline Stanhope “utilizes a kind of Freudian humor to transform her pain to clever parody and continual witty victories” without expanding on what he means by Freudian humor. A hostile joke, Freud explains, aims at:

> enlisting [a] third person against our enemy. By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him—to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter. (122)

By this point, Slope is the signora’s enemy: “She was tired of Mr. Slope and wanted to get rid of him,” and so she uses a more aggressive kind of wit than before (448). Her questions make Slope appear ridiculous but even more so than usual because “there sat Mr. Thorne, laughing silently. There stood his old antagonist, Mr. Arabin, gazing at him with all his eyes” (447). Thus, Madeline Neroni’s laugh is a sign of her agency and “represents a rebellion against. . .authority” (Freud 125). The hostile joke can be directed, Freud says, against people and institutions or, in Slope’s case as a clergyman, “people in their capacity as vehicles of institutions” (Freud 129).

Though Madeline’s wit is always transgressive, especially in contrast to the narrator, it is significant that in this scene her wit is not as detached as it usually is, but personal and hostile. Trollope argues that even hostile wit has its place, though it must be used sparingly and balanced by warm, sympathetic humor. If there is always a danger for wit to become sterile, in this instance, it is cleansing because it deflates Slope’s self importance. From this point on, he is no longer a credible preacher of duty and morality in Barchester, as Madeline’s merry “ha, ha, ha” attests when the bishop’s chaplain makes his exit (448).
Madeline Neroni is suspect in Barchester for several reasons including the fact that she is separated from her husband, boldly flirts with unmarried and married men alike, and has a witty nature. Many Victorians felt that one who laughs too much runs the risk of being “guilty of social impropriety,” especially women whose laughter potentially could be construed as orgasmic (Martin 8). Indeed, the signora’s wit, her sexuality, and perhaps most interestingly her disability, are all intertwined in complex ways. The narrator implies that Madeline was in an abusive marriage by sharing that six months after having married Paulo Neroni, an Italian, Madeline ends up back at her father’s house, a cripple. Though unable to walk, Madeline is still a great beauty, and it is little wonder, says the narrator, “that with such charms still glowing in her face, and with such deformity destroying her figure, she should resolve to be seen, but only to be seen reclining on a sofa” (67). In spite of, and even perhaps because of, her disability, the signora wants to be seen and admired. The narrator describes her goal as follows:

Her ambition was to create a sensation, to have parsons at her feet, seeing that the manhood of Barchester consisted mainly of parsons, and to send, if possible, every parson’s wife home with a green fit of jealousy. She did not doubt of success, for she had always succeeded; but one thing was absolutely necessary, she must secure the entire use of a sofa. (76-77)

The signora takes care to display herself on the sofa, which she makes the “bed of a seductress,” in an advantageous way so that her disability becomes a crucial component of her allure (Wiesenfarth 52).

In her helpful overview of recent criticism on the disabled figure in Victorian literature, Julia Miele Rodas observes that Victorian scholarship has typically “overlooked, dismissed, or treated disabled figures in Victorian texts with scant attention,” also noting that few scholars have given full consideration to Madeline Neroni’s role in Barchester Towers (373). Using Madeline Neroni as her introductory example, Rodas correctly emphasizes that instead of
“overcoming” her disability, Madeline uses it to her advantage (372). The mystery surrounding Madeline’s disability gives her power and a sort of hold over the curious residents of Barchester, who long to understand the mystery under Madeline’s skirt, which becomes a topic of conversation more than once. The narrator informs us that after her fall, Madeline “injured the sinews of her knee,” so that she could only move, painfully and gracelessly, by dragging herself along (66). Barchester gossips, however, pass along more sensational accounts, including the bishop’s daughter who misinforms her father by telling him that the signora has no legs, leaving her father “dying with curiosity about the mysterious lady and her legs” (79). And later, Mrs. Proudie wrongly informs the countess that the signora has only one leg. All of these questions and comments about Madeline’s legs signal curiosity about her sex life and awareness of her erotic potential. For many in Barchester, Madeline’s sexual experience (she is a single mother to an eight-year-old daughter) are negative functions of her foreignness. Still, most of the male characters, including the narrator himself, consider themselves to be a little in love with Madeline, and at least one of these characters always can be found near her sofa during the two public parties she attends.

I would like to add to Rodas’ reading of the productiveness of Madeline’s disability by noting that Madeline is allowed greater license with her wit because she is disabled. Her disability and the sofa on which she is carried around by men is another, physical separation between her and the residents of Barchester. Her position on the couch literally makes her an observer and a member of an audience at Barchester functions, thus apparently licensing her witty judgment. Though her disability entails physical limitations, her use of comedy helps level the playing field and even gives her an edge. For example, after Mrs. Proudie ceases to scold the

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8 Cindy LaCom, on the other hand, reads Madeline’s disability more negatively, arguing that Trollope “(re)inscribed a negative attitude by associating female disability with diseased female sexuality and suspect morality” (190).
signora at the bishop’s reception, the former proceeds to walk away. Though the “signora
couldn’t follow her, or she certainly would have,” she is able to follow Mrs. Proudie with her
laughter, the sound of which resounds through the house for everyone to hear (94). We can
conclude that Mrs. Proudie would not allow anyone else to get away with such impertinence.

Finally, Madeline’s desire to “wound the hearts of men” in Barchester by making them
fall in love with her and then laughing at their folly is her way of taking revenge upon the abuse
done to her by a man, her husband (69). Madeline Neroni’s laughter also is a positive channel
for the lingering emotional and physical pain that might otherwise threaten to overwhelm her. In
showing that Madeline’s wit cannot be separated from her hidden earnestness, Trollope manages
to garner reader sympathy even for her. The linkage between Madeline’s wit and her abusive
marriage ultimately shows us that her wit is power, but only as compensation for her
powerlessness.

In *Barchester Towers*, the two chief risks of Madeline Neroni’s witty distance are
cynicism and insincerity. Amanda Anderson notes that other potential disadvantages of a
cultivated distance include moral insensitivity, dislocation, alienation, and indifference. One of
Trollope’s contemporaries, Charles Dickens, guards against persistent detachment in his novels,
Anderson argues, through an “impulse to affirm the ties of love, community, and nation” (76).
Similarly, Trollope prevents Signora Neroni’s detachment from collapsing into cynicism by
having her bring about the happy resolution of the love plot. Understandably, however, cynicism
does, at first, threaten to overwhelm the signora (as it might the readers), especially regarding the
subject of love and marriage. When her sister Charlotte encourages their brother to marry
Eleanor Bold, Madeline sneers at Charlotte’s “sentimentality,” stating that “marriage means
tyranny on one side, and deceit on the other” (126).
However, it is Madeline’s well-intentioned interference into the Reverend Francis Arabin and Eleanor Bold’s relationship that saves Madeline from being consumed by the “real feeling in the scorn and satire which she spoke of love and marriage generally” earlier in the novel (251). Importantly, Arabin’s sincerity checks Madeline’s wit, often a mask for her insincerity, another form of detachment. Arabin, like Slope, finds the signora’s beauty intoxicating, and she initially believes that in the former she has found another object of her laughter. But Arabin, unlike his fellow clergyman, refuses to whisper empty nothings into her ear. Before Arabin reveals his truthfulness and sincerity, the signora guesses that he loves Eleanor and proceeds to tease him, telling the reverend that she will try to help the match along:

It is needless to say that the signora was not very sincere in her offer. She was never sincere on such subjects. She never expected others to think her so. Such matters were her playthings, her billiard-table, her hounds and hunters, her waltzes and polkas, her picnics and summer-day excursions. (367-8)

In other words, Madeline’s witty insincerities initially act as substitutes for the activities she physically is unable to do (dancing, etc.). Refusing to flatter falsely his current companion, Arabin responds to Madeline’s words with surprising and refreshing “earnestness” (368) and “facile openness” (371) as he acknowledges his attachment to Eleanor in so many words. In effect, Arabin forces Madeline to become sincere and involved, both signs of engagement rather than detachment. Madeline “felt that she never could induce Mr. Arabin to make protestations to her that were not true, or to listen to nonsense that was mere nonsense” (371). Significantly, it is at this moment that she vows to “do a good-natured act for once in her life”; contrary to her declaration to Slope that she has no heart, the signora shows that she does by appreciating and encouraging the true love she witnesses between Arabin and Eleanor.

The Reverend Francis Arabin, like the signora, is witty, but his is a more subdued wit that he cultivated for his audience of Oxford peers. Prior to coming to Barchester, Arabin was a
fellow at Oxford where he combined his love of comedy with his religious calling; for the Tractarian cause, he “concocted verses, for it he made speeches, for it he scintillated the brightest sparks for his quiet wit” (169). The narrator describes Arabin’s wit in detail and implicitly contrasts it to Madeline’s:

Though always in earnest, yet his earnestness was always droll. . .He had failed, failed in his own opinion as well as that of others when others came to know him, if he could not reduce the arguments of his opponents to an absurdity, and conquer both by wit and reason. To say that this object was ever to raise a laugh, would be most untrue. . .A joke that required to be laughed at was, with him, not worth uttering. He could appreciate by a keener sense than that of his ears that success of his wit. (168-69)

Clearly, wit here is associated with reason, earnestness, and the intellect rather than the more emotional humor. Though Madeline too is witty and uses her intellect and words to advantage, her main characteristic, as we have seen, is ever-resounding laughter, while, as the quotation above shows, Arabin disapproves of laughter (“A joke that required to be laughed at was, with him, not worth uttering.”). He prefers to use his eyes rather than his ears to test that success of his wit. One reason for these differences is that Arabin’s subject matter is religion, at which many Victorians were cautious not to laugh. There had always been a fear that “unchecked comedy had as its disguised goal the putting of holy matters into disrepute” (Martin 9). Yet Trollope needs for Madeline to perform the necessary task of exposing, through laughter, the pretensions and vanities of certain characters.

Mr. Arabin needs the signora’s match-making skills because his quiet wit often leads to misunderstandings between him and Eleanor. Ultimately, Trollope shows that the witty, intellectual celibate fellow must learn humor before he can become a married man. If wit is associated with the head and humor with the heart, then Arabin must learn to express earnestly

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9 In Chapter 4, I discuss in detail the necessity for a former college fellow to learn to navigate courtship rituals after accepting his first living in a country town.
the feelings of his heart. Previously a fellow at Oxford, Arabin had given his life, up to this point, to his career, but he begins to realize how unpalatable his bachelor existence is, and how much he wants a wife and children. The narrator assures us that he can have both if he balances his wit with humor:

It has been said that Mr. Arabin was a man of pleasantry; and it may be thought that such a state of mind as that described [in Vol. II, chapter 1], would be antagonistic to humour. But surely such is not the case. Wit is the outward mental casing of the man, and has no more to do with the inner mind of thoughts and feelings than have the rich brocaded garments of the priest at the altar. (my emphasis 178)

In public, Arabin sparkles with wit while on the inside he pines for a family like his friend Granty’s. Thus Trollope argues that wit is the side we show to others but it does not necessarily reveal our inner feelings. Because Mr. Arabin is more adept at revealing his wit than his feelings, Eleanor Bold has difficulty making out his character and detecting his love for her.

While Arabin and Eleanor stay as guests of Archdeacon Grantly at Plumstead Episcopi, they quickly become friends, conversing easily with one another. Eleanor immediately notices both to her surprise and pleasure, that his conversation is different from other clergymen. She believes these men are usually interested merely in “power” or “income”; Mr. Arabin, however, shows “quiet earnestness” regarding larger issues of “truth” (185). Still, after Eleanor questions him about why clergymen are always fighting, Arabin banters with her. Eleanor only “half followed” what he said, though she “caught his meaning” (186). Hence, the widow Bold is both attracted to and confused by Arabin’s wit. Wit is not enough to win a woman like Eleanor. To her, Mr. Arabin “was always gently playful. Could she have seen his brow once clouded she might have learnt to love him” (213). While a clouded brow does not necessarily indicate humor, it does show Eleanor’s desire to see a degree of seriousness and engagement in Arabin.

Because Mr. Arabin’s wit leads to misunderstandings, Signora Neroni eventually must pave the way for this couple. Once Eleanor and Arabin have fallen in love, the road to courtship
and marriage is not easy. When Dr. Grantly mistakenly accuses Eleanor of planning to marry Mr. Slope, she blames Arabin for putting the idea into Grantly’s head. It appears to her that “Mr. Arabin in his jeering, sarcastic way had suggested the odious match” (272). Granted, Trollope characterizes Eleanor here as rash and unjust. Nevertheless, it is Arabin’s wit—what Eleanor perceives of as his jeering, sarcastic way—that is partly responsible for her jumping to the wrong conclusion. When the clergyman attempts to defend himself to Eleanor, he ultimately is unable to utter in “plain language” the question on his mind: whether or not Eleanor can love him. Arabin’s awkwardness as a wooer further adds to the confusion between them. Eleanor nevertheless witnesses a brief moment of seriousness on his part in this chapter, and it dawns on her that she is loved, though the widow is not yet ready to forgive him.

Consequently, the now less detached, but nonetheless more experienced and cosmopolitan, signora beckons Eleanor to her and openly states that Arabin loves her (Eleanor), the kind of straightforward declaration that Arabin himself is able to make. Madeline realizes that Arabin hides his inner feelings telling Eleanor, “he is not like other men. You must not expect him to come to you with vows and oaths and pretty presents” (440). Though Eleanor is shocked at her neighbor’s bluntness, she nevertheless intuits that the signora’s friendship is “real” (sincere) and decides to take her advice if the time comes and answer Arabin’s proposal with a clear, unambiguous “yea” (439). Arabin and Madeline’s friendship, then, turns out to be mutually beneficial. His sincerity thwarts her descent into cynicism and leads her to become sincerely interested in helping him marry the woman he loves. Madeline, the most sensual character in the book, accordingly prods the intellectual clergyman to cultivate humor. In other words, sexuality puts reason in its proper place. Robert Polhemus similarly observes that Madeline teaches Arabin “to heed his longings for pleasure, the flesh, and relationship” (Comic
Finally, not only does Trollope show the need to balance wit and humor, but he also distinguishes between kinds of wit. In this instance, loud laughter like the signora’s is more constructive and decipherable than Arabin’s quiet wit.

Scholars rightly see Arabin as falling in the middle of the ecclesiastical spectrum, with conservative Archdeacon Grantly positioned to his right and the liberal Proudies to his left, and thus Arabin’s acceptance of the deanship acts as a sort of reconciliation. As Wiesenfarth observes, Arabin, like Trollope, is the “advanced conservative liberal” and the “man in the middle” (49). Through Arabin, society will be on a course of “gradualism and prudent change” (Wiesenfarth 49). Similarly, Robert Polhemus describes Arabin as being Trollope’s “key figure in achieving finally a harmony between worldliness and idealism” (Changing World 47). It is also important to stress that this future leader uniquely combines humor and wit, which Trollope implies will allow him to effectively cope in an age of slow but steady reform.

Eleanor’s decision to marry Arabin, meanwhile, can be seen as representing her more mature and tempered view of the men in her life. Fairly early in the novel, Eleanor expresses fatigue at the “respectable humdrum wearisome mode of living” of clergymen, and shows an interest in “foreigners” (non-Barchester natives) saying that after all, “people in the outer world, who had lived in Italy, London, or elsewhere, need not necessarily be regarded as atrocious and abominable” (181). But Trollope strongly implies that neither the cosmopolitan Bertie Stanhope from Italy nor Mr. Slope, who comes from London and returns there by the end of the novel, are suitable for Eleanor. Though Arabin originally is not from Barchester, his training at Oxford shows his allegiance to the thinking of many Barchester residents. Further, by having Eleanor marry Arabin, a man who proves capable of not only wit and humor but earnestness as well, rather than Bertie, the perpetual caricaturist, or Slope, who is unable to throw a joke back at
Madeline at the end of the novel in order to save face, Trollope again connects a successful romance with a proper blend of wit and humor.

Many critics claim that the Stanhope family’s removal from Barchester for Italy at the end of the novel is a collective punishment. James R. Kincaid, for example, says of the Stanhopes: “once their job is done, these negative agents must be gotten rid of” (604). Kincaid also notes that they do “a job which the morally approved and passive cannot handle” (604). However, as I have argued, we cannot simply dismiss Madeline Stanhope as “bad”; rather, her transgressive wit is needed alongside the narrator’s sympathetic humor to ensure that there will be progress, but not too much, in Barchester. Furthermore, an often overlooked detail at the end of the novel, the arrival of a letter from Madeline, contradicts the idea that the Stanhopes have been expunged completely, at least as far as Madeline is concerned. Eleanor Bold, keeping a promise to the signora, writes to that lady to inform her of her (Eleanor’s) marriage. In return Eleanor receives a “bright, charming, and witty” reply (498). This “witty” letter indicates that Signora Neroni’s laughter has been quieted but not silenced.

The signora’s wit still plays a role in Barchester when she is absent because her laughter has, to a certain degree, become infectious. For example, even the shy, subdued Mr. Harding, the moral center of the book, brings “forth little quiet jokes” at the conclusion of the novel because his heart is finally at ease (489). Earlier, Mr. Harding despaired at the modern idea (of the enemy camp) that one must laugh at tradition: “We must laugh at everything that is established. Let the joke be ever so bad, ever so untrue to the principles of joking; nevertheless we must laugh—or else beware the [rubbish] cart” (103). Mr. Slope’s removal, Mr. Arabin’s acceptance of the dean position, and Eleanor’s marriage to the new dean all largely represent a continuation of the norm in Barchester, with one exception: Barchester residents have learned to
laugh. The establishment has become something not to mock, but to laugh joyfully and thankfully about. Clearly modified (soft) sounds of comedy will continue to be heard in Barchester.

Though we rejoice at the fitting and jovial ending of *Barchester Towers*, we must not forget that, because of the efforts of the narrator, this is exactly the ending we expected all along. The narrator consistently assures readers that things will work out as they should, as when he tells us that Eleanor will marry neither Mr. Slope nor Bertie Stanhope. As I mentioned earlier, the narrator desires to move along with the reader in full confidence. Trollope’s narrator (who in this passage refers to himself as “novelist”) wants readers to avoid the emotional rollercoaster created by some of his fellow authors who “raise false hopes and false fears” and “give rise to expectations which are never to be realized” (127). These writers often seem to promise “delightful horrors” but in the end deliver “commonplace realities,” while Trollope’s narrator consistently provides the latter (127). The narrator’s aesthetic reveals a larger truth about the comic country town novel, namely that much of the comic potential results from the fact that the reader is confident that there will be a happy ending.\(^\text{10}\) The narrator ensures that, as the novel progresses, our distance diminishes and our engagement increases, allowing us to feel like a member of the small community and, as the narrator calls us early on, a “friend” to the characters.

Reading *Barchester Towers* in light of Amanda Anderson’s *The Powers of Distance* helps us move beyond a mere discussion of Victorian comic ideology to understand the tendency of mid-Victorian writers and thinkers to stress a balance between detached wit and sympathetic humor, corresponding with what Anderson calls their ambivalence about cultivating a

\(^{10}\) George Eliot’s provincial novels prove to be the exception to this rule.
progressive critical detachment while pursing many intellectual projects. Trollope is particularly illustrative because the comic structure he uses in *Barchester Towers* parallels his preference for gradualism in politics. His comedy reinforces the basic liberal position of wanting steady but slow reforms.
CHAPTER 3
PRESERVING THE COUNTRY TOWN: GASKELL’S HUMOROUS OLD MAIDS

“all the kindly old maids who thronged the country towns of England” (281).

Wives and Daughters

Though the mid-Victorian novel typically is about courtship, the old maid¹ is a central and celebrated figure in Elizabeth Gaskell’s “Knutsford stories.”² The old maids are the backbone of the country town rather than stock characters or mere “redundant women”³ and, accordingly, reader focus shifts from the lovers (as in the courtship plot) to what is going on around the lovers. I will add to discussions of Gaskell’s positive portrayal of the spinster by showing that these characters act as preservers of the community. In Cranford (1851-53) and two lesser-known works, My Lady Ludlow (1858) and Mr. Harrison’s Confessions (1851), Gaskell’s spinsters use humor to mediate change and defuse perceived threats to the country town.⁴ But though their jokes often seem to target marriage, a means of social cohesion but also an agent of change, the jokes imply uneasiness over issues other than marriage, such as preserving class hierarchies and exposing gender inequalities. Far from simply joking about something they do not have (marriage), Gaskell’s spinsters make jokes that reveal larger questions about how to maintain village unity.

¹ Gaskell uses the terms “old maid,” and “spinster” interchangeably, neither of which she is using negatively. I too will be using both terms.

² Gaskell’s fictional country towns generally are equated by scholars with Knutsford, the village in which the author was raised. Her stories of village life, therefore, are sometimes referred to as her “Knutsford stories” and include the three novellas I discuss here, and also Wives and Daughters and Cousin Phillis (see Gillooly 245, n. 3).


⁴ Mr. Harrison’s Confessions and My Lady Ludlow often are categorized as novellas, and though Cranford generally is considered a novel, Audrey Jaffe points out that Cranford, because it is “loose and episodic,” has its “generic affiliations more with the sketch or short story than with the novel” (47).
As befits their investment in the community, the spinsters can often be found gossiping about what is going on in the country town.\textsuperscript{5} In her study of gossip, Patricia Meyer Spacks argues that gossip is a model of the realist novel, both in its “analogizing the exchange between narrator and reader” and because of the focus of both on minutiae (21-2). Gossip, Spacks observes, deals with “what is every day acted, with the old and familiar” (136) and is the “loving contemplation of detail” (20). But despite gossip’s emphasis on the trivial, and despite the fact that Gaskell’s spinsters typically, and amusingly, spread inaccurate gossip, I will show that it nevertheless resolves important issues in the community. Gaskell therefore privileges the trivial, crediting it with holding the community together, at the same time that she allows the old maid to become the heroine of her mock-epic novellas about everyday life in a country town.

In her role as chronicler of Cranford, Hanbury, and Duncombe (the respective towns of the novellas I focus on in this chapter), Gaskell’s goal is much the same as that of her maidenly characters. In “The Last Generation of England,” an essay written for an American publication in 1849 and containing much of the material that would be included in \textit{Cranford}, Gaskell explains to readers that she wishes to “put upon record some of the details of country town life” because, she says, even in small towns society is changing rapidly and much will appear “strange” though it occurred only in the preceding generation (161). Like her fictional old maids, then, Gaskell strives to preserve the country town, despite her realization that it is changing and that a certain amount of change is necessary. Her essay is made up of both what she has observed herself and what was “handed down to [her] by older relations”; hence, Gaskell\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{5} Compare Julia Prewitt Brown’s thesis about Miss Bates in Austen’s \textit{Emma}: “Miss Bates is perhaps the nearest symbol of Highbury; all classes join and cooperate in her, just as all gossip passes through her vacant mind. She is the repository of all that occurs and has occurred in Highbury” (112).
too is an agent of gossip, relishing and sharing with her readers the domestic and the trivial in hopes of keeping the character of an English country town forever alive in their minds.

Gaskell’s description of the country town in this essay includes a hierarchy of a typical town, including the landed gentry, the professional class, and a class of single or widowed ladies. We see this hierarchy most clearly if we look at My Lady Ludlow, Mr. Harrison’s Confessions, and Cranford together, a practice rarely performed by scholars. Lady Ludlow is a landed aristocrat, Mr. Harrison is a doctor, and the “Amazons” of Cranford are unmarried, middle-aged ladies. Though my focus in each of these texts will be the old maid, I want to look at these works as a whole because collectively Gaskell achieves her most thorough chronicle of an English country town. Wives and Daughters is, of course, a detailed portrait of country town life and the classes that comprise it, including the landed Cumnors, professionals like Mr. Gibson, and various townspeople. But Wives and Daughters nevertheless remains Molly Gibson’s story, while the novels I focus on in this chapter are unique because of their ensemble casts. The country town becomes, in effect, the main character in these works, much more so than in the comic country town novels of Oliphant or Eliot.

I will begin with Cranford not only because it is the most well-known and popular but also because it most fully deals with the class in which I am interested. Specifically, I focus on Miss Pole who is most apt to joke about marriage and is the first to spread gossip. Her joke about the marriage of Lady Glenmire and Mr. Hoggins reveals uneasiness about the disruption to Cranford’s strict class structure. Next, I will turn to the character of Miss Galindo in My Lady Ludlow who, in contrast to Miss Pole’s rejection of change, uses change to maintain village harmony and continuity. Finally, I examine Mr. Harrison’s Confessions, a story that, though

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6 Though titled Cranford, the 2007 BBC film adaptation includes plot from Mr. Harrison’s Confessions and My Lady Ludlow as well.
narrated by the bachelor Mr. Harrison, is continually interrupted by the gossip and jokes of the unmarried ladies of Duncombe, revealing their desire to control information so as to filter change in the town.

Because of their habit of spreading false information (and, hence, not always knowing what is going on) and inability to understand the full force of their own jokes, Gaskell’s old maids clearly are not only agents of humor but are also objects of a gentle humor. Readers may periodically laugh at the spinsters, but Gaskell discourages a detached and superior position, instead encouraging our admiration and sympathy for their efforts on behalf of the entire town. Scholars of Cranford, however, often imply that single female characters cannot lead satisfying lives and be objects of humor.7 Coral Lansbury, for example, rightly argues that Cranford not only illustrates that the middle-aged are capable of “deep and enduring love,” but that Gaskell convincingly shows that single women can lead just as happy lives as married ones (87).

However, Lansbury continues, “If there is comedy, it is not at the expense of the characters, but of the reader’s prejudices” (87). Nina Auerbach, meanwhile, stresses that the “Amazons” are “beyond the years of waiting” and “in possession of themselves,” which she says reminds us of their “stability and strength” (79), comments that may make it easy to overlook the humor directed at these women. Eileen Gillooly, in contrast, thoroughly analyzes the many sources of humor in Cranford, concluding that the narrator, Mary, is the “generative source” of the novel’s humor (130). Though Mary recognizes the foibles of the Cranford ladies, she is also fond of them, accounting for the fact that the humor becomes “increasingly protective” (Gillooly 149).8 Rather than focusing on the narrator’s view of the Cranfordians, I will emphasize the reader’s

7 Put another way, Gillooly observes that critical thought often “stumbles” (245 note) over Gaskell’s use of the mock heroic, a “textual impulse to make fun of the very women whom the novel celebrates” (130).

8 Susan Snider Lanser characterizes Mary as a “singular’ communal narrator” because though Gaskell employs the syntax of a first-person narrative, the “narrator’s identity becomes communal” (241).
view which, like Mary’s, is balanced between amusement and sympathy. It is this lack of cruel humor and presence of a caring humor, gendered female, which I suggest helped make *Cranford* so popular throughout the Victorian period.

If, as writer, Gaskell strove to preserve the country town, it is worth considering why she assigned this same role to the old maid in her fiction; in other words, why is the old maid uniquely qualified to be caretaker of the country town? One answer can be found in “The Last Generation of England” where Gaskell describes the “old ladies” of the town as “living hoards of family tradition and old custom” (166). These matrons accumulate and carefully guard what is necessary for the preservation of the community for future generations (namely traditions and customs). Furthermore, in Gaskell’s oeuvre, spinsters usually are daughters of the clergy, entitling them to respect and a significant role in the parish. Deborah and Matty Jenkyns in *Cranford* and Miss Galindo in *My Lady Ludlow* are all daughters of clergymen (the Miss Brownings’ father in *Wives and Daughters* was a vicar). Though after the death of their father, Deborah and Miss Matty had to give up living in the “Rectory, and keeping three maids and a man,” they continue to live “genteelly” (59), and because Miss Matty is “the rector’s daughter” (62), she is always high on the list of ladies to be invited to Cranford parties. Thus, as daughters of the clergy, spinsters and old maids naturally play a central role in the community, and because they tend to have been born and bred in the country town, they are experts concerning the history and customs of the place. Finally, because they are unmarried, spinsters presumably spend more time and energy considering village affairs than do young men and women wrapped up in themselves and their courtship.

Though Miss Matty Jenkyns is often considered to be the most “representative” (Gillooly 146) of the Cranford ladies, I wish to focus primarily on Miss Pole, who is the most vocal
opponent of marriage despite her own obvious inclination for the marriage state. With the air of one who has made up her mind about the “nature of life and the world,” the spinster Miss Pole frequently warns young people against matrimony and claims to be an expert on men saying, “my father was a man, and I know the sex pretty well” (96). Miss Pole is funny because she is so vocal about not wanting to marry, though the narrator gives us not-so-subtle hints of her tremendous desire to become a wife. For example, Mary suspects that Miss Pole had given “very vigorous chase” to Mr. Hayter, the rector, because now she has a dread of having her name coupled with his (88). For his part, the old bachelor Mr. Hayter is afraid of “matrimonial reports getting out about him as any girl of eighteen” and does all he can to avoid the Cranford ladies (88). And after Peter Jenkyns returns home to Cranford and begins spending time with the widow Mrs. Jamieson (in an attempt to reconcile her and the newly married Hogginses), Miss Pole worries that Peter wants to marry Mrs. Jamieson and expresses her opinion that there are other ladies who would have been better choices, prompting the narrator to say, “I think she must have had some one who was unmarried in her head” (158).

Yet Miss Pole’s negative remarks and jokes about marriage do not derive from a jealous wish of being married herself; rather, I argue that her joke about the marriage of Lady Glenmire to Mr. Hoggins, the town surgeon, reveals uneasiness about their breach of the clearly defined class structure in Cranford. When Miss Pole learns of the impending marriage, she quips:

‘She [Lady Glenmire] has married for an establishment, that’s it. I suppose she takes the surgery with it,’ said Miss Pole, with a dry little laugh at her own joke. But, like many people who think they have made a severe and sarcastic speech, which yet is clever of its kind, she began to relax in her grimness from the moment when she made the allusion to the surgery. (115)

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9 In the next chapter, I discuss in detail the comedy surrounding the middle-aged bachelor clergyman’s fear of marriage.
Eileen Gillooly briefly remarks on this scene, noting that Miss Pole’s joke allows her to “sidestep pain and frustration” and that the joke allows the narrative to avoid grimness (126). But if the narrative avoids grimness, Miss Pole relaxes in hers, raising the question why she is grim in the first place? The “allusion to the surgery” is the key to answering this question. Miss Pole’s joke is funny because Lady Glenmire, a “Baron’s widow” (68) and a “peeress” (114) certainly is not marrying for an establishment by attaching herself to Mr. Hoggins, who the Cranford ladies think is “coarse” (63). In fact, it is quite the opposite, as Miss Pole is well aware; Lady Glenmire is choosing to marry down, much to the dismay of Miss Pole and her neighbors. She also chooses to drop her title, in effect cutting the “aristocracy to become a Hoggins!” (143). 10

It is not surprising that a Glenmire/Hoggins pairing should cause such an uproar in Cranford given the fact that, from the beginning, the Cranford ladies are confused about the level of gentility of both families, neither fitting neatly into the Cranford social scale. The most aristocratic lady of Cranford and the enforcer of the town’s “strict code of gentility” (64), Mrs. Jamieson dislikes Mr. Hoggins because of his loud “voice, his complexion, his boots, smelling of the stable, and himself, smelling of drugs” (115). When Mrs. Fitz-Adams, his widowed sister, returns to Cranford after many years away, it is “not at all a settled thing” whether the ladies should call on a sister of Mr. Hoggins; eventually, thinking Fitz-Adams an aristocratic-sounding name, everyone but Mrs. Jamieson begins to call upon her (64). The Cranford ladies have the opposite problem when they hear of Lady Glenmire’s arrival in town; believing the peeress to be much above them in rank, Miss Pole worries about what to call her (Your Ladyship? My lady?) (69). The point temporarily is moot when Mrs. Jamieson asks her neighbors not to call upon

10 Though she acknowledges that gossip allows the Cranfordians to assert their “unity” (189), Patricia Meyers Spacks also argues that because these women lack “money and occupation,” they “rely on social differentiation as substance for talk” (185), exemplifying gossip as a “resource of the deprived and subordinated” (186). I suggest that focusing on the spinster’s motives (preserving community) more so than their means (practicing a strict code of gentility), allows them to be more laudable.
Lady Glenmire, Mrs. Jamieson wanting the latter to think she is visited only by county families. And when the Cranford ladies are finally allowed to visit Lady Glenmire, they are surprised to find she is “poor” and pleased to see how down to earth she is (76). From the beginning, then, new arrivals in town from the Hoggins and Glenmire families upset the “code of gentility” so near and dear to the hearts of Cranford spinsters, foreshadowing the future union between the two families.

The marriage between Lady Glenmire and Mr. Hoggins is also foreshadowed by Miss Pole’s remark about Lady Glenmire’s credulity, which Miss Pole connects to her having been married. When the “great Cranford panic,” caused by supposed violence and robberies, is waning, widowed Lady Glenmire suggest that the “robbery” of Mr. Hoggins at his door was no more than theft by a cat, leading the contradicted Miss Pole to retort: “it argued great natural credulity in a woman if she could not keep herself from being married” (106). Lady Glenmire’s not having been able to keep herself from being married once suggests (to readers, though not to characters) that she likely could be persuaded into another such union. This interchange further reveals that Lady Glenmire is well-informed about Mr. Hoggins’ affairs. But if marriage makes one credulous, remaining unmarried (like most of the Cranfordians) ensures one will remain incredulous. In Miss Pole’s eyes, Lady Glenmire is gullible for believing what the former calls Mr. Hoggins’ “vamped-up story about a neck of mutton and a pussy” (106); however, in actuality, it is Miss Pole’s version of the story that is concocted and outrageous. Gaskell directs humor at Miss Pole in this instance, realizing that credulity is not always such a bad thing.

Regarding the juxtaposed events of the panic and the announcement of the marriage of Lady Glenmire to Mr. Hoggins, Miss Pole ironically is very credulous of sensational stories generated by the panic but incredulous about the more realist, mundane account of the
impending marriage. By linking the panic and the marriage, Gaskell slyly suggests that, in Cranford, marrying outside one’s class is much more of a cause for panicking than are robberies. Miss Pole scarcely can make herself comprehensible when being first, as always, to tell the marriage news to her friends: “Lady Glenmire is to marry— is to be married, I mean— Lady Glenmire— Mr. Hoggins— Mr. Hoggins is going to marry Lady Glenmire!” (114). Miss Pole’s neighbors equally are unprepared for a marriage between a peeress and a country doctor, as Mary makes clear when she observes that they surely were “blind and deaf to what was going on around [them]” and that she had noticed no “sign of the times” (115). But Miss Pole’s failure to guess this outcome is more humorous given that her neighbors consider her a kind of “prophetess” with the ability to foresee events, “although she did not like to disturb her friends by telling them her foreknowledge” (113).  

Despite her ill success as a prophetess, Miss Pole nevertheless succeeds in being a heroine in this mock-epic novella, both in the minds of Cranfordians and readers. It is Miss Pole who takes the lead in Cranford, being the first to both hear and spread news. Miss Pole’s neighbors think of her as a “heroine” (83, 95) because of all of the adventures she has. We learn that of all the ladies in Cranford, it is Miss Pole who is most likely to have had an adventure because of her habit of popping in and out of shops for “stray pieces of intelligence” (82). She even risks having a tooth extracted so that she can pump Mr. Hoggins for information. The two adventures which earn her the greatest respect from her neighbors are being first to see the magician Signor Brunoni, and flying from “that murderous gang,” who she thinks plans to rob her house (95). They also admire her courage when she complains about the “impudence” of Mrs. Jamieson’s snobbish servant Mr. Mulliner; while the other ladies are nervous in his august

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11 Earlier in the story, Miss Pole complains of men: “they have always foreseen events, though they never tell one for one’s warning before the events happen” (96), suggesting a connection between Miss Pole and men.
presence, Miss Pole “ventured on a small joke” to amuse the “sulky” servant (75). The narrator acknowledges that if Miss Pole had not been so “very genteel and prim,” her behavior might at times have been “considered impertinent” (82). Importantly, however, Gaskell does not ask us to see Miss Pole merely as an impertinent gossip. For the sake of Cranford, she has the nerve to do and say things that her neighbors don’t, and in the process of spreading news she links all of the residents of the town together through common concerns. Imelda Staunton, the actress who plays Miss Pole in the 2007 film adaptation, similarly observes in an online BBC Press Release that it is Miss Pole’s job to make sure everyone is informed, and “she is a thread through the whole piece, connecting stories and people.” Thus, in Cranford, the old maid is heroine of the mock epic.

Gaskell’s treatment of her material in Cranford is unique not only because she makes the marriage plot a minor one, but also because, although she allows reader sympathy to be with the lovers (Mr. Hoggins and Lady Glenmire), she continually diverts our attention away from them and toward the single women of Cranford. Our main interest stays with the spinsters. Looking back at Miss Pole’s joke about Lady Glenmire marrying for an establishment, we see that Miss Pole is not a successful ironist. Mary says that the joke is “clever of its kind,” but also compares Miss Pole with others who “think they have made a severe and sarcastic speech,” implying that she has not (my emphasis 115). In another sense, the joke fails because readers cannot share Miss Pole’s feeling of grimness at the announcement. Rather, we see how happy the lovers are, Lady Glenmire having the “flush of youth” and Mr. Hoggins looking “broad and radiant,” and applaud the match (117). Readers also are moved when we see kind and gentle Miss Matty becoming increasingly open to the pairing, noting that Lady Glenmire will be secure

12 In her examination of how Cranford resists a teleological narrative, Margaret Case Croskery observes that the “Glenmire/Hoggins courtship only gently taps the shoulders of Cranford’s narrative” (215).
in her home and husband, and also admitting that Mr. Hoggins is very “personable,” though his manners might not be refined and polished (127). While marrying outside of one’s class usually is a mistake that can lead to serious consequences in many Victorian novels (Trollope’s come to mind), no such disasters result from such a pairing in Cranford, allowing readers to maintain sympathy for the lovers.

Nevertheless, the impending marriage causes the ladies of Cranford to be uncertain about the future, not knowing whether Mrs. Jamieson, who is out of town at the time, will allow them to call upon Lady Glenmire in her less genteel position: they “looked into the darkness of futurity as a child gazes after a rocket up in the cloudy sky, full of wondering expectation of the rattle, the discharge, and the brilliant shower of sparks and light” (115). They are so befuddled by the marriage and how to handle it without Mrs. Jamieson that they simply choose not to handle it and, instead, “ignore the whole affair” (117). But, of course, Mrs. Jamieson is a snob who has no authority in the minds of readers; she is the primary enforcer of Cranford’s code of gentility, which Eileen Gillooly equates with “enforcement of class snobbery, a slavish devotion to rules, empty rituals, and archaic forms” (139). Even Miss Pole realizes the dangers of being too strict when she makes a comment that, at first, seems very uncharacteristic of her. Shortly after Miss Jenkyns dies taking clear knowledge of the “strict code of gentility” with her, Miss Pole says “‘As most of the ladies of good family in Cranford [are] elderly spinsters, or widows without children, if we d[o] not relax a little, and become less exclusive, by-and-by we sh[all] have no society at all’” (64). Miss Pole here realizes that some society is better than no society, taking a position of compromise essential for a preserver of the community, in contrast to the widowed Mrs. Jamieson who is too purist.
Just as Gaskell’s characters choose to ignore the marriage while Mrs. Jamieson is out of town, so does Gaskell opt to re-focus both characters and readers on Miss Matty’s economic loss because of the bank failure. Like the disruption to the Cranford class hierarchy represented by the marriage of Lady Glenmire to Mr. Hoggins, Miss Matty’s financial trouble also represents a threat to the continuity of the community, risking Miss Matty’s genteel status as the rector’s daughter. Given the threat to the community, it is no surprise that Miss Pole is the one to assemble several women of Cranford in a meeting in her drawing room to decide what each can do financially to ensure that Miss Matty maintains her genteel position. It is only when Miss Matty’s class position is secure (first through the tea shop and then through the return of Peter) that Gaskell reintroduces the love plot.

Heretofore, values (especially a strict class hierarchy) have been more important in Cranford than have relationships. It takes the return of Peter Jenkyns, an outsider, from India to show the ladies of Cranford, who have continued to ignore the Hogginses, that change is possible. The winds of change first start, though, with the return of Captain Brown’s daughter and her husband. The Gordons invite a range of Cranford inhabitants to a luncheon, from Mrs. Jamieson to Mrs. Fitz-Adams and “those Hogginses,” so-called by Mrs. Jamieson, showing the potential harmony that can exist among all members of society (157). Also responsible for ushering in change is Peter’s ability to propitiate Mrs. Jamieson at the assembly rooms by telling her fantastic stories to keep her awake long enough to make up with the Hogginses. Though punished as a young man by his father for his joking ways, Peter returns to his “old tricks” and uses humor as a way of bringing “peace to Cranford” (159). Just as Miss Pole turns to jokes when working to protect the community, so does Peter use them to allow his neighbors to regain their “old friendly sociability” (160). In managing to get Mrs. Hoggins and Mrs. Jamieson into
conversation, Peter ensures that relationships will be factored into the town’s values, in turn allowing Gaskell to emphasize the benefits of a small amount of change.

In contrast to Miss Pole who initially resists change in order to preserve Cranford, Miss Galindo, the witty village scold in *My Lady Ludlow*, uses change to maintain harmony and continuity in the village of Hanbury in the early nineteenth century. At first, Miss Galindo is as resistant to change in “orthodox, aristocratic, and agricultural Hanbury” as is the kind, gentle, though old-fashioned, Lady Ludlow, who presides over the village and wants it to remain as it has always been (239). As a wit, Miss Galindo uses her sharp tongue to joke about individuals who threaten the village with change, but as a scold and a gossip, she busies herself in village affairs and thereby learns the real merit of those she previously had been quick to label. Not only does Miss Galindo’s sense of humor finally allow her to accept change, but her gossipy nature enables her to spread and incorporate change into the community by providing a bridge between Lady Ludlow’s Hanbury Court and villagers. It is humor, then, that eases change as a mediator between old and new. Though Gaskell introduces the character of Miss Galindo late in *My Lady Ludlow*, readers, like the narrator Margaret Dawson, come to admire her and be guided by her opinions, realizing quickly that she is far from a “queer, abrupt, disagreeable, busy old maid” (250).

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13 *My Lady Ludlow* has been neglected by critics largely because of perceived structural weaknesses. Christine L. Krueger usefully describes the structure of the novel as being like a “set of Russian dolls” (171). Though containing multiple narrators, the bulk of *My Lady Ludlow* consists of Margaret Dawson’s reminiscences of her time as companion to Lady Ludlow. Within this story, Lady Ludlow narrates the tragic history of two young lovers during the French Revolution, taking up nearly a third of the novel, and interrupting the focus on the village of Hanbury. Edgar Wright summarizes scholarly critiques of *My Lady Ludlow*, in the process arguing that the theme of revolution ties the numerous stories together.

14 Despite criticism of *My Lady Ludlow*, scholars often praise Gaskell’s characterization of Miss Galindo. Gaskell appropriately introduces this character, the “precipitator of primary revolution,” immediately after Lady Ludlow’s story of the French Revolution (Cook 73). Among articles discussing Miss Galindo, Ruth McDowell Cook’s concentrates on the importance of women’s work in the tale and especially Miss Galindo’s many roles as “seamstress, nurse, teacher, single-mother and accountant/clerk” (69). Christine L. Krueger, meanwhile, considers
Like many of the Cranfordians, Miss Galindo is a poor, though genteel, middle-aged old maid who, unlike the ladies of Cranford, successfully uses her wit to advantage. Her motto is, “when everything goes wrong, one would give up breathing if one could not lighten one’s heart by a joke” (160). Miss Galindo puts this motto into practice when she happens upon a housewife chasing a duck, whom she calls “Miss Galindo,” out of her cottage, and learns that the housewife’s husband so named the duck because it is always “poking” itself where it is not wanted (161). As Margaret Dawson explains, though this would have been a “rebuff” to anyone else, it was “rather enjoyed than otherwise” by Miss Galindo (160-1). She then proceeds to hire the husband for a repair job and win him over by her “merry ways” and “sharp insight” (161), having skillfully turned a joke against herself into a means of empowerment. This male character’s conversion is representative: most of the townspeople eventually are won over by Miss Galindo and appreciate her efforts on their behalf. Furthermore, her tendency to lighten her heart with a joke during tough times allows her, as we will see, to process effectively the many changes facing Hanbury (160).

As the above anecdote illustrates, Miss Galindo’s occasional unpopularity stems from her habit of poking herself in other people’s business. Miss Galindo, however, embraces the role of scold and uses it to advantage. For example, Miss Galindo identifies the sewing she does for the village repository with the letter “X” because it stands for Xantippe, the wife of Socrates, who is a notorious scold (164). Because she does not have a husband to scold, Miss Galindo resorts to scolding villagers because she cannot bear to see things go wrong in the village. Thus, scolding is a sign of Miss Galindo’s deep involvement in the community. Though her meddling often annoys her servants and fellow villagers, Miss Galindo’s “turn for humor” (159) and witty

Miss Galindo to be one of the novel’s story tellers who hears and tells “stories in order to be part of a narrative community” (178).
speeches often amuse more than they irritate, according to the narrator. Though, as the narrator states, she may not always be popular, Miss Galindo would be much missed if she left the village, attesting to her essential role in Hanbury (160).

Not only is Miss Galindo a scold and a wit, but she also is a gossip, ensuring that she will share information and mediate between the village and Lady Ludlow’s home, Hanbury Court. Because Lady Ludlow’s rank acts as a kind of barrier between herself and villagers, she is uninformed about much in Hanbury. Representative of the “old nobility” (223), Lady Ludlow dislikes newness and change, but as she becomes better informed about the true state of her village with the help of Miss Galindo, she gradually if reluctantly accedes to change. We might assume that the clergymen, Mr. Gray, would be an obvious bridge between Lady Ludlow and the villagers, but his cluelessness about Lady Ludlow’s antiquated rules and habits for habit’s sake, in addition to his Evangelical fervor, lead to misunderstandings between them. Miss Galindo, in contrast, effectively helps Lady Ludlow comprehend how things stand because she herself is a “well-bred” lady (161), who can easily converse with Lady Ludlow while also having an “ease in relating across the classes,” that the aristocrat does not (Cook 71).

Despite the fact that gossip plays such a positive and integral role in this novella, many of the characters disapprove of it: Lady Ludlow claims not to listen to it, Mr. Gray frowns upon it, and Miss Galindo considers it a sin. Only Margaret Dawson, a companion to Lady Ludlow and an invalid, admits to being “particularly fond of little bits of village gossip” because of her confined existence (233). Margaret acknowledges that Miss Galindo is her “great authority” (187) for village news, though she also says that Miss Galindo is apt to speak “more strongly

15 The scold is a fairly common stock character in fiction. Gaskell’s sympathetic portrait of Miss Galindo contrasts with Austen’s ironic presentation of Pride and Prejudice’s notorious scold, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, who, whenever any of her cottagers were “disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented or too poor, she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and scold them into harmony and plenty” (111).
than accurately” (172) and that she “might make mistakes” (207). Margaret’s qualifications emphasize the eccentric spinster’s habit of speaking passionately, first against a neighbor and then in defense of that same neighbor. In other words, Miss Galindo doesn’t spread false information so much as she speaks hyperbolically.

Miss Galindo initially is just as apt as Lady Ludlow to resist individuals in the community who represent change, going further in her “unsparing” expressions and jokes (167) than Lady Ludlow’s “head in the sand” approach. While readers laugh along with Miss Galindo at her first impressions of characters, we (like Miss Galindo) come to see their full worth. At first, the village scold dismisses Mr. Gray as a “little blushing man, who can’t say boo to a goose,” because of his shyness (167). She even goes so far as to say that Mr. Gray and Rousseau are “birds of a feather” (168) because Mr. Gray supports reform in education, which Lady Ludlow views as “leveling and revolutionary” (32), just as Rousseau’s philosophies are revolutionary in the sense that they were celebrated during the French Revolution. Yet after spending time with Mr. Gray in a sickroom, Miss Galindo becomes a self-described “partisan” of the clergyman (193). She reports to Lady Ludlow all that she has observed during her time as nurse: “when I see a sick man thinking always of others. . .I’m apt to think he’s got hold of the right clue” (194). Seeing Mr. Gray ill and vulnerable has enabled Miss Galindo to understand his point of view. Therefore, she vows to support Mr. Gray’s wish for a Sunday-school, a project which Lady Ludlow has up until now blocked. Though Lady Ludlow does not immediately give in to Miss Galindo’s wish, she evidently considers her opinion very carefully and, soon after, Lady Ludlow relents about the school.

16 “Miss Galindo is an exaggerated version of Lady Ludlow. The difference between them is that Miss Galindo’s inferior social status forces conversation upon her, while Lady Ludlow can exist in the silent isolation of authority” (Krueger 179).
Miss Galindo initially is resistant to two other individuals who represent change, Captain James and Mr. Brooke, first treating them as objects of wit but eventually coming to accept them for the sake of village continuity. First accounts of Captain James, injured at Trafalgar, reduce him to a stock character: he is a “thorough sailor, as sailors were in those days—swore a good deal, drank a good deal” (233). Miss Galindo exploits the comic paradox surrounding a sailor managing land, joking that he will look after his laborers through a spy glass, and that because of his wooden leg he likely will get stuck in the mud; she assumes his is a leg injury because “sailors are almost always wounded in the leg” (214).17 Though, ironically, Lady Ludlow is responsible for bringing Captain James to Hanbury, she grows skeptical of her choice after the captain, in an effort to better manage Hanbury Court property, strikes up a friendship with Mr. Brooke, a dissenter, whose lands are better cultivated. Despite Mr. Brooke’s skill in agriculture, this “Baptist baker from Birmingham” is problematic for Lady Ludlow for both class reasons (he is a tradesman) and especially for religious ones (he is a Dissenter) (171).

As the arrival of these newcomers attests, change has arrived in Hanbury whether or not Lady Ludlow chooses to admit it. It is Miss Galindo who helps Lady Ludlow both accept this inevitable change and peacefully incorporate it into the community. Miss Galindo begins to approve of the captain as soon as she sees him stop to pick up a villager who had taken a tumble and swear at a little boy who was laughing at the child (246). Using a kind of Socratic Method, Miss Galindo appeals to Lady Ludlow’s common sense in order to reconcile her to Captain James’ friendship with Mr. Brooke, and his eventual engagement to Miss Brooke. Though Lady Ludlow complains that Miss Galindo goes too fast and that she can’t quite follow and would

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17 Gaskell’s Captain James managing land is reminiscent of Austen’s *Persuasion*, a novel that opens with the naval officers coming ashore to find homes during the peace of 1814. Indebted Sir Walter Elliot makes several disparaging remarks about the navy before agreeing to allow Admiral Croft to rent Kellynch-hall.
rather have known to “what her acquiescence would lead” before giving her consent, Lady Ludlow nevertheless concedes, among other things, that baking bread is, after all, a simple, honest profession, a first step toward accepting the Brooke family (247). And shortly thereafter, Lady Ludlow agrees to allow Captain James to present his future bride, the daughter of a tradesman and dissenter, to her.

Though Miss Galindo brings about many changes in Hanbury, she has less success concerning issues of gender equality; as we might expect, the spinster lightens her heart with jokes at this setback (160). Lady Ludlow appoints Miss Galindo to be clerk to her steward, Mr. Horner who, though open to reform in education, is skeptical of Miss Galindo’s abilities because she is a woman. Just as Miss Pole expressed unease over issues of class through a joke about marriage, so does Miss Galindo express her dissatisfaction at gender inequality through a similar joke. According to Margaret, Miss Galindo’s joke after her first work session with Mr. Horner is “grim,” a word Gaskell also used to describe Miss Pole’s joke: “if he were decently civil to me, I might want a chaperon, you know, now poor Mrs. Horner is dead” (173). In one sense, Miss Galindo’s joke is self-deprecating: she knows full well that Mr. Horner has no interest in marrying her. In another sense, her sarcasm is aggressive, allowing her to laugh at Mr. Horner, whom she has no romantic feelings for, because of his outmoded notions about women. The joke surfaces, then, from Miss Galindo’s annoyance at not being given a fair chance by him only because she is a woman. Though even her efforts to act like a masculine clerk, including putting a pen behind her ear and bowing instead of curtsying, do not change Mr. Horner’s mind about her, he nevertheless cannot find fault with her flawless work, which proves that she is a capable clerk.
Miss Galindo resorts to a similar joke in a parallel scenario when Lady Ludlow installs Captain James as her new steward after the death of Mr. Horner. Miss Galindo decides to cease acting as clerk because, she says, of the impropriety of working with a man not above thirty: “But here am I, not fifty till next May, and this young, unmarried man, who is a widower! Oh, there would be no end of gossip. . .He’s afraid I will marry him. But I won’t; he may feel himself quite safe from that” (218). Miss Galindo’s joke implies that she knows she will be an old maid for life and is a joke of the type that preempts hurtful comments from others by claiming them first. For his part, Captain James’ habit of looking “askance” at Miss Galindo is likely less because of a fear that she wants to marry him and more awe at her eccentric person and disinclination to work with her; in fact, he is even less willing to work with a female assistant that was Mr. Horner (218). During these moments, readers can laugh with Miss Galindo rather than at her because Gaskell emphasizes that male stubbornness, not spinsterhood, is funny.

Miss Galindo is in the unique position of being both a spinster and a kind of mother figure as well. The daughter of a clergyman who became wealthy after the death of his brother, Miss Galindo’s newly well-to-do parents discouraged her from marrying the man she loved, just as Cranford’s Miss Matty decides against marriage in order to appease her family. Soon after her parents lost their wealth in another reversal of fortune, Miss Galindo moved to Hanbury to be near her friend, Lady Ludlow. Having kept in touch with the relatives of her former lover, Miss Galindo learns years later of Mr. Gibson’s death and of the existence of his natural daughter, and undertakes to care for the girl. Despite Miss Galindo’s past relationship with Mr. Gibson, his relatives cannot conceive of her as having had a romance and continue to view her as a “kindly, useful, eccentric old maid” (229). Perhaps because she never married, Miss Galindo has had
more time to devote to her community, though her role as quasi-mother only enriches her usefulness within Hanbury. She works extra hard sewing for the village repository, for example, not only to pay for Bessy’s schooling, but also to provide goods for the village. And when Bessy finishes school, Miss Galindo risks the displeasure of Lady Ludlow, who disapproves of illegitimate children, to integrate Bessy in to Hanbury life. Through Miss Galindo’s efforts, Bessy wins the respect and admiration of Lady Ludlow, and eventually becomes village schoolteacher and wife to Mr. Gray.

Before Margaret Dawson leaves Hanbury near the end of the novel, she observes that, in addition to the residents, “The village, too, had a different look about it” (250). The altered look of the village largely is a result of Miss Galindo’s ability to blend old and new through her humorous outlook and willingness to accept change. As in Cranford, however, Gaskell advocates incremental change as the best way to preserve village continuity. Though Miss Galindo brings about many reforms, including greater education opportunities, increasing tolerance of other religious views, and eased class prejudices, it is also true that “traditional values such as loyalty, duty, [and] integrity” are maintained (Wright 35). Given the fact that Miss Galindo arguably competes with Lady Ludlow for the role of heroine in this story, it is fitting that she should have the last words (with a minor exception) of the novel. Just as she united various people throughout My Lady Ludlow, so does her gossipy letter to Margaret, who no longer lives in Hanbury, serve a similar function. Miss Galindo describes a tea party, significantly hosted by the once inflexible but now more tolerant Lady Ludlow, noting that the heterogeneous guest list includes Mr. Gray and Bessy, Captain James and his wife and the Brookes. Gaskell uses this scene, which resembles the final gathering of the Cranfordians at the assembly room, to highlight the changes among a nonetheless stable community. With an
assurance from Margaret before she departs from Hanbury that Miss Galindo is still kept busy scolding (251), readers feel content that Miss Galindo will continue to ensure that Hanbury is, in her words, “as good a village as ever lived” (167).

Like “The Last Generation of England,” Mr. Harrison’s Confessions (1851) can be seen as an apprentice piece to Cranford, though I conclude my discussion with it because, unlike Cranford and My Lady Ludlow, Gaskell chooses a young male outsider as her narrator thereby yielding a different tone from the previous works. As a newcomer to Duncombe, the eponymous hero Frank Harrison, a doctor, often discusses his new and mostly female neighbors with a detached and condescending tone. As Shirley Foster observes, the narrative “stimulates a subtextual reading” because we are “reminded throughout that these are the observations of a somewhat callow, self-confident young man who has, moreover, fairly conventional ideas about women” (118). Similarly, Gaskell biographer Jenny Uglow comments that a first-person narration is often the means of twisting the truth, and that readers begin to wonder if “Frank is quite as ‘frank’ as he pretends to be” (282). Though Frank may hold the title of (unreliable) narrator, the old maids and widows of the town are storytellers with whom to reckon, and because Frank is an outsider they consider it their duty to keep track of both his professional and personal life18 in order to act as a buffer to any changes he may represent. I argue that though Frank sets out to narrate for his brother the “wooing and winning” of his new wife, the unmarried women of Duncombe repeatedly seize control of the story of Frank’s courtship, inflating and distorting it along the way, and finally forcing him to tell his courtship story in the form of a “confession” (405). In Duncombe, though the spinster’s gossip may often be false, it nonetheless serves the important function of forcing Mr. Harrison to reexamine some of his

18 Marie Fitzwilliam’s helpful article examines the Victorian general practitioner’s social and professional dis-ease, which can result in ladies misreading professional signs as romantic signals (34).
preconceived opinions, in the process providing a clearer picture of Mr. Harrison for readers than he himself is able to present.

Keeping in mind that *Mr. Harrison’s Confessions* is the first written of these three stories highlights Gaskell’s increasingly gentle humor toward inhabitants of small towns, especially spinsters. Because of the narrative voice, scholarship generally agrees that Gaskell’s humor in *Mr. Harrison’s Confessions* is more broadly humorous and less sympathetic than her later works, an observation which tends to prevent much further discussion of the story. Shirley Foster observes that the distance between the narrator and his material encourages “readerly amusement but not empathy” (117-18). Margaret Case Croskery notes that the story derives its humor from the “ridiculous nature of the antiquated customs of its small-town denizens” and that it fails to “capture the sympathetic resonances” of *Cranford* (203). Finally, stating that the story’s wit is both “critical” and “affectionate,” Jenny Uglow adds that the gossiping spinster Miss Horsman has a “touch of malice” lacking in Miss Pole (282). While I agree that Gaskell’s humor is less sympathetic to the spinsters and other “small-town denizens” here, I argue that if we laugh at them, we also are meant to laugh at the town outsider, Mr. Harrison. Though the motives of the spinsters in *Mr. Harrison’s Confessions* are not always clear, we see the beginnings of the prominent role they will play as protectors of the community in future Gaskell stories.

In a town inhabited mostly by women, where there are “widows and old maids in rich abundance,” it is no surprise that this latter group controls the spread of information (414). Gaskell often designates in her country towns a particular clearing house for gossip, and “the centre of the gossip of Duncombe” is the home of a deaf widow, Mrs. Munton (412).¹⁹ Because of a chronic complaint that prevents her from often going out, Mrs. Munton’s neighbors

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¹⁹ In *Wives and Daughters*, the center of gossip is Grimstead’s bookshop where Miss Phoebe sees Molly Gibson give Mr. Preston an envelope on Cynthia’s behalf, leading to Molly’s damaged reputation (496).
regularly bring her the “newest, freshest, tit bit of news” (412). Given society’s habit of mishearing and spreading inaccurate information, it is fitting that gossip should originate from a woman who is rather hard of hearing. But beyond Mrs. Munton, it is the spinster Miss Horsman (an intimate friend of Mrs. Munton’s) who, like Miss Pole, often is the first to learn and spread news. Miss Horsman frequently makes insinuations to Frank, which he describes as her “disagreeable, knowing way,” but which exposes his habit of missing certain romantic cues and innuendos (430). Unlike Frank, Miss Horsman usually is a good “reader” and at a picnic quickly realizes that the host, Mrs. Bullock, intends her stepdaughter to marry the new doctor. When Mrs. Bullock becomes angry that Frank fails to show as much attention to her stepdaughter as she would wish, Miss Horsman and Mrs. Bullock get into a “war of innuendoes,” which Frank claims are “completely unintelligible” to him (432). Whether Frank is innocently ignorant or willfully ignorant is unclear, though it is clear that he fails to profit from Miss Horsman’s hints about the mother’s expectations.

As a doctor who has recently finished schooling in London, Frank potentially brings new medical practices with him, just as, as a bachelor, it is likely he will marry one of the unmarried ladies of Duncombe; accordingly, the town and especially the spinsters make it their business to keep track of Frank and any changes he may represent. Aware of Duncombe’s speculation about him and especially his love life, Frank notes that they “like a joke about marriage; it is so easy of comprehension” (462). Revealing his condescension, Frank’s comment implies that the townspeople only are capable of appreciating straightforward jokes that are easy to understand. Jokes about marriage, however, prove slippery for both Frank and his neighbors. When Frank buys at an auction a table which he thinks is a writing desk but that is really a woman’s work table, the auctioneer immediately quips that it will make a “useful present for Mrs. Harrison,
when that lady comes,” the joke about marriage which prompts the spectators of the auction to laugh (462). Though Frank attempts to brush off the joke as being uninspired, it actually exposes the fact that he is too quick to underestimate the power of jokes. Clearly, the joke is at Frank’s expense, emphasizing his failure to realize beforehand that he is about to purchase a woman’s work table. He laughs awkwardly to cover his error, giving the impression that his marriage is imminent (though it is not) and implying, when he presents the table to his housemate Mrs. Rose, that he will marry that lady. Thus, the full force of the joke about marriage is fully appreciated only by readers, who know that Frank is in love with Sophy Hutton, the rector’s daughter, despite “evidence” to the contrary.

Miss Horsman becomes a kind of conscience for Frank, continually checking up on his actions. Miss Horsman is the one who, at the auction, is skeptical and expresses surprise at the advanced state of Frank’s courtship, a misperception Frank does not dispel. And when Frank decides to use a new treatment on a patient’s arm, though the town had expected him to follow the older method of amputation, it is Miss Horsman who continually visits the patient, for whom Mr. Harrison is privately anxious. Though Gaskell never explains Miss Horsman’s motive in being perpetually curious about Mr. Harrison’s affairs, it appears that it is no more than her desire to know what is going on in her town. It is difficult to extract a clear perception of her character because though Frank frequently complains about her “sharp, hard” ways (456), he also acknowledges on more than one occasion that she is very kind to the poor people of Duncombe (459-60), suggesting her commitment to community service.

Just as Gaskell re-focuses reader attention away from the Hoggins/Glenmire courtship plot in Cranford, so is the focus in Mr. Harrison’s Confessions continually diverted from the story Frank wants to tell: his courtship of Sophy Hutton. Rather, Frank is forced to tell the story
about his inadvertently appearing to woo three women (Miss Bullock, Miss Tomkinson, and Mrs. Rose) simultaneously. In Duncombe, gossip works much like the children’s game of “telephone,” in which each successive participant whispers a message whispered to them by the preceding participant. Cumulative error typically makes the final message very different from the original, just as gossip in Duncombe becomes more inflated with each telling of the story, culminating in Frank being accused of downright “perfidy” (472). Once Sophy’s father, the vicar, hears that Frank is a “gay Lorthario,” he temporarily prevents his daughter from seeing the new doctor (482). Characteristically, Frank blames the town’s “apple of discord” on Miss Horsman, though he makes sure to tell his audience that he does her the justice of admitting her actions were not intentional (476). Nevertheless, Frank must tell his story as a confession, or acknowledgement of one’s fault, crime, or sin to another (in this case, to his brother, Charles).

As he narrates, Frank does occasionally admit that many of his first impressions of Duncombe residents were incorrect, but he also often falls back on characterizing himself as being either above residents or victimized by them. Furthermore, at the suggestion of Charles, Frank begins his narration, “Once upon a time, a gallant young bachelor,” thereby also casting himself, albeit half mockingly, as hero (405). The inflated way in which Frank tells his tale matches the inflated gossip told by the spinsters; in other words, they continually compete with him for a starring role in his own story. Ultimately, though Frank may be knowledgeable about writing prescriptions and giving correct doses of medicine, one should be wary of following his convoluted “receipt” for finding a wife (405).

Early in the story, Frank declares that the “charm of a small town” is that “everybody is so sympathetically full of the same event” (454). But Gaskell is well aware that the advantage of

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20 See Jenny Uglow’s description of Frank overhearing a conversation between Mrs. Rose and Mrs. Munton as being like “hearing one end of a telephone call” (282).
a country town is often equivalent to its drawback. Everyone’s being so full of the same event is unpleasant when one’s love life is the “event” most often discussed, accounting for Frank’s fluctuating opinion of Duncombe: “little kind-hearted town,” “little quiet society,” and “cruel little town” (424, 433, 481). But if the old maid is the target of humor in this story so too is the cocky bachelor. Despite the incorrect gossip that circulates about Frank, it does no real harm and he gets his happy ending. Miss Horsman, meanwhile, who is still spreading false engagement announcements at Frank and Sophy’s wedding, anticipates Gaskell’s more fully developed and sympathetic old maids in her later works.

In *Cranford*, *My Lady Ludlow*, and *Mr. Harrison’s Confessions*, the old maid’s joke about marriage rarely simply masks her wish to be married, but rather underscores her concern about larger issues than whether she is single or married. Though a spinster, she is in effect wed to the community as she works to preserve the country town, successfully mediating change through humor. It is clear from “The Last Generation of England” that Gaskell realized that “even in small towns” things were changing rapidly, but by using fictional old maids to parallel her own efforts as author to record country town life, she has enabled many generations of readers to continually revisit Cranford, Hanbury, and Duncombe (161). More so than any of the authors I am studying here, Gaskell can be associated with a caring humor, gendered female, likely also accounting for the popularity of her stories among Victorian readers.
“If you would have been led by me, archdeacon, you would never have put a bachelor into St. Ewold’s.”

“But my dear, you don’t mean to say that all bachelor clergymen misbehave themselves.”

“I don’t know that clergymen are so much better than other men.” (451)

Archdeacon and Mrs. Grantly, *Barchester Towers* (1857)

The bachelor clergyman in question in this humorous dialogue between Archdeacon and Mrs. Grantly in Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* is the Reverend Francis Arabin, who has recently accepted his first living in the cathedral town of Barchester. Mrs. Grantly’s realization that clergymen are no better than other men captures why fictional clergymen are so often targets of comic deflation: beneath their clerical exteriors lie flawed individuals. Oliver Lovesey, in *The Clerical Character in George Eliot’s Fiction*, has traced the history of the clergyman as a stock comic character in literature from the medieval tales of friars and monks to the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novels of Fielding, Goldsmith, and Austen to the high Victorian novels of Eliot, Trollope, and Oliphant (12-13). But while many of the clerics appearing in Austen’s fiction, including Mr. Collins, Mr. Elton, and Mr. Edward Ferris, are comical suitors, they are not problematic suitors in the way that clergymen who appear in the mid-Victorian novel are, in large part, because they have never been University fellows.

Francis Arabin is a representative type of clergyman who appears frequently in the novels I will be discussing: a former fellow at the all-male Oxford University who was inadequately prepared by that insular institution to interact with women or perform parish duties. Fellows learn Greek and Latin rather than how to minister to the masses. Before coming to the country town, scholarly fellows are perceived as being, in effect, humorless or what George Meredith
calls “agelasts” (non-laughers) in his essay “On Comedy” (114). And in the case of Arabin, when he arrives in Barchester he “misbehaves” because in trying to woo Eleanor Bold, whom he loves, the cleric alienates her and then seeks the assistance of another woman to win Eleanor back, leading Barchester residents to think he is courting two women.

The middle-aged bachelor clergymen, because of his narrowly focused training, has difficulty transitioning from the role of academic fellow to the role of lover in the country town setting, often the site of a fellow’s first living. The clerical bachelor and the country town are closely linked because it was in this locale that a clergyman was a more prominent and influential figure than in large cities or industrial towns (Clark xiv). In defending his emphasis on the social lives of his clerical characters rather than their professional duties, Trollope’s narrator in The Last Chronicle of Barset states that “no men affect more strongly, by their own character, the society of those around than do country clergymen” (my emphasis 860).

Importantly, though a clergyman’s bachelorhood is a vestige of his life at Oxford, it also automatically qualifies him for a role in the novel’s courtship plot. I will argue that Trollope’s Barchester Towers (1857) and Margaret Oliphant’s The Rector (1863) and The Perpetual Curate (1864) all comically portray a former fellow’s participation in the courtship plot to show that a clergyman who has failed personally (as suitor or husband) ultimately fails professionally (as clergyman). These novels further reveal that only by relinquishing bachelorhood and marrying can a fellow fully integrate himself into the fictional community. In other words, a fellow must learn humor (sympathy) via marriage in the country town in order to be a successful cleric. Thus, these characters go from being humorless objects of wit to being included in our sympathy as objects of and participants in humor. By focusing on the courtship plot in their novels in order to stress the need to modernize clerical training, Trollope and Oliphant avoid being explicitly
theological and instead stress the personal foibles of clergymen, accounting for the mid-Victorian novel’s reinvigorated interest in characteristically comic clergymen.

Trollope’s *Chronicles of Barsetshire* (1855-1867) consists of six novels set in the fictitious cathedral town of Barchester. Robin Gilmour calls the “situation of the provincial Anglican clergy in the middle of the nineteenth century” Trollope’s “splendid and original subject” (xvi). Trollope’s success with his subject matter surely inspired Oliphant’s decision to write her *Chronicles of Carlingford* (1861-1876), which, the author writes in her autobiography, “made a considerable stir at the time, and almost made me one of the popularities of literature” (70). My reading of *Barchester Towers*, the second novel of Trollope’s series, will focus on the Reverend Francis Arabin who leaves his scholarly life at Oxford when asked by his friend Grantly to come to Barchester to help “put Slope [the new bishop’s evangelical chaplain] down” (111). But Trollope displaces the theological battle between High and Low Church factions with the rivalry between Arabin and Slope for the love of a woman. By focusing on the comedy surrounding Arabin’s struggles with courtship rituals, Trollope not only demonstrates that the university poorly prepares fellows for domesticity but also that it is marriage that allows for both personal and professional integration into Barchester society. In contrast to Arabin, Morley Proctor in *The Rector* displays an amusing fear of women and persists in clinging to his bachelorhood and defining himself solely as a fellow, ultimately resulting in his departure from Carlingford. *The Perpetual Curate*, meanwhile, picks up where the two previous novels leave off by focusing on a former fellow, Mr. Morgan, who has already married and accepted a Carlingford living. Mrs. Morgan’s sense of her husband’s personal and professional failings allow Oliphant to argue that the current fellowship system disrupts marriage and the community at large because it produces men who are selfish and set in their ways. But because Mrs. Morgan
obsesses about small domestic matters as a means of coping with her imperfect marriage, Oliphant manages to maintain a comic tone throughout.

In focusing on a clergymans “coming out” in society after his professional training (or lack thereof), Trollope and Oliphant stress an issue that is unique to the Church of England. While Catholic priests take vows of celibacy that they must abide by for life, the Protestant fellow must remain celibate only for the duration of his fellowship, making marriage a distinct possibility for him in middle age. Thus, the Anglican bachelor clergyman is in the atypical and comic position of establishing a family at the time of life when most men already have a wife and children, thereby leading him to engage in behavior usually reserved for young lovers. Despite the fact that Anglican celibacy was temporary, the very notion of celibacy, as James Eli Adams has explained in *Dandies and Desert Saints*, possessed a “provocative power” (104). Many Victorians, most notably Charles Kingsley, saw celibacy as a threat to the kind of manhood that “marries and is given in marriage” (Adams 104). Particularly distressing to some Victorians, Adams notes, was the priestly celibacy of the Tractarians at Oxford that, along with their desire to reform the church, led many to label them “Roman priests in disguise” (86). Though the satirical *Punch* took up these questions of church politics and anti-Catholicism with gusto, mid-Victorian fiction typically centers on clerical domesticity. But because the university fostered male bonding, intellectualism, and even isolationism, it often proves difficult for the fellow to adjust not only to the domestic sphere but also to his clerical duties.

In the pre-Victorian era the Church of England was under attack because in some ways it was corrupt, old-fashioned, and unable to keep up with the changing times. The bishops in charge were connected with the aristocracy by “blood, marriage, or patronage,” and they tended to support Tory policies (Altick 204). In some instances, parsons under their governance rarely
bothered with their parish duties, and a select group of favorites were allowed to hold and earn money from multiple livings while rarely visiting any of their dioceses, revealing pluralism, nepotism, and absenteeism as routine offenses. Figure 4-1, a *Punch* cartoon from 1851, for example, depicts three bishops hoarding bags of money. They nervously and perhaps guiltily flee from a noble horse that represents Edward Horsman, a Scottish politician. Horsman, an MP, is well known for his attacks on the Church, in this case because of the often-exorbitant income of bishops. Richard Altick suggests that the “informal league of Tory landowner—Tory parson—Tory bishop” in its “isolation from evolving human needs” constituted one of the major obstacles to political and social reform (205). Meanwhile many, including English and Irish Catholics, Dissenters, and working-class radicals, were clamoring for reform and could not help but notice that bishops voted down most reform measures. By 1851 the Religious Census revealed, according to Chadwick, that “the dissenting churches commanded the allegiance of nearly half the population of England,” though this estimate deducted Jews, Mormons, and Roman Catholics from the equation (367). Factoring in these groups, the Church of England was not the majority Church.

In this age of reform, party loyalties among those who were not dissenters largely split between High Church and Low Church. Evangelicalism, which had its origins in the mid-eighteenth century, had become a dominant force in mid-Victorian religious life, especially among the middle and lower-middle class. Low Church doctrines included an emphasis on the supreme authority of the Scripture and the importance of Sunday observance; furthermore, it stressed consciousness of sin and the need for Christ’s redemptive power (*Faith and Doubt* 1). Though Evangelicalism’s strength derived from the enthusiasm of its followers and the dedicated involvement of its leaders with their flock, its demands often led to “repressive
sanctimoniousness,” as Trollope shows through the character of Mrs. Proudie (Faith and Doubt 19). Elisabeth Jay notes that John Henry Newman, one of the leaders of the Oxford Movement, repeatedly attacked Evangelicalism for its “incapacity to counter the growth of liberalism” (Faith and Doubt 6), while Altick states that the “narrow[ness] and inflexib[ility]” of this group prevented them from successfully coping with the “intellectual troubles ahead” (207).

While Cambridge was the headquarters of the Evangelicals, who tended to identify with the Whigs, Oxford University was a Tory stronghold and birthplace of the Oxford Movement. This movement also was called Tractarianism for the series of ninety position papers called Tracts for the Times and published between 1833 and 1841. Accordingly, members were called Tractarians or, more derogatorily, Puseyites. In Figure 4-2, an 1841 Punch cartoon, four Puseyites (represented as pussycats) sit at the feet of aged Mother Church. The Puseyites (“Pussey-ites”) have spilled their milk and unravel a ball of Protestantism, symbolizing the apparent sympathy of the Tractarians for many elements of Catholicism. The cat sitting underneath the Tracts for the Times is a caricature of Newman.

Because this movement was propagated in the university setting and because I am interested in fictional portraits of the Oxford fellow, I wish to give a sense of the intellectual atmosphere in the years before and during the 1850s and 1860s when Trollope and Oliphant were publishing their respective Chronicles. Oxford men feared that the Church was under attack from Parliament’s interference in its affairs, and they therefore sought to strengthen the Church by revitalizing the spirituality of religion. More specifically, Tractarians who wanted to prove that the Church was infallible and unassailable appealed to history to show that the church’s beliefs are those of the ancient Fathers. And by privileging the sacraments and arguing that the powers of the clergymen who delivered them derived from Christ, the Tractarians hoped
to prove that the Church should be free of state control. The Oxford Movement suffered on several fronts, however, including Newman’s conversion to Roman Catholicism (which left many in shock) and in-fighting among members. As Richard Altick notes, these intellectual debates on the Oxford campus must have seemed “remote and irrelevant” to the “man in the street” who, in the thirties and forties, was facing social and political turmoil (214). But scholars of church politics agree that the movement had positive consequences as well, especially through reconnecting the High Church with its spiritual mission and by asking Englishmen to see their religion as part of a apostolic inheritance.

Anthony Trollope had mixed feeling about church reform, supporting some measures and disagreeing with others. Generally, he favored a pragmatic rather than a theoretical approach to questions of church reform. In his Clergymen of the Church of England, a series of clerical sketches written in 1866, Trollope perceives, sometimes thankfully and sometimes regretfully, that the old-style clergymen is giving way to a new, modern clergyman. An example of the latter sentiment occurs in his chapter called “The Parson of the Parish” where Trollope observes that some institutions are preparing what he calls “literates” in contrast to the loveable, genial, humorous parsons of old who were “gentlemen” and graduated from Oxford and Cambridge (59). This reflection leads him to say, “There is, alas! a new order of things coming on us which threaten us with some changes, not for the better, in this respect” (59). This sense of sadness and inevitability in the face of change also pervades The Warden, the first Chronicle of Barsetshire. In this novel, the reformer John Bold threatens the “ecclesiastical snuggeries” (41) of Barchester, and as a result the beautiful and awe-inspiring cathedrals that Trollope’s narrator takes such pleasure in describing metaphorically are in danger of “falling” (280).
Most important for my argument, however, is the fact that Trollope did argue in *Clergymen of the Church of England* that the process whereby college fellows take orders needed reforming. Unlike many professions that require special training, preparation, or apprenticeships, fellows are awarded a living as soon as they ask for one. Trollope admits that when this arrangement was first made, there was probably a good reason for it, but that argument no longer exists, showing the author’s support for certain reform measures. Colleges, he notes, previously were ecclesiastical bodies and so college fellows would have needed to be clergymen (81). But by the time he writes *Clergymen*, Trollope wonders how anyone can become a clergyman “who has no intention whatsoever of helping others to worship” (83). Trollope suggests that this system has been allowed to continue because of a tendency to romanticize the Church: “because it [the Church] is so picturesque and well-beloved in its old-fashioned garments, we can put up with anomalies which elsewhere would be unendurable” (87). Trollope disagrees with those who believe that the profession of a clergyman requires “no special fitness, no training, no skill, no practice, no thought, no preparation” (86). While the army and navy have moved away from patronage in favor of meritocracy, fellows continue to receive livings not based upon their experience or qualifications, but rather because a fellowship automatically confers a title to orders:

> It is quite true that the clerical fellow does in this way become a real clergyman, ora parson proper if I may so call him, in the latter half of his life, when at forty or forty-five he begins to feel that he would like to have something softer near to him than his gyp [male college servant] or laundrywoman, and bethinks himself of some Eliza whom he has long half loved, but would never before allow himself to love altogether, —because of his fellowship. The fellow then drops his fellowship, and takes a living . . . (83-4)

This unromantic scenario reveals that many fellows decide to accept a living simply because they can, or because they want to have a family, rather than from a real desire or special ability to perform the duties of a clergyman. We can also account for the presence of multiple middle-
aged bachelor clergymen in the provincial novels of the period by the fact that, after fifteen or so years within the confines of Oxford, fellows often decided to begin a new chapter of their lives. The comedy of these novels highlights the fact that these men not only were unprepared for the new professional challenges that they faced, but, also, as the courtship plot reveals, for the personal ones as well.

Despite Trollope’s criticism in *Clergymen of the Church of England* that the Church was not professionalizing as it should, or at least not to the degree that other professions were, there is evidence that the Church did begin to emphasize professional training as the century progressed. George Kitson Clark observes that one of the most “notable symptoms of the easy-going secularism” of the Church in the early nineteenth century is the fact that most clergy received little specialized training (49). In many cases, all the training that a clergyman received was a degree taken at Oxford or Cambridge after study in largely secular subjects (Clark 49). Some had to pass an examination; others did not. Clearly, standards for ordination varied and bishops did not always ensure that clergymen were adequately prepared to care for their flocks. Gradually, though, individuals both within and outside of the Church began to think of the clergyman as a man who should be separated, to a degree, from ordinary secular life. Lovesey notes that at ordination, a professional clergyman was expected to assume the “indelible character of the priest, a ceremony which became more explicitly spiritual during the Victorian period” (89). One development that began to prepare clergymen to take on such a role occurred in 1822, when classes in divinity were finally offered at Oxford. In addition to improving the education of the existing class of gentlemen clergy, many new institutions began offering professional training for those individuals who could not go to Oxford or Cambridge. In other
words, non-Oxbridge institutions began training working-class clergymen. It seemed as if the
eighteenth-century sporting and hunting parson was poised to give way to the professional priest.

But if new professional training aimed to elevate clerics above secular life, it also likely
made it harder for priests to interact with their parishioners after leaving the university setting.
Before I turn to the comic obstacles that many fictional clergymen face in their effort to settle
into a new parish in the novels, I first want to account for this difficulty by emphasizing the
insular, all-male university environment that inadequately prepares clergymen for the real world.
My focus will be Oxford because all of the fictional clergymen on whom I focus in this chapter
attended that university. As we have seen, Trollope argues that fellows should not only learn to
be scholars but just as importantly, clergymen. For her part, Margaret Oliphant deplored many
aspects of the Oxford system including the “self-cocooning habits and smugness of confirmed
bachelors” as well as their “ivory tower living” (qtd. in Jay’s Mrs. Oliphant 94). In his chapter
on brotherhoods and manliness in Dandies and Desert Saints, James Eli Adams describes the
importance of reserve among Tractarians and describes the Oxford Movement as a “male order
akin to a secret society” (88). The Tractarians accordingly adapted distinctive behavior and
dress, labeled dandyism or effeminacy by some (Adams 9). More generally, though, such a
brotherhood enforced a “distinction between sacred and profane” and separated the world into
“initiates and outsiders” (Adams 89). A fellow, who may or may not be a Tractarian, is spatially,
intellectually, and emotionally remote from the common man. In other words, a university
fellow tends to be quiet, intellectual, set in his ways, partial to male bonding, and perhaps
feminine. The “Pet Parson” in Figure 4-3 is a favorite of the parish spinsters, who enjoy seeing
him stand in the pulpit “scented and curl’d.” Looking in a mirror surrounded by various
grooming products, the parson gives his appearance a final check apparently before preaching.
Many clergymen struggled between an allegiance to their university brotherhood and to their loved ones. A contemporary anecdote that persuasively highlights competing spiritual and worldly interests can be found in an unintentionally funny letter by William George Ward, which appeared in *The Times* on March 3, 1845. Ward was a leading Tractarian who, in his *Ideal of a Christian Church* (1844), urged the Church of England to form a union with the Church of Rome. Owen Chadwick explains that once word of Ward’s upcoming marriage got out, some newspapers “hinted at the incompatibility between matrimony and Ward’s Roman opinions about priesthood” (210). Ward felt compelled to respond to these hints in *The Times* letter. Hoping he does not appear “egotistical” or “unduly sensitive,” Ward states his goal of explaining to readers his views on the “subject of religious celibacy” (5). He then says that, to him, “celibacy is a higher condition of life than marriage,” that vows of celibacy should be “perpetually obligatory,” and that priests should be selected from among those who have taken such vows (5). And though Ward understood that by not taking the vows of celibacy he “forfeits a great spiritual blessing” and “involves himself in a terrible snare,” he admits to being devoid of a “vocation to high and ascetic life” (5).

This slightly ridiculous letter highlights Ward’s struggle between two states of being: noble celibacy and passionate marriage. His obvious disregard of his fiancée’s feelings in writing this letter also shows how a clergyman’s allegiance to his brotherhood could easily border on anti-feminism. Chadwick explains that it is not so much the marriage as Ward’s mode of announcing it that “shattered the Tractarians in a roar of contemptuous laughter” (211). Some felt this absurdity marked the collapse of the Oxford movement. About six months after the publication of the letter, Ward left the Church of England for the Catholic Church (as did his wife); his lead was followed by Newman soon after. Ward’s pro-celibacy position, Tractarian
background, and eventual conversion to Catholicism likely reaffirmed the charge that Puseyism
and Romanism are indistinguishable. According to the next Punch cartoon from 1850 (Figure 4-4), the Puseyites are moths (here as Newman) to the Roman flame.

**Bachelor Clergymen Behaving Badly in Barchester**

Significantly, the dialogue between Archdeacon and Mrs. Grantly in the epigraph to this chapter concerns the Reverend Francis Arabin’s *personal* rather than *professional* conduct. Mrs. Grantly regrets that her husband placed a bachelor (Mr. Arabin) at St. Ewold’s parish because Arabin has made himself a subject of gossip by associating frequently with the married seductress, Signora Madeline Neroni. In the dialogue immediately following the selection that I quoted, Mrs. Grantly argues that it is unwise to put a young man into a living unless he is married or engaged. The other bachelor clergyman of *Barchester Towers*, the villainous Mr. Slope, supports Mrs. Grantly’s thesis because he unscrupulously has designs on two women, Madeline Neroni and Eleanor Bold. When the archdeacon declares that there was no person more respected at Oxford than Mr. Arabin, Mrs. Grantly touches upon the feeling of many Victorians that Oxford purposely separates itself from the real world and operates under different rules and laws: “What men choose to do at Oxford, nobody ever hears of. A man may do very well at Oxford who would bring disgrace on a parish” (451).

Archdeacon Grantly eventually comes to see that his wife has a point, though he hesitates to take her advice and speak to Arabin about the issue because, though the archdeacon admits to feeling comfortable rebuking younger clergymen, he is unwilling to do so with his (middle-aged) peer. The combined roles of bachelor and clergyman therefore lead to a precarious position; because Arabin is a man of the cloth, he is held to higher standards concerning courtship. But because he is a *middle-aged* bachelor, he is also given some leeway, evidenced by Grantly’s refusal to caution his friend and fellow clergyman.
Though Arabin’s primary and ostensible purpose in coming to Barchester is to aid the High Church Grantly party in their “battle” with Low-Churchman Mr. Slope, Trollope curiously fails to narrate these men debating their theological differences. Instead the author presents them as rivals for the love of Eleanor Bold. Prior to the present of the novel, the narrator tell us, Arabin and Slope were engaged in “a tremendous controversy in print regarding apostolic succession (112). But in Barchester Towers, there are only two scenes where both Arabin and Slope appear together (at the Ullathorne party and at Madeline’s home). In both instances, they meet under private rather than professional circumstances in which Trollope shows the clergymen obsessing about Eleanor more than ecclesiastical power.\footnote{Joseph Wiesenfarth has noted that Eleanor’s personal situation (her inheritance) reflects the church’s public position: “both are worth 1,200 pounds in yearly income; both are pursued by Arabin and Slope” (44).} Thus, in Barchester Towers courtship literally shows the struggle between the High and Low church factions. Furthermore, by routinely privileging Arabin’s comic attempts to navigate courtship rituals, Trollope highlights the flaws in the fellowship process, especially its failure to prepare clergymen to transition from an academic life to a more practical one, which Trollope greatly objected to in Clergymen of the Church of England.

In contrast to worldly Barchester, Arabin’s Oxford is intellectual, scholarly, and spiritual. Chadwick notes that Oxford and Cambridge were “nurseries of the clergy” (90) but that while Cambridge tended to be more liberal, Oxford was a “fortress of the Church of England” (93). “Fortress” is a telling description of the insularity of the university. Trollope’s chapter introducing Mr. Arabin to readers is, in part, a detailed account of the life of an Oxford fellow. The narrator tells us that Arabin became a fellow shortly after taking his degree, and that he also was chosen as professor of poetry. Like many of his fellow Tractarian brothers, he was in danger of following Newman to the Catholic Church. But unlike Newman and Ward, Arabin
made an escape, though a “narrow” one (170). After grappling with such a crisis of faith, Arabin left Oxford for a retreat, still apt, the narrator explains, to “look down on the ordinary sense of ordinary people,” which Adams has shown was believed to be a frequent fault of the Tractarian brotherhood (171). In addition, Arabin looked down upon the rural clergymen of most English parishes whom he viewed as inferior (171). Arabin’s time away from Oxford opens his eyes to many of his errors and prepares him, though not yet fully (a point I will illustrate momentarily), to accept a position in rural Barchester when asked.

Many critics, including Robert Polhemus, characterize Arabin’s struggle in terms of his need to find a “balance between worldliness and idealism” (Comic Faith 188) so that his “vocation and faith [may] be joined to community” (Comic Faith 189). I agree with Polhemus and would add that, ironically, it is Arabin’s role as a bachelor that works both against and toward his joining the community of Barchester. His inability to relate to women is a vestige of his time at Oxford. However, by struggling through courtship rituals he eventually is rewarded with the hand of Eleanor Bold and the title of dean, both signs of his involvement with the Barchester community, thereby achieving a happy ending personally and professionally.

Once Arabin accepts the living at St. Ewold’s, he stays with Archdeacon Grantly and his family in order to get a feel for the neighborhood. After spending time with Grantly’s family, Arabin begins to yearn for a “wife, and children, and happy home,” reminding us of the scenario Trollope himself lays before readers, and which I previously quoted, in his chapter called “The College Fellow who has taken Orders” in Clergymen of the Church of England (173). The narrator of Barchester Towers somewhat ironically comments upon the timing of Arabin’s sentiments: “It will be said that no time can have been so fitted for such desires on his part as this, when he had just possessed himself of a country parish, of a living among fields and
gardens, of a house which a wife would grace” (176). Does Arabin want a living because he wants a family? Or does he want a family because he has a living? And would it be so bad if the answer to either question is “yes”? The narrator implies that the second scenario is applicable to Arabin but urges us not to be too harsh on him. As Joseph Wiesenfarth argues, Arabin’s ambition rightly “complements his maturity” (46). Though his maturity also complicates his ambition.

As we have seen, Trollope focuses on Arabin the suitor. But interestingly, Arabin is written out of the courtship plot, both by women of Barchester and by himself. Arabin reflects that the path of a Church of England clergyman is, in many respects, opposite that of other men. The reverend only now sees how beneficial it will be to work in the world and start a family, notions that “other men arrived at . . . in their start of life,” but that to him they had come when they were “too late” (178). Arabin’s sense that he is too late suggests his belief that he is both too set in his ways as well as too old to find a wife. The muted praises of Mrs. Grantly and her daughters for Arabin, meanwhile, reflect the perception by these women of what Polhemus calls the “anti-feminism of the clerical tradition” (Comic Faith 188). The church, Polhemus rightly notes, is a “bastion of male primacy” and it accordingly has molded Arabin’s view of women (Comic Faith 167). His life at Oxford was incompatible with a wife and children and so prior to his coming to Barchester, Arabin had gotten in the habit of thinking of women as “pretty and amusing,” but also as “little more than children” (173). Though she comes to appreciate Arabin’s goodness, just as readers come to sympathize more with him, Mrs. Grantly at first is unimpressed, significantly saying “I’ve no doubt Mr. Arabin is a very valuable man—at Oxford,” and she thinks she detects a bit of “conceit” in him (174). Here Trollope has the astute Mrs. Grantly arrive at the heart of the matter: Oxford is out of touch with the real world.
Grantly’s daughters, Griselda and Florinda, meanwhile, who are seventeen and sixteen respectively, dismiss him as a possible suitor because he is so different from other suitors. When Griselda first hears that Arabin will be coming to Barchester, she asks her father if Arabin is married and then asks his age. When the archdeacon tells her that he is about forty, the narrator humorously remarks that had Grantly said eighty, Mr. Arabin “would not have appeared to [Griselda] to be very much older” (114). After Griselda meets Arabin, she admits that he looks younger than she had expected, but comments that he does not “talk at all like a young man” and concludes that he is “not at all nice” (173). The sisters then discuss the advantages of other clerical bachelors in the neighborhood, deciding that the Reverend Augustus Green is still the best catch. Granted, Griselda and Florinda are silly, minor characters whose opinions might seem easy to dismiss, but Griselda’s observation that Mr. Arabin does not talk like other young men provides further evidence of the fact that life at intellectual Oxford poorly prepares men for casual conversation and flirting in the domestic sphere.

Because many nineteenth-century clergymen spent their twenties and thirties studying at Oxford or Cambridge, and only began to think of marriage at middle age, Barchester Towers accurately assigns older couples leading roles in the love plot. In contrast to Austen’s novels, which revolve around heroines roughly between the ages of 17-21 (with the important exception of Anne Elliot) falling in love and gaining self-knowledge, in Barchester Towers, characters in this age bracket are relegated to minor status. We only hear vaguely of young men and women flirting at the Ullathorne garden party, and the girls of marriageable age, such as the Grantly and Proudie daughters, are never Trollope’s focus. Rather, the main love plot centers on Francis Arabin and Eleanor Bold, though Trollope treats their courtship ironically throughout, the reasons for which I will return to momentarily. James R. Kincaid argues that, in Barchester
Towers, the narrator subtly makes an “attack on these almost-young lovers. Their actions are treated as mechanical, manipulable, and therefore trivial” (599). Kincaid furthermore shows that Trollope takes a position counter to traditional comedy through a rhetoric that shifts our attention away from Arabin and Eleanor “marrying, having children, and living happily ever after in power, and fixes it on the unconventional center of the novel, the weak, retiring, and old Mr. Harding,” who is also of primary interest in The Warden (600). Kincaid accurately describes Trollope’s unconventional use of comedy, but his emphasis on the author’s “distrust of the young” in favor of Harding ignores the fact that the widow Bold and Arabin are not all that young.

The irony surrounding Arabin and Eleanor’s relationship largely results from their age; they are funny precisely because, though presumably more knowledgeable in the ways of the world, they are experiencing the same feelings and insecurities usually reserved for young people, yet they are no better able to cope with these feelings than are their younger counterparts. Coral Lansbury has argued that “sexual love between the middle-aged and old has always been regarded as disgusting or a source of broad humor,” the latter point being applicable to Trollope’s novel (86). The narrator of Barochester Towers teases readers with the notion that older lovers are more capable of true love: “but for real true love—love at first sight, love to devotion, love that robs a man of his sleep, love that ‘will gaze an eagle blind,’ . . .—we believe the best age is from forty-five to seventy; up to that men are generally given to mere flirting” (359). But there are many reasons to be suspicious of this claim. The quote refers to fifty-year-old Mr. Thorne’s discovery of the charms of Madeline Neroni; however, most of the male characters consider themselves to be “in love” with Madeline at one point or another. Secondly, the clichéd, over-the-top, way in which Trollope’s narrator describes mature love makes it no
less a comic target than youthful love. A final comic effect here is that the narrator inverts the usual order by making passion and intensity hallmarks of mature love rather than youthful love.

While most courtship novels chronicle the history of a young lady’s entrance into the world, *Barchester Towers*, in a way, (and *The Rector*, too, as I will show in the next section) chronicles the history of a middle-aged clergyman’s entrance into the real world. Also unlike many other romance plots, Trollope stresses the virginity of the clergyman rather than the female, anticipating the most extreme example of a virginal clergyman, Casaubon\(^2\) in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72). In the latter instance there is uncertainty about whether Casaubon and his young bride Dorothea ever consummate their marriage. In *Barchester Towers*, when Arabin kisses Eleanor, we learn that it is the first time his “virgin lips” had “tasted the luxury of a woman’s cheek” (466). For her part, Eleanor is only recently widowed with an infant son, but she still is described by the narrator as a “discreet matron” and a “lady at any rate past the wishy-washy bread-and-butter period of life” (460, 396). Despite their mature ages, Arabin and Eleanor are as “unable to tell their own minds to each other as any,” and they decide to become man and wife only after many misunderstandings, and with the aid of Madeline Neroni, whose efforts to bring the couple together I described in Chapter 2. Even Arabin and Eleanor’s closest friends, however, are taken aback by the announcement of their engagement, suggesting once again that few if any seriously considered Arabin as a suitor; rather, the residents of Barchester assume Eleanor will marry either Mr. Slope or Bertie Stanhope, and apparently believe that Arabin will be a perpetual bachelor.

\(^2\) Casaubon is a clergyman and scholar who, Mr. Brooke says, is a “little buried in books” (Book I, Chapter 4). He fails both as a husband and as a clergyman, showing little affection for Dorothea or interest in her plans to build cottages for the poor.
But if Slope represents immorality and Bertie Stanhope represents amorality, Arabin offers a positive alternative. His success at learning to be a better suitor suggests the likelihood of his being a good clergyman as well. It is no coincidence that Arabin becomes dean immediately after Eleanor agrees to be his wife. By forfeiting the role of bachelor, Arabin, with Eleanor’s help, has become fully integrated into the Barchester community and deserving of all of the benefits that this entails. In true Trollopian fashion, Arabin has finally been able to find a balance and bridge the gap between Oxford and the cathedral town of Barchester. In the final chapter, we learn that not only is Arabin still well respected in Oxford circles, but he also lives in “perfect mutual confidence” with his wife (498).

**The “languishing transplanted Fellow of All-Souls” in Oliphant’s The Rector**

In *Churchmen of the Church of England* and *Barchester Towers*, Anthony Trollope emphasized the need for the clerical profession to be reformed and modernized. These issues likewise appear in many of Margaret Oliphant’s Carlingford novels, in addition to her critique of the elitism and detachment of many clerical fellows. As we saw earlier, Oliphant disapproved of the “ivory tower living” of confirmed Oxford bachelors (qtd. in Jay’s *Mrs. Oliphant* 94). Morley Proctor, the eponymous main character of *The Rector*, is one such product of Oxford. *The Rector*, first published as a short story in 1861 and later published in book form in 1863, begins as Proctor, a former fellow of the College of All Souls at Oxford, accepts his first living in provincial Carlingford. Throughout the story, Oliphant uses garden imagery to highlight the clergyman’s sheltered life as a fellow at All Souls and to contrast the gardens of All Souls with the “real-world” ones in Carlingford. Proctor’s ultimate unwillingness to enter the feminine gardens of Carlingford and his persistence in clinging to his bachelorhood signal both personal and professional failure, necessitating his departure from Carlingford.
Questions surrounding Proctor’s religious views allow Oliphant to foreground the difficulties surrounding a clergyman’s attempts to define his role, especially while making the transition from fellow to parish clergyman. Though reports proceeding Proctor’s arrival represent him favorably, “whether he was high, or low, or broad, muscular or sentimental, sermonising or decorative, nobody in the world seemed able to tell” (3). Indeed, Proctor himself does not know, which seems to be Oliphant’s point. His sole way of defining himself is as a Fellow of Oxford, which is not surprising given the fact that he has spent the last fifteen years of his life there. Thus, when people ask “what [is] he?”, he inwardly makes the following reply: “He was neither High nor Low, enlightened nor narrow-minded; he was a Fellow of All-Souls” (18). Morley Proctor, therefore, is a perfect example of the fellow, whom Trollope objects to in *Clergymen of the Church of England*, who becomes a fellow to enjoy his fellowship rather than with a view to a future living (84). Proctor has been trained as a classical scholar, not as a clergyman.

Proctor’s continuing identification with his fellowship role manifests itself in his longing for the contemplative, spiritual gardens of All Souls and dread of the sensual, worldly gardens of Carlingford. The clergyman’s over-the-top fear of Carlingford’s gardens, where female sexuality is heightened, humorously underscores his reluctance to participate in a love story that would eventually end in his “settling for life” (28). In the first chapter of the story, Oliphant describes Proctor as having been “cloistered” at All Souls, a word that suggests not only seclusion and retirement but also life in a monastery (or nunnery), all appropriate descriptions of the bachelor existence of Oxford fellows (9).³ Another denotation of the word cloister, a

³ Though Morley Proctor is not a Tractarian, it is interesting to note that Tractarianism stimulated a renewed interest in devotional life, which included the formation of many new monasteries and convents.
covered walk in a religious institution having an open colonnade often opening onto a courtyard or garden, continues Oliphant’s use of garden imagery.

In contrast to the all-male world of Oxford, female sexuality reigns supreme in the gardens of Grange Lane. In *Five Centuries of Women and Gardens*, Sue Bennett states that for centuries gardens have “functioned as physical and spiritual arenas in which individual women strove to assert control, define their identity, struggle with sexual feelings and escape or embrace the world” (12-13). At the beginning of *The Rector*, Mr. Proctor is introduced by Mr. Wodehouse to his daughters, the middle-aged spinster Miss Wodehouse and her much younger sister Lucy who sit in the garden with Mr. Wentworth, the eponymous hero of Oliphant’s *The Perpetual Curate*. The garden is strewn with feminine “apple-blossoms, blue ribbons, and other vanities” (11) that the new clergyman finds “bewildering” and “dazzling” (9). Surrounded by fragrant flowers and blue ribbons, Proctor blushes, usually a mark of female embarrassment, and unromantically rejoices at the presence of Wentworth, whom Proctor likely hopes will act as a buffer between him and the ladies. After taking luncheon with the family, Proctor quickly “escape[s]” only to narrowly avoid meeting with another group of “female parishioners!” exiting another garden, causing the distressed rector to rush home and fortify himself in his library. Clearly the “languishing transplanted Fellow” fails to thrive in the gardens of Carlingford and so his only comfort is to recreate, as best he can, the environment of Oxford in his library among the late rector’s bookshelves (14).

The aforementioned garden scene not only reveals Proctor’s unease among women, but also hints at his fear that these women expect him to marry one of them. The rector imagines a role reversal to have taken place whereby he, the male, is wooed and the Wodehouse sisters are the wooers. For “anything [Proctor] could tell,” the narrator states, “somebody might be
calculating upon *him as her* lover, settling his future life for him” (my italics 22). Proctor is an example of a feminized clergyman that Adams speaks of in his discussion of Victorian masculinities. In addition to questions of gender, though, the rector considers courtship matters as being “beneath the consideration of a Fellow of All-Souls,” revealing the elitism and snobbishness that Oliphant abhorred in many clerics (22). Woe is the day, thinks the rector, when he will be “seduced” from bachelorhood or when he allows himself to “fall” into the marriage state (24). Here again, Oliphant reverses standard gender roles for comic effect so that it is a man—a clergyman—who is in danger of falling or being seduced, rather than, more traditionally, a vulnerable female.

Unlike Frances Arabin whose decision to accept a living occurs almost simultaneously with this desire for a family, Morley Proctor persists in his disinclination for romance. In fact, his main reason for accepting the Carlingford living is so that he can provide a home for his elderly mother and make her the mistress of that home. She apparently is the only woman that he needs or wants in his life. In her interest in the domestic concerns of her neighbors, Mrs. Proctor does seem to be a kind of surrogate wife: “If she had been his bride and at blithe commencement of life, she could not have shown more inclination to know all about Carlingford” (16). But if, in this novel, Mrs. Proctor’s old age represents a “fresh start” and reinvigoration, middle age accounts for Proctor’s being “preoccupied by right of his years” (16).

Though set in his ways and paranoid, one of the ironies of the rector’s situation is that his fears of people plotting to marry him are both true *and* false. He is false in thinking that the Wodehouse sisters are in “pursuit” of him, especially in the case of Lucy whose courtship with Wentworth is narrated in *The Perpetual Curate* (23). However, residents of Carlingford do naturally assume that the new, single clergyman will eventually marry one of their daughters.
Proctor’s own mother delights in teasing her son about his marrying one of the Wodehouse sisters and encourages him, now that he has a living, to settle for life. Eventually, it is revealed that a great deal of Proctor’s fear of romance arises from his “guilty consciousness” (23). Deep down, the rector realizes that if he were pushed into marrying, he would not have the power of resisting and that he probably would find it to be anything but miserable.

Not only has Oxford ill prepared Proctor to comfortably handle the garden parties, dinners, and other social occasions in Carlingford, but it has also left him professionally unprepared. Trollope argues that the “only fit education for a parish parson is to be found in a parish curacy” (85). But a fellow does not receive such an apprenticeship; rather, he is expected to transition seamlessly from scholar to parish clergyman. When one of his dying parishioners asks the rector to provide words of comfort, he is unable to think of anything to say and must stand aside with the equally helpless Miss Wodehouse while Lucy and the perpetual curate take over. Proctor realizes that he has failed to fulfill his clerical duties, admitting that his education was faulty: “such duties require other training than mine has been” (48). This crisis prompts Mr. Proctor to give up his Carlingford living and return to All Souls. In the final pages of the story, Oliphant again returns to garden metaphors, noting that once Proctor goes back to his “dear cloister,” he feels a “sting” and begins to consider Oxford an “uneasy paradise” (52). He longs for the “work he had rejected,” but now understands the need to apply his book learning to the real-life concerns of his parishioners on the one hand, and to accept his desire for the sympathy and love of a wife on the other. But because he stubbornly clung to his bachelorhood and failed to “penetrate” the female gardens of Carlingford, Proctor was unable to successfully join the community, necessitating his return to Oxford. Though the final paragraph of the story describes
a muted happy ending for Morley Proctor, we must wait until *The Perpetual Curate* to understand fully how he becomes something more than a Fellow of All Souls.

If *Barchester Towers* and *The Rector* begin just as a former-Oxford-fellow-turned-available-bachelor takes his first living in a country town, Oliphant’s *The Perpetual Curate* picks up where these two stories leave off. My focus in this section will not be on the eponymous hero of the novel, Perpetual Curate Frank Wentworth⁴, but rather the subplot revolving around a newlywed couple, Rector Morgan and his wife, who have only recently arrived in Carlingford. Prior to coming to Carlingford, Morgan was an Oxford fellow, just like Frances Arabin and Morley Proctor. Married for three months at the beginning of the story, Dr. and Mrs. Morgan had prudently deferred their marriage for ten years until the time when Morgan received a suitable living in Carlingford. Morgan too has difficulty transitioning from being a fellow to a husband and clergyman. Indeed much of this novel’s comedy results from Mrs. Morgan’s sense of her husband’s all-to-frequent failure in performing these latter roles.

Though only a modest number of scholars have written about *The Perpetual Curate*, those who have often praise Oliphant’s comic handling of the Morgan subplot. The following quote by Merryn Williams is representative: “[Mrs. Morgan’s] disillusionment with her husband, and the tension between them, is beautifully conveyed, and looks forward to the sophisticated comedy of the next Carlingford novel” (80-1). Oliphant uses the Morgan subplot to show that the Oxford fellowship system complicates and disrupts marriages by forcing many couples to delay marriage until middle age, thereby depriving them of the softening influences of that state. The Morgans fail to see eye to eye on many domestic and parish issues because the rector, as a

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⁴ Though the perpetual curate is a Tractarian, he does not have as much difficulty navigating courtship rituals as do Arabin and Proctor because Frank Wentworth “had always been more of a man than a thinker” (II, 74). He delays marrying Lucy Wodehouse, not because his book smarts make him an awkward wooer, but for economic reasons.
young man, did not experience the improving influence of a wife and instead spent those formative years at Oxford where he became set in his ways. By increasingly consulting his weak-minded curate Leeson, whom Mrs. Morgan dislikes because of his habit of showing up at dinner time, instead of his wife, Morgan recreates the “all boy’s club” phenomenon of Oxford. And by excluding his wife from his decisions, Morgan leaves her to fret about relatively minor and comic domestic aggravations that mirror the larger issue of the unnaturalness of her delayed marriage.

To exact her small revenge on Leeson, the curate who continually times his visits to the parsonage to coincide with the dinner hour, Mrs. Morgan “smile[s] a smile which would have struck awe into the soul of any curate that ever was known in Carlingford” and says to him “I quite expected you, for we have the All-Souls pudding to-day” (II, 231). All-Souls pudding, a favorite Oxford treat of Morgan’s and Leeson’s, serves to foster male clerical bonding to the exclusion of women while it simultaneously reveals Mrs. Morgan’s habit of dealing with the frustrations of her marriage by instead worrying about everyday domestic concerns (like pudding). As Elisabeth Jay points out, Mr. Morgan’s “tolerance of the curate’s intrusions when he realizes a particular pudding is in the offing, speaks of that male collegiate world that takes servants and women for granted, and from which it is [Mrs. Morgan’s] business to wean her husband” (Mrs. Oliphant 302). Morgan and Leeson share a dislike and suspicion of Frank Wentworth, the perpetual curate, whom Carlingford gossips have charged with being responsible for the suspicious disappearance of seventeen-year-old Rosa Elsworthy. Even before the Elsworthy situation, Mr. Morgan was displeased with Wentworth because of the latter’s interference in his district. By invitation from the previous rector, the late Mr. Bury, Wentworth preaches to some of the lower-class residents of Wharfside, part of Morgan’s parish, causing the
latter to feel jealous of the perpetual curate’s influence. Consequently, when Leeson visits the parsonage, the two men often discuss Wentworth’s affairs and their certainty of his guilt, though Mrs. Morgan intuitively knows he is innocent. When the rector’s wife loses patience and acknowledges her feelings, Mr. Morgan tells her that he knows more about the subject than she does saying, “I am not as incredulous as you are. Perhaps I have studied human nature a little more closely” (I, 200). This comment is ironic because though Mr. Morgan may have studied human nature more closely than his wife, she understands and sympathizes with her fellow human beings much more than her clerical husband.

The clergymen are not influenced in the least by Mrs. Morgan’s more charitable impulses and rarely consider her feelings; indeed, the all-male Oxford environment seemingly instilled such traits in its pupils. The rector often privileges the traditions of Oxford above his marriage, while Leeson’s continual appearance at dinner time emphasizes not only that he is a moocher but also that he has little respect for the Morgan’s marriage and for the likelihood of their wanting to dine alone occasionally. The only dinner time leverage Mrs. Morgan possess, besides her pointed barbs at the clueless Leeson, is instructing the cook not to prepare the longed-for All Souls pudding.

Oliphant creates such excellent comic tension between the Morgans because they quarrel over relatively minor things that are immensely important to them nonetheless. One major source of their quarrelsome nature, and hence the novel’s comedy, is the fact that the Morgans are middle-aged newlyweds who became set in their ways during their ten-year engagement. Through the character of Mrs. Morgan, Oliphant clearly endorses a short rather than a long engagement because the former allows couples to grow and improve together. Oliphant’s condemnation of a long engagement also makes an implicit critique of the Oxford fellowship
program that is set up to consume the best year’s of a young man’s life without adequately preparing him to become a clergyman and husband. As Mr. Morgan continues not only to doubt the perpetual curate but to lead an inquisition into his conduct, Mrs. Morgan sees for the first time the difference between the “ideal” rector who courted her and the “real” one whom she married (I, 198). She feels that their situation would have been much happier had they not delayed their marriage:

If we hadn’t been afraid to marry ten years ago, but gone into life when we were young, and fought through it like so many people, don’t you think it would have been better for us? Neither you nor I would have minded what gossips said, or listened to a pack of stories when we were five-and-twenty. I think I was better then than I am now. (I, 202).

Mrs. Morgan’s sense of their “impoverished existence” is unique to her; these insights remain a mystery to Mr. Morgan, who has no conception that his middle-aged pettiness, jealousy and stubbornness might have been softened if he had married this woman earlier (I, 204).

Each marital disappointment that Mrs. Morgan suffers heightens emphasis in her own mind on her matronly middle-class sexuality. The Morgan’s chances of having children are reduced because they waited until middle age to marry, recalling Kingsley’s complaint that the celibate priest (in this case an Oxford fellow) threatens domesticity. After almost every unsatisfying conversation with the rector, Mrs. Morgan is painfully aware of a “redness” in her countenance that is “not exactly bloom” (I, 9). The flowering rectory carpet, which Mrs. Morgan detests, serves as an unrelenting, though perhaps subconscious, reminder that she is not in her first bloom. Second perhaps only to Leeson’s visits, the bitterest pill for Mrs. Morgan to swallow in her married life is the design on the rectory carpet, a pattern chosen by the previous owner, Mr. Proctor. As Elisabeth Jay notes, the large floral pattern in Mrs. Morgan’s home “serves as a constant reminder of the continued need for irksome frugality” (Mrs. Oliphant 302). The Rector and his wife cannot afford to buy new furnishings when the old ones are perfectly in
order. Oliphant repeatedly uses these domestic objects as comic relief. She focuses on an objectionable carpet and Oxford pudding instead of explicitly narrating the many sacrifices that the clergyman’s wife makes.

At least part of the reason that Mr. Morgan is not more attuned to the needs of his wife is because he is torn between a longing for All Souls and his role as a husband. When Morley Proctor returns to town and visits his friend Morgan, the rector’s mind instantly recalls the many friendly meals the two shared at Oxford. A “regretful thought of that Elysium stole across the mind of the late Fellow, who had been so glad to leave the sacred brotherhood, and marry, and become as other men” (II, 218). Mr. Morgan, however, is not only a bit “envious” of Proctor’s bachelorhood, but he also feels a slight “contempt” for the “elderly celibate” who is neither married nor Rector (II, 218). When the Wentworth situation comes up as a topic of conversation during Mr. Proctor’s visit to the parsonage, his reaction, like Mr. Morgan’s, is rather unsympathetic. In Mrs. Morgan’s mind, both clergymen are unable to show feeling and compassion and instead convey an intellectualism that, while appropriate for Oxford, leaves no room for the sympathy demanded of a parish clergyman. Though they “understood Greek plays” a great deal better than Mrs. Morgan, they are unable to “see into the heart of things as she did” (II, 230). Therefore she must wait until her husband and Mr. Proctor “had attacked the question in the orthodox way of siege, and made gradual entrance by dint of hard labor” (II, 230). Oliphant’s irony is clear: sympathy and fellow feeling should not be “hard labor” for clergymen.

I have argued in *Barchester Towers* and *The Rector* that Trollope and Oliphant use comedy to show that an unsuccessful suitor makes an unsuccessful clergyman. It is the ability of a former fellow to give up his bachelorhood and marry, in the process gaining reader sympathy, which affects his chances of integrating professionally and personally into a country town. In
other words, marriage is a symbol of the larger community. Frances Arabin eventually woos Eleanor Bold, at which time he is given the position of Dean. Rector Morley Proctor, however, decides against marriage in part necessitating his departure from Carlingford. In *The Perpetual Curate*, Rector Morgan is married but suffers from both professional and personal troubles largely because of his narrow mindedness, which suggests that he tries to live his life as if he were still an Oxford fellow. But when it is proved that Frank Wentworth had nothing to do with Rosa Elsworthy’s disappearance, the rector realizes that he misjudged his fellow clergyman and decides that he and his wife would be better off in another parish, all signs that he will begin to devote more attention to his marriage. Importantly, Morgan consults his wife about the decision to quit the more expansive provinciality of Carlingford for a smaller country parish. At first Mrs. Morgan’s hopes of her husband becoming the “ideal parish-priest” of Carlingford are dashed, but only until he reminds her that Frank Wentworth likely will become the new rector. Mrs. Morgan understands that if Frank Wentworth assumes the position of rector, he will earn more money and thus be able to wed the young, beautiful Lucy Wodehouse. In other words, the Morgans’ sacrifice will prevent Wentworth and Lucy from suffering through a long engagement. Morgan’s good-natured decision restores his wife’s faith in him, and she immediately dreams of new, flowerless carpet and decides to serve All Souls pudding with dinner, after all.

Similarly, Proctor too comes to value domestic pleasures and understands that the influence of a wife will help him becomes a better clergyman. In fact, he returns to Carlingford not merely to pay a visit to his former friends, but to propose to middle-aged Mary Wodehouse, who accepts him. The couple will live in a small, distant parish, and Mr. Proctor looks forward to having a house of his own: “I don’t say that it is not very pleasant at All-Souls; but a house of one’s own. . .of course I mean a sphere—a career—” (III, 200). In Trollope’s novel, Arabin
becomes a part of the first parish to which he is assigned, St. Ewolds in Barchester. For
Oliphant’s characters, the process is more complicated and they must attempt to integrate
themselves more than once before they find just the right fit. And while Arabin quickly becomes
an ideal clergyman, Morgan and Proctor must continually struggle to do their duty. And at the
beginning of *The Rector* and *The Perpetual Curate* it seems that they are fighting a losing battle.
But by the end of the latter novel there is hope that they will be better men and clergymen
because of the positive influences of Mrs. Morgan and Miss Wodehouse respectively.
Figure 4-1. “A Gallop Amongst the Bishops; or, a Rapid Act of ‘Horsman’-ship,” *Punch* 21, 1851.
Figure 4-2. “Mother Church and Her Pussey-ites,” *Punch* 2, 1842.
Figure 4-3. “The Pet Parson,” *Punch* 2, 1842.
Figure 4-4. “The Puseyite Moth and Roman Candle,” *Punch* 19, 1850.
CHAPTER 5
“IT IS SO ODD I SHOULD HAVE NO SENSE OF HUMOR”: HUMORLESSNESS AND SOCIAL CONTROL IN OLIPHANT’S MISS MARJORIBANKS

Like the clergymen I examine in Chapter 4, the eponymous heroine of Margaret Oliphant’s Miss Marjoribanks (1866) has no sense of humor and such an absence of humor ironically is a source of comedy. Though readers occasionally laugh awkwardly at the seriousness with which Lucilla Marjoribanks treats supposedly trivial things such as the distinction between “Evenings” and parties and the color of her dresses and drapery, we simultaneously recognize that as a stateswoman organizing society, such a serious outlook is necessary (49). I will argue that Lucilla’s earnestness is validated if we recall that witty characters like the amused spectator Dr. Marjoribanks and the caricaturist Mrs. Woodburn are disqualified from being rulers of society because their wit is divisive, while Lucilla’s humorlessness allows her to unite society. In representing the public interest, Oliphant’s heroine, unlike the wits, must not laugh at her neighbors but rather foster fellow feeling. Because Lucilla herself never laughs, readers cannot laugh with her, as humor usually encourages us to do, but significantly, Lucilla nevertheless is positioned as humorous to readers. Readers never feel detached from this heroine, and while we often are amused by Lucilla, it is affectionate amusement. Thus, Lucilla can be humorous to readers but fails to have humor, in contrast to the clergymen in Chapter 4 who must gain a sense of humor in order to integrate successfully into the community.

One explanation for why Miss Marjoribanks was not the success Oliphant had hoped is confusion over her complicated use of comedy in the novel. In her Autobiography, Oliphant

1 The narrator marvels at Miss Marjoribanks’ “statesmanlike breadth of view” (422). See Pamela K. Gilbert’s discussion of Lucilla as a “liberal statesman” in The Citizen’s Body: Desire, Health, and the Social in Victorian England. And for more on Oliphant’s linkage of the domestic, social, and political spheres in the novel, see Elizabeth Langland’s Nobody’s Angels.
wrote that the Carlingford series “made a considerable stir at the time, and almost made me one of the popularities of literature. Almost, never quite . . .” (70). Melissa Schaub rightly notes that because of the “pervasiveness of irony” in this sixth work of the series, pinpointing Oliphant’s political position can be difficult and it is necessary for the reader to differentiate between what she calls an “irony of tone” (the mock-heroic imagery) and a “structural irony” (196). Linda Peterson, focusing on the former, suggests that the constant association between Lucilla and warriors and generals only diminishes her: “the mock-heroic continually reminds us how serious real warfare is deemed in the world outside of the novel and how trivial Lucilla’s skirmishes seem in comparison” (72).

But Peterson’s implied definition of the mock-heroic, namely that it treats a trivial subject in the grand style in an effort to deflate the elevated character, is only one way of defining this term. In her reading of Miss Marjoribanks, Elizabeth Langland differentiates between traditional mock-heroic (which Peterson is thinking of) and Oliphant’s technique that “unsettles common assumptions and makes conventional distinctions appear facile” (157). In other words, Langland argues that by equating Lucilla with a general, the narrator makes Lucilla appear more powerful by linking “social belief with control of social policy” (157). Ultimately, Lucilla Marjoribanks’ domestic sphere is invested with larger social and political implications, a theme that appears in many of Oliphant’s novels.

As with modern scholars, contemporary critics often did not appreciate fully Oliphant’s subscription to the idea that small occurrences and incidents can have enormous consequence. One reviewer, in an 1866 Christian Remembrancer article, complains that it is the “infirmity of female writers” such as Oliphant in Miss Marjoribanks to “hang on small occurrences” and linger over “incidents which would be lost and utterly disregarded in the real stir of life” (199).
In her correspondence with Editor John Blackwood, Oliphant herself momentarily expressed concern that he would not appreciate her “over-minuteness” in the first two numbers but nevertheless determined to continue with this scale (*Autobiography and Letters* 197).

This issue of the novel’s scale has direct bearing on the criticism in the *Christian Remembrancer*. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, characters inhabiting Victorian fictional country towns are so focused on their circumscribed environments that they appear to obsess over trivialities. Oliphant’s focus in *Miss Marjoribanks* (and all of her Carlingford novels) is Grange Lane, “inhabited . . . by the best families of Carlingford” including the rector and his maiden sister, a retired colonel and his wife, and Dr. Marjoribanks and his daughter (20). Because the true aristocracy (the gentry or “county” folk) live outside the confines of provincial Carlingford, the professional middle classes become, in this shrunken hierarchy, what Langland calls “bourgeois aristocrats” or aristocrats by proxy (25). Thus, the bourgeoisie largely are entitled to feelings of self-importance. As Melissa Schaub puts it, “if Carlingford were a kingdom, then Lucilla would be its queen” (200). And because self-contained Carlingford has “no alien activities to disturb the place—no manufactures, and not much trade,” residents are free to privilege the quotidian (*The Rector* 1).

We have seen how the narrator’s use of the mock-heroic tone causes confusion about whether we are meant to laugh with or at Lucilla. My own reading of the novel will emphasize how Oliphant’s characters (rather than her narrator) use humorlessness and wit. By contrasting the unproductiveness of witty characters with Lucilla’s productive humorlessness, confusion ceases as we see that Lucilla is justified in taking things—even supposedly trivial things—seriously.
In humorlessly creating a community in Grange Lane and bringing order to “that chaos which was then called society” (19), Lucilla draws upon her education in political economy and consistently emphasizes the “public interest” (90). In other words, Oliphant connects her heroine’s humorlessness with selflessness. But in fostering public interest, Lucilla must often sacrifice her own feelings, revealing one of the main popular criticisms of utilitarianism. To make up for this deficiency, Oliphant has Lucilla struggle to balance the good of the community with her self-interest. Lucilla’s self interest comes to include emotion, unlike the enlightened self-interest identified with emotionless selfishness by opponents of utilitarianism. Accordingly, we can classify Miss Marjoribanks as a popular interpretation of political economy that rejects the economical position that selfishness alone (without emotion) can contribute to the general good. Victorian readers would have been familiar with such popular conceptions of political economy, especially after Dickens’ satire of utilitarianism in Hard Times (1854). Miss Marjoribanks as a popular interpretation of political economy has little to do with the complex philosophical arguments of such writers as Bentham and Mill. In this view of the novel, one can argue that in marrying Tom, Lucilla is finally able to achieve a balance between head and heart and is not simply entering a loveless marriage, as some scholars maintain. Overall, Lucilla changes very little, but when her father dies, the only true crisis she faces, Lucilla does become more sympathetic and emotional, a state of mind culminating in her marriage. Thus, though Lucilla lacks a sense of humor and never comes to possess one, she is the object of humor, and readers feel increased sympathy for her as the novel progresses.\(^2\)

\(^2\) It is conceivable that if a powerful, influential female character like Lucilla had also been funny, she would have been too threatening to gender norms.
“The sound principles of political economy”

When Lucilla Marjoribanks was at school she read political economy, and her training in these “sound principles” shapes her methods of organizing and running Carlingford society (93). On the one hand, Lucilla is a hedonistic utilitarian who subscribes to the “greatest happiness principle,” when she manages to “please everybody by having her own way” (my italics 113). And though Lucilla declares that much of her success is due to luck, she (like the mathematically minded political economists) also congratulates herself on her “reign of reason” (399). She had been taught at school, after all, that “feelings had nothing to do with an abstract subject” (223). On the other hand, Lucilla’s genius is of the kind that realizes that self-interest and public interest are inseparable. Lucilla’s “egoism” convinces her, the narrator assures us, that in discussing her own doings, she was “bringing forward the subject most interesting to her audience as well as to herself” (14). Everything that Lucilla does, from redecorating her father’s drawing room to hosting Thursday “Evenings” (rather than parties) (49), is in an effort to “be a comfort to dear papa” (17) as well as to bring the heterogeneous elements of society together. In representing the public interest, Lucilla clearly subscribes to the notion that what happens to one resident in Carlingford will affect the others, and she continually tries (usually successfully) to bring everyone together (90). She repeatedly sacrifices her personal sentiments to this “great work” (100).

Yet Lucilla eventually learns the importance of fostering personal feelings and emotions, like sympathy, in addition to the needs of society. Oliphant’s biographer Elisabeth Jay notes that in the hands of many other Victorian authors, Lucilla’s “mechanical absolutism” might have become “monstrous” (Mrs. Oliphant 224). Lucilla, however, remains likeable, I will argue, because she combines self-interest and public interest, pragmatic and ethical concerns. Before discussing how Lucilla’s humorlessness is key to her success in managing society, I will first
show, by way of contrast, why the witty residents of Carlingford are, unlike Lucilla, ill equipped to reign.

Dr. Marjoribanks, Lucilla’s father, is a detached patriarch in the tradition of Austen’s Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. The Scotch doctor is kept busy by his profession and when at home prefers to escape to the seclusion of his library. Furthermore, he is unsentimental and not at all “addicted to demonstrations of feeling” (8). After the death of her mother, the teenage Lucilla wants to leave school and immediately begin comforting her papa, who quickly nixes the idea because he thinks she will interrupt his routine. Once Lucilla completes school and returns to Carlingford at nineteen, the doctor’s opinion of his daughter continually changes, though he never completely understands or appreciates her. When Lucilla begins to sit in her father’s chair and redecorate his house, symbolic of her usurpation of his power, the doctor is surprised and annoyed by her audacity. He also wrongly thinks many of Lucilla’s declarations and schemes are insincere and laughs at her seriousness about what he thinks are trifles, such as Lucilla’s choosing drawing room colors to match her complexion and asking Barbara Lake to sing duets with her because Barbara’s voice perfectly complements her own. Nevertheless, the doctor genuinely respects what he calls Lucilla’s “talent,” and his pride in her continually grows (47).

As Q. D. Leavis rightly sums up, one of the purposes of *Miss Marjoribanks* is to “take the reader through the father’s phases too,” though arguably the reader appreciates and warms to Lucilla more than even Dr. Marjoribanks (6).

One of the main manifestations of the doctor’s detachment is his wit. Indeed, he most often takes on the role of “amused spectator” (117). In contrast to humor, which usually suggests nearness and tenderness, wit is often distanced and detached. Dr. Marjoribanks gave dinners for his male friends prior to the commencement of Lucilla’s evenings. But his dinners
do more harm than good to society because the men enjoy the food served at the doctor’s table so much that they have grown “intolerable” and have not been satisfied with a regular family dinner since (20). Doctor Marjoribanks’ dinners fail to unite Carlingford in the way that Lucilla’s evenings do, not only because he initially excludes the female population, but also because of his wit. The Evangelical rector’s sister, Miss Bury, for example, takes offense at Dr. Marjoribanks’ “profane jokes” and what she calls his “indifference. . .to many things in which it was his duty to have interested himself” (57). Similarly, the doctor threatens the peace at one of Lucilla’s own gatherings by launching “a shaft of medical wit” at Mr. Bury himself (149). This arrow metaphor is fitting and reminds us of George Eliot’s definition of wit, which she likens to an “electric shock, which takes us by violence” and that is “brief and sudden, and sharply defined as a crystal” (“German Wit” 2-3).

 Granted, Oliphant seems to expose the Evangelicals’ disapproval for any kind of levity, but, regardless, the doctor’s wit divides rather than unites. When the doctor does remain in the drawing room on a Thursday evening to observe, he chuckles to himself whenever Lucilla feels a check to her power. In another instance, as Lucilla prepares to support Ashburton in the upcoming election, her father shows the paper announcing Cavendish’s intention to run; Cavendish is a former suitor of Lucilla’s and a political rival of Ashburton. The doctor laughs at Lucilla’s shock, feeling “not sorry nor sympathetic,” and thinking Lucilla’s campaign on behalf of Ashburton lost (351). But once again, the doctor underestimates his daughter who does in fact make an M.P. out of Ashburton. Though Dr. Marjoribanks is not an evil character by any means, Oliphant shows that his wit is limiting; he is unable either to become an influential leader of society or to comprehend and cherish the full extent of his daughter’s talents.
Nelly Woodburn, a wife and mother who resides in Grange Lane, is also a wit rather than a humorist. The narrator explains that there are two factors that disqualify the women of Grange Lane from making society pleasant: circumstances (i.e. babies) and character. It is Mrs. Woodburn’s witty character or, more precisely, her habit of caricaturing her neighbors that prevents her from “knitting people together” and making a “harmonious whole” out of society (21). A caricaturist exaggerates recognizable personal qualities in another for comic effect. Mrs. Woodburn is highly skilled at taking on the tone and even the appearance of her victims, revealing the physical nature of this kind of comedy. Freud notes the physical dimension of caricature, explaining that the caricaturist will “innervate [his] speech” and change his “facial expressions” (248). Mrs. Woodburn’s style of wit recalls two characters from Trollope’s Barchester Towers: Madeline Neroni and her brother Bertie Stanhope. Madeline, as we saw in Chapter 2, combines her witty remarks, her beauty and sexuality, and her disabled body to bend others to her will. And Bertie, of course, is a caricaturist himself, though his medium is drawing.

Interestingly, Mrs. Woodburn’s skill does not cause her to be unpopular, which is surprising given that she keeps “all the good people in terror of their lives” (41). Rather, she is a celebrated entertainer in society because, the narrator admits, there are so few people in Carlingford who can be amusing. However, residents of Carlingford also realize that though they are part of Mrs. Woodburn’s laughing audience today, they could easily become her targets the next day. Despite the fact that Mrs. Woodburn’s victims try to convince themselves that her wit is never “ill-tempered,” caricaturing (and indeed most forms of wit) unlike humor cause neighbors to laugh at rather than with one another. It is what Freud, in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, calls a tendentious or aggressive form of comedy. Therefore, Oliphant shows, it will fail as a means of uniting society.
Mrs. Woodburn is a striking foil to Lucilla because whereas Lucilla’s humorlessness is a sign of her complete confidence in herself, Mrs. Woodburn’s wit signals her insecurities and desire to deflect attention away from herself. Though Mrs. Woodburn’s mimicry forces her to be often in the spotlight in a crowd, it focuses attention on the foibles of others rather than her own character. Indeed, because she is always “taking off” her neighbors, it is difficult to precisely describe Mrs. Woodburn’s true character (20). Mrs. Woodburn has many reasons for not desiring others to pry too closely into her own affairs, including her unhappiness in her marriage. The narrator describes Lucilla as being a “little hard” upon her satirist, when Lucilla states that unlike unmarried ladies married ones must consider how best to please their husbands, because Mrs. Woodburn does not much devote herself to that duty (89). And one of the few times Mrs. Woodburn assumes a natural tone, “if indeed she could be said to have a natural tone,” is when she rhetorically asks whether a woman ever does get along with her husband’s family (91). These details suggest that her caricatures allow Mrs. Woodburn a freedom of expression that her domestic duties do not.

Mrs. Woodburn’s caricatures also are an expression of her uneasiness about the lies surrounding her family history and her desperation at the thought of others (especially her husband) finding out. Mr. Cavendish, Mrs. Woodburn’s brother and fellow resident of Carlingford, claims to be “one of the [aristocratic] Cavendishes” though in reality his connections are not so high (22). When the truth begins to dawn on Lucilla, she proceeds to ask Mrs. Woodburn pointed questions about her brother, causing the housewife’s mimicry initially to utterly collapse and then to return with a vengeance. After Lucilla leaves, Mrs. Woodburn bursts into the “wildest comic travesty” of the queen of Carlingford, which the narrator explains acts as a “safety-valve” for Mrs. Woodburn (230). Trapped by her marriage, domestic duties, and the
lies of her brother, Mrs. Woodburn struggles to control her anger, fear, and even hysterical impulses through comedy, sometimes unsuccessfully. When Archdeacon Beverley (who knows that her brother is an imposter) arrives in Carlingford, Mrs. Woodburn shows physical symptoms of her fear. Everyone notices that her eyes have lost their brightness, that her nerves and temper have failed her, and that her sketches are especially bitter (190). She ultimately cannot be calm, collected, and humorless like Lucilla because she has not the clear conscience and confidence of a true ruler. Instead Mrs. Woodburn’s very name, as Elisabeth Jay notes in her superb introduction to the novel, hints at the continual threat of her “self-destruction” (xx).

In fact, Lucilla’s confidence makes her an appealing target of Mrs. Woodburn’s art because it gives Lucilla a certain “naïveté” (40). In Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Freud argues that caricature is directed against people of authority such as a monarch or ruler (248). It follows that the caricaturist of Carlingford will desire to take off the queen of Carlingford, but because Lucilla feels herself to be above recognizing such a “lèse-majesté,” she accepts Mrs. Woodburn’s sketches of her in a matter-of-fact way (89). As the narrator explains, it is only the “insignificant people” who are afraid of Mrs. Woodburn, a comment that ultimately reinforces the ineffectiveness of her wit and her overall powerlessness (84).

Throughout Miss Marjoribanks, Oliphant emphasizes the numerous ways characters attempt to represent Carlingford society, most of which are utter failures. In addition to Mrs. Woodburn’s “literary portraiture,” the Miss Browns “caricatur[e] hideously” in their photographs the residents of Grange Lane, while Rose Lake tries to “immortalize” them in her drawings (190, 84). But only Lucilla Marjoribanks, as we shall see, has the talent of continually representing everyone at his or her best.
“It is so odd I should have no sense of humor.”

Lucilla Marjoribanks readily admits that she has no sense of humor with “that consciousness of her own faults, and slight disposition to consider them virtues, which is common to persons of great endowments” (226). Oliphant makes it clear, however, that Lucilla’s humorlessness is much more of a virtue than a fault because it allows her to bring people together unlike the wits. As we saw in the case of Dr. Marjoribanks, wit usually creates distance between the perceiver of comedy and the laughed-at object of comedy. Lucilla clearly is anti-wit because in representing public interest, she must not laugh at any of her subjects or be complicit in “any attack upon an individual,” a decision that fosters unity rather than division (90). Indeed, Lucilla’s prestige rises in the eyes of her people after she snubs Mrs. Woodburn, the caricaturist, whom Carlingford residents fear. And, as Elisabeth Jay observes, because Lucilla is so self-assured, she harbors no feelings she would be ashamed to have exposed publicly; consequently, unlike Mrs. Woodburn she has no need to use comedy in order to deflect attention away from herself (Introduction xx).

In contrast to the more biting wit that includes ridicule, irony, and satire, the distinguishing aspects of humor came to be “sympathy and love,” definitions I have discussed in more detail in my Introduction and in Chapter 2 (Martin 26). Because sympathy is a key part of humor and Lucilla is humorless, one might be tempted to conclude that Oliphant’s heroine must be unsympathetic, but in fact, her relationship to sympathy is much more complicated. At first, readers are inclined to laugh at Lucilla’s tendency to congratulate herself upon her sympathetic nature. Lucilla marvels at the “breadth of her human sympathy” (259), and describes herself as reigning with “benevolence” and “goodwill,” terms often connected with sympathy (79). But Lucilla’s sympathy is not simply abstract and, as the novel progresses, we see more specific instances of her sympathy. To take one example early in Volume III, when Lucilla’s former
suitor Cavendish and her new suitor Ashburton meet awkwardly in her drawing room as rival political candidates, she gives a “a measure of her sympathy” to both and proceeds to play reconciler (378).

The origin of Lucilla’s sympathy is her humorlessness. By respecting her fellow citizens and not laughing at them, Lucilla demonstrates a sympathetic engagement that allows her to create a sense of community. In both The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century and his lecture on “Charity and Humour,” William Makepeace Thackeray describes the sense of community that a humorous, sympathetic writer achieves, likening him to a “week-day preacher” who awakens our love, pity, charity, and fellow feeling (English Humourists 2). After reading the work of a humorist writer, Thackeray argues, readers are “happier, better disposed to their neighbors, more inclined to do works of kindness, to love, forbear, forgive, [and] pity. . .” (my italics, “Charity and Humour” 350). Lucilla not only feels sympathy but inspires in Carlingford the type of sympathy that Thackeray describes; residents faithfully attend Lucilla’s Thursday evenings whereas before there was little society to speak of in Grange Lane. And though Lucila’s subjects vacillate between amusement and resentment toward her interferences, they nonetheless work. The remarkable thing about Lucilla is that she both recognizes her own superiority and remains involved in the lives of her neighbors anyway. She is never detached and instead strives for sympathetic engagement.

It is also true, however, that because Oliphant’s heroine can be so self absorbed, she cannot always “divine the characteristics of other people” (14). And most importantly, Lucilla knows when to withhold sympathy for the greater good of Carlingford. Lucilla has limited sympathy because she understands that there are times when individuals must be sacrificed to insure the strength of her reign. For example, when Rector Bury threatens Lucilla’s sovereignty
and independence by suggesting she should not be without another lady in the house, he presents the widowed Mrs. Mortimer as a solution. Lucilla plays the shocked ingenue, expressing surprise that Mr. Bury would be offering a prospective bride for her father (when he is really only suggesting a companion for Lucilla, as she well knows). In the process, Mrs. Mortimer faints, at which Lucilla unsentimentally reasons that there are some cases in which it is “absolutely necessary to have a victim” (65). Granted, Lucilla afterwards becomes Mrs. Mortimer’s patron and protector, but ultimately, in Lucilla’s world, stability trumps sympathy.

Another example of Lucilla’s willingness to sacrifice an individual (whether friend, neighbor, or relative) for the greater good occurs when Archdeacon Beverley threatens to expose Mr. Cavendish for who he really is, which would be a “dreadful blow to the community” (152). An evil to one member of a community is an evil to all. And as Langland rightly notes, because Mr. Cavendish is a “man of talent” he must be saved to consolidate the middle-class power base in his town and country (162). But in saving Cavendish, Lucilla is protecting both the public interest and her self interest. If the archdeacon revealed too much, he would “destroy public confidence” in Carlingford’s leadership; in other words, Lucilla would be blamed for not being discriminating enough about whom she allows into society (i.e. an imposter) (152).

Consequently, Lucilla must make the archdeacon feel “utterly subdued and conquered” so that he will stifle his desire to expose Cavendish (298). There is, though, a ripple effect because in protecting Cavendish, Lucilla must also separate him from the lower-class Barbara Lake, whom he loves. And when Barbara characteristically reacts angrily to her separation from Cavendish and refuses to look after her younger siblings, her sister Rose must become the mother substitute and give up her art career. Except perhaps in the case of Rose Lake,3 Oliphant does not ask her

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3 And even in the case of Rose, it is doubtful that we are meant to feel much sympathy for her. As Elizabeth Winston shows, most of the material Oliphant included in the serial edition of the novel but omitted from the three-
readers to feel sorry for these victims; instead we seemingly are meant to celebrate the strengthening of Carlingford.

As stated previously, Lucilla claims that she will not take part in any comical attack on her guests, but she occasionally contradicts this promise by encouraging the laughter of her company either to provide entertainment or as a form of punishment for a guilty guest. Lucilla categorizes her male guests into two groups: those who can flirt (and so serve a useful purpose) and those who cannot. Lucilla dismisses the latter group as “a butt when anybody wanted to be witty” (102). And when Cavendish stops paying his attentions to Lucilla and instead favors Barbara Lake, Lucilla pointedly recounts to her guests how her cook tried to cheer her after his defection despite the fact that she never suffered from low spirits. Lucilla’s guests then laugh a laugh that conveys both “guilt” (because they, too, assumed she must feel the desertion keenly) and “admiration” (132). Cavendish, meanwhile, feels the shame that Lucilla intends for him to feel. Others present feel laughter is an inappropriate response because a “young girl’s happiness” is “too serious a matter” to be laughed about (132). But Oliphant’s point is that Lucilla’s happiness has not been dampened; in fact, she is most happy running society and accepts that doing the job well will often mean neglecting her own personal prospects, a point I will discuss further in the next section.

Employing the “Lamp of sacrifice”

We have seen that Lucilla Marjoribanks’ character is not simply a compilation of utilitarian doctrine because she is capable of sympathy and looks beyond her own interests to the greater good. But in carrying the “Lamp of sacrifice,” Lucilla often neglects her personal

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volume edition deals with Miss Marjoribanks’ use of Rose Lake to entertain her guests. By omitting moments that “convey a subtle critique of Lucilla and sympathy for Rose,” Oliphant succeeds in achieving a “more flattering portrait” of Miss Marjoribanks (Winston 88).
prospects (100). In lieu of marriage, she decides to comfort her father and organize society. I have said that Lucilla’s humorlessness yields her selflessness; similarly, another manifestation of her humorlessness is her disinterest in love and marriage. Lucilla’s efforts on behalf of others fulfill her to an extent that marriage is superfluous. We must also keep in mind that Lucilla’s decision to temporarily “sacrifice” marriage is a sign of luxury. As I illustrate in my Introduction, characters of the professional class living in country towns often are perceived as being highly leisured. As many scholars have pointed out, Lucilla is a descendent of Austen’s Emma Woodhouse (a member of the gentry who lives in the village of Highbury) who has had “very little to distress or vex her” (55). Just as Emma has a “comfortable home and happy disposition” (55), Lucilla is “very comfortable. . .in every way” (335). Emma comes from a rich family and Lucilla’s father has a thriving medical practice. Both are motherless and have fathers who give them, more or less, free reign. As a result, Emma has had “rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (55) while Lucilla meets with “little opposition to speak of” (335). With such freedom and luxury, why would these heroines want to marry? As Oliphant’s narrator puts it, it is not necessary for Lucilla to “invent any romantic source of happiness” because her life is so full already (370).

But playing society hostess is not an adequate substitute for a love life in the minds of some of Lucilla’s neighbors, who accuse her of being unfeeling and cold. At one point Mrs. Centum suggests that Lucilla does not have “any feeling” (83). And some current scholars agree with this character’s understanding of Lucilla. Linda Peterson, for example, describes Lucilla as being a “little too well-regulated” (70). Indeed, when Lucilla prepares to decide on a course of action, she first and foremost considers what is “right to do” (358), and never accounts for the “action of any such unknown quantity as love” (245). Such a formulaic system recalls the
utilitarian habit of making every decision according to whether more pleasure or pain will result. And if Lucilla professes never to factor love into her decisions, what should we make of her marriage to her cousin Tom Marjoribanks? Elisabeth Jay notes that Oliphant frequently offers “resistance to the conventional happy endings of domestic romance” in her writing (Introduction xvi). It is possible to argue that unlike most Victorian heroines, Lucilla fails to subscribe to romantic notions of love (like Oliphant’s Phoebe Junior) and does not marry Tom because she is in love with him. Rather, this argument would go, Lucilla marries because after the death of her father she is impoverished and needs to marry someone, or because Tom is the only man left to marry, or because she knows she can manage him. As Langland sums up, “women often traffi[c] in men to solidify social bonds” (153).

While I do not read Lucilla as being merely cold and calculating, such a reading would explain why Oliphant’s publisher John Blackwood complained of a “hardness of tone” in the novel (Autobiography and Letters 204). Leavis suggests that such a tone would “grate on Victorian sensibility” (22). Similarly, Langland hypothesizes that many of Oliphant’s novels were consigned to obscurity because they challenge so many “Victorian sacred cows” including romance, angels, innocence, and passivity (153). But to focus too heavily on Lucilla’s indifference to romance, in contrast to more conventional Victorian heroines, blinds us to the moments, all related to her sexuality, when Lucilla does show emotion. Though Lucilla repeatedly says that she has no intention of marrying and only wants to be a comfort to her papa, she repeatedly betrays herself, thereby showing that she is capable of spontaneous feeling. Thus, if we stress Lucilla’s continual struggle between the public good and her personal feelings, which I have likened to a softening of the popular economic position that selfishness alone can
contribute to the general good, then her decision to marry (if not exactly motivated by her wildly passionate love for Tom) can at least be viewed as a decision both of the head and of the heart.

**Comic Deflations of Expected Proposals**

Though Oliphant validates Lucilla’s seriousness and tendency to calculate likely probabilities, an exception arises in matters of courtship. Generally, Lucilla only thinks of courtship rituals in so far as they assist her in hosting successful evenings. Mr. Cavendish, for instance, is a valuable assistant to Lucilla because he flirts and, as Oliphant’s heroine clearly understands, it is “always an advantage to have a man who flirts” (84). Though residents of Carlingford take this declaration as a *bon mot* or witticism, as we know, Lucilla is always in earnest. Lucilla must tap into everyone’s talents (whether Cavendish’s flirting or his sister’s caricatures) to keep her gatherings lively and varied. She frowns, meanwhile, on young men like Osmond Brown who have no conception of what it is to flirt and simply stand around, adding nothing to the company. But Oliphant clearly exposes the humor surrounding her heroine’s naïve belief that she can control the flirting of others and ensure that it remains merely “something to do” and some way to pass the time. Lucilla here takes the formulaic instructions of conduct books and political economy to extremes.

Just as Lucilla assumes she can manipulate flirting, she also believes she can influence the parameters of a man’s proposal of marriage to her. To a younger classmate, Lucilla confidently declares that it is possible for a girl “always to stop a man when she does not care for him,” a sentiment that puts the woman in charge of love making (16). When she begins her reign in Carlingford, Lucilla prepares for the fact that she might have to stop men from proposing because she plans to spend at least 10 years being single and comforting her father. In fact, she thinks of marriage as a pesky annoyance—as a “little cloud” that threatens now and then to move over her “prosperous way” (93). Lucilla’s plan not to consider marriage until she has remained
single for a specific number of years (a decade) is highly amusing and very characteristic of her. It implies that she will be able to find a husband at any time she chooses after those 10 years without any difficulty, just as she plans to control who flirts with whom on Thursday evening.

Despite Lucilla’s intention to control courtship matters as smoothly as she organizes everything else, we quickly realize this area will present some unexpected challenges. Cavendish’s flirting, for example, quickly becomes uncontrollable as his attentions veer from Lucilla herself to lower-middle-class Barabara Lake. And early in Volume I when her cousin Tom practically proposes to her, Lucilla is angry with herself because she had “not taken sufficient precautions to avoid the explanation,” an explanation she has already claimed is easily avoidable (75).

While scholars often focus on Lucilla’s “unmitigated success” in all that she does, I would like to stress in what follows that Lucilla never quite has a handle on her sexuality, evident by the fact that she expects a proposal of marriage from at least three different men over the course of the novel, none of whom manages to propose (Holubetz 44). Repeatedly, Oliphant achieves comic effect through romantic reversal of fortune. In deflating expected proposal scenes, the comic works against rather than toward classical comedy, which can be defined as the “maneuvering of a young man toward a young woman, with marriage as the tonic chord on which it ends” (Frye 450). Importantly, though, Lucilla being jilted (repeatedly) is comic; readers are meant to have limited sympathy for the heroine during these instances because we know that she is not in love with any of the men who never quite pop the question. In a later section of this chapter, I will contrast the limited reader sympathy for Lucilla during these “crises” and the enlarged sympathy we have for her during a real crisis in her life: the death of her father.
In a sense, Lucilla desires the honor that comes with proposals as well as the agency to reject them. She certainly is not in love with any of the men; however, it is still important to notice when she feels, whether it is shock, disappointment, or anger. Lucilla claims not to be bothered by these aborted proposals and repeatedly states that she “has not the least intention of marrying anybody. If I had thought of that, I need never have come home at all” (75). Despite these assurances, Lucilla often betrays herself, as in a representative scene that I will focus on in the rest of this section. Ultimately, her famous ability to utilize people and place to create a harmonious effect fails when it comes to matters of sexuality. Though she is capable of staging perfect Thursday evenings in the family drawing room, Lucilla eventually learns that she cannot stage a man’s proposal to herself, even in a setting of her own creation.

The first time we see Lucilla highly aggravated is in a garden setting that initially seems to be an idyllic, pastoral hideaway, allowing Oliphant to parody romantic garden courtship scenes. Lucilla has fixed up the garden containing a cottage and school for her protégé, Mrs. Mortimer, who now serves as the schoolteacher. As I mentioned in my discussion of The Rector in Chapter 4, Oliphant’s gardens often heighten our awareness of courtship rituals. And this one is no different, especially when Archdeacon Beverley, who is thought to be paying attention to Lucilla after Cavendish’s desertion, happens upon Lucilla as she surveys the garden. Yet the narrator maintains an ironic tone throughout by juxtaposing evidence of a forthcoming proposal with hints of an unexpected finale. Lucilla instinctively feels that the archdeacon is about to propose marriage, noting his “softened and mellowed” manner (196). The narrator states that the couple presents “all the appearance of being occupied with each other” (196), though neither “know[s] what is coming” (195). And though Lucilla immediately prepares herself for the “climax,” Oliphant repeatedly emphasizes that Lucilla’s method of strategic planning is
ineffective when it comes to sexuality (196). Hence, instead of being proposed to in the pretty, secluded garden, Lucilla is forgotten entirely when the Archdeacon glimpses his old love, Mrs. Mortimer, leaving Lucilla feeling as if the “earth had suddenly given way under her feet” (198).

Though Lucilla tries to cast her situation in the best light, reminding herself that she is not in love with the archdeacon, she cannot but admit that her position is “sufficiently aggravating” and the change in the archdeacon’s sentiments “difficult to bear” (200). Her frustration is most apparent in a scene that Oliphant portrays as comic rather than violent, when Lucilla expresses her anger physically, a display more common for the lower-middle-class Barbara Lake, by shaking Ethelinda Lake, who resembles her elder sister Barbara. The fact that Lucilla, who is usually so calm and collected, unleashes her vexation in a physical way on a miniature version of Barbara reveals the extent of her frustration at having both of her would-be lovers (Cavendish and the archdeacon) prefer other women (Barbara and Mrs. Mortimer, respectively).

Ironically, Lucilla is responsible for Mrs. Mortimer’s newfound bloom, which signals the widow’s renewed marital eligibility, and explains why the archdeacon only has eyes for her when he sees her again. Lucilla’s active help in procuring Mrs. Mortimer a house, garden, school, and students has allowed the once-faded widow to regain “the bloom on her cheeks” (196); the signs of Mrs. Mortimer’s sexuality contrast with the less obvious and more private signs of Lucilla’s own (196). Not only does Mrs. Mortimer momentarily usurp the lead role in the novel’s romance plot, but she also becomes the subject of mock-epic language, which is usually reserved for Lucilla only. Oliphant elevates our awareness of the schoolteacher’s sexuality with an allusion to Torquato Tasso’s epic Jerusalem Delivered (1581). When he first happens upon Lucilla, the archdeacon innocently asks, “Is [this] Armida’s garden, or the Elysian
fields?” (194). Armida, a character in Tasso’s poem, is the niece of the King of Damascus who lures Rinaldo, a Christian warrior, to live in her pleasure gardens. Elisabeth Jay has traced the parallel between Rinaldo and the archdeacon and Armida and Mrs. Mortimer (note in Miss Marjoribanks 508-509). After Rinaldo defeats the enemy he marries Armida just as Archdeacon Beverley disposes of Cavendish and marries Mrs. Mortimer. Oliphant’s parallel is largely ironic because the weak and retiring Mrs. Mortimer is more unlike than like the strong, seductive Armida. However, both characters do succeed in gaining the love and attention of their preferred lovers. It is always Lucilla’s fate, meanwhile, to be overlooked by men who choose women far inferior to herself.

Clearly, then, Oliphant stresses that though it is possible for her heroine to treat her campaign of duty formulaically, affairs of the heart cannot be planned for in this way. Furthermore, Lucilla begins to understand that possibilities that “did not depend upon herself alone had better not be calculated upon” with romance being first and foremost among these possibilities (390). Mrs. Mortimer’s garden is a sort of physical reminder of this lesson; a closer look at the garden reveals flaws, specifically nature under “miserable confusion” in Mrs. Mortimer’s care (203). While Lucilla had set up the garden in perfect order, it has since fallen into disrepair, the pear trees dangling untidily and the flowers drooping and dying. Not only is the confusion of the garden an apt metaphor for the confused emotions of the characters within, but it also reinforces to Lucilla that to leave a task in the hands of others (whether gardening or proposing) will only yield uncertain and chaotic results. It is only after Lucilla walks around the garden tidying up that she begins to calm down. In essence, she realizes that the archdeacon’s proposal is out of her hands and returns to doing something, namely re-organizing the garden,
over which she does have control (at least for the moment) thereby regaining her equilibrium and peace of mind.

Lucilla’s agitated reaction to the archdeacon failing to propose is not an anomaly; though she won’t always admit it, Lucilla becomes upset each time an anticipated proposal never comes, a point often overlooked by scholars. Though Lucilla has difficulty scripting her own love life, it should be noted that she is capable of successfully scripting the love life of others. After Cavendish and the archdeacon shift their affections, it is Lucilla who orchestrates their marriages. Though we laugh at these crises, we will see in the next section how our sympathies are enlarged when Lucilla faces a real crisis.

When reading Miss Marjoribanks, one quickly realizes that Margaret Oliphant took great delight in sketching Lucilla’s character. The author of the Christian Rembrancer piece states that it is evident that Oliphant took “extraordinary pleasure in the delineation” (199). Jay explains that focus is kept on Lucilla because Oliphant deflects our attention from other possible centers of interest. Though we like Lucilla Marjoribanks from the beginning, she becomes even more likeable as we see her gain in sympathy in the latter portion of the novel. Though Lucilla grapples with numerous emotions, some unfamiliar, during her period of mourning, it is important to realize that Oliphant never betrays the spirit of her heroine. In other words, Lucilla never becomes a sentimental heroine.

Scholars rightly praise Oliphant’s handling of Dr. Marjoribanks’ death because it is moving without being melodramatic, thereby remaining true to the novel’s overall tone. Leavis enthusiastically notes that the death of the doctor is an “outstanding artistic achievement” (8). And though the Colbys have few positive things to say about the novel as a whole, they describe the doctor’s death as “admirably restrained but moving” (63). When the seemingly healthy
doctor dies suddenly one night—a death presumably brought on by the news of his bankruptcy—Carlingford’s reaction is realistic. Residents feel “true sorrow,” but of a kind that is “not so much for the person mourned as for the mourner’s self, who feels a sense of something lost” (398). I would also suggest that scholars are not only reacting positively to the portrayal of the doctor’s death itself, but to Lucilla’s genuine reaction to it.

While readers feel limited sympathy for Lucilla during her proposal “crises” because we know that her heart is not engaged and that these are not real crises, our sympathy increases for her after she learns of the death of her father because she feels “honest sorrow” (400). One critic captures the importance of Lucilla’s honest emotions, noting that the tears Lucilla sheds “in the opening pages for her mother are not such genuine tears as those that flow for her father” (Christian Remembrancer 201). Oliphant’s heroine notices a change in herself and claims not to feel like Lucilla anymore:

She herself seemed to have changed along with her position. An hour or two before, she could have answered for her own steadiness and self-possession in almost any circumstances, but now the blood seemed to be running a race around her veins, and the strangest noises hummed in her ears. She felt ashamed of her weakness, but she could not help it. (408)

In this emotional state, Lucilla’s thoughts continually return to and cherish the memory of her father patting her on the shoulder in an uncharacteristically tender act before retiring on the wintery night of his death. And when she hears that her father lost his fortune and that she is penniless and alone, Lucilla thinks not of herself but of her father and what he must have felt, showing even more so than before her capacity for sympathy. The narrator reminds us that because Lucilla is not “much given to employing her imagination in this way, and realizing the feelings of others, the effect was all the greater now” (407). Thus, the heroine as well as the reader has increased sympathy at this point in the novel.
Though Lucilla does think about her father’s feelings first and foremost, she simultaneously shows a greater willingness to consider her own feelings, whereas previously she put public interest above self-interest. Significantly, the beginning of Volume III marks the end of Lucilla’s first ten years as ruler of Carlingford, the specified amount of time she was to remain unmarried. Lucilla’s thoughts do, in fact, turn toward marriage, in part because she needs a new challenge and in part because now more than ever she realizes how often her good deeds are unappreciated. Lucilla regrets that despite all of her exertions on behalf of her neighbors, she has failed to “procure their gratitude” (331). In addition, the doctor anticipates the consequences of his monetary loss and urges Lucilla shortly before his death to marry. Importantly, Lucilla reasons that though she is still willing to serve her fellow creatures, she is not going to “relinquish her personal prospects” (431). And, finally, after the death of her father, Lucilla no longer has the luxury of being too comfortable to think of marriage.

In describing Lucilla’s period of mourning, which she likens to a metaphorical widowhood, Margaret Homans argues that Oliphant presents a new, “privatized, emotional” Lucilla who acquires more “psychological depth,” a point which corresponds with my argument that Lucilla is more apt to consider her own feelings at this stage of the novel (81-82). Just as I have argued that Lucilla’s more focused attention on self-interest corresponds with her thoughts of marriage, so Homans states that Lucilla’s “privatizing mourning leads her into marriage,” a point I will return to momentarily (81). I agree with Homans that though the emotional Lucilla never completely disappears, the original Lucilla soon returns (82). After all, it is clear from Margaret Oliphant’s letter to Blackwood (in which she responds to his “hardness of tone” complaint) that she by no means desired her heroine to be dramatically changed by the end of the novel, but rather was determined to maintain Lucilla’s characteristic spirit throughout:
I have a weakness for Lucilla, and to bring a sudden change upon her character and break her down into tenderness would be like one of Dickens’s maudlin repentances, when he makes Mr. Dombey *trinquer* with Captain Cuttle. Miss M. must be one and indivisible, and I am pretty sure that my plan is right. (*Autobiography and Letters* 205)

Accordingly, even while Lucilla mourns her father, her mind is nonetheless a “bustle of plans and projects” which she cannot suppress, and despite the shock of her neighbors she decides to remain in her father’s house, even after she learns she is poor (400). Even her married name (also Lucilla Marjoribanks) clearly indicates how little this heroine changes over the course of the novel.

We have seen that Lucilla Marjoribanks continually struggles to balance the greater good with her personal feelings though, up until this point, she has favored the public good. But her declaration in Volume III to focus more on her personal prospects should prepare us for her finally accepting the marriage proposal of her cousin, Tom Marjoribanks. In essence, Lucilla’s marriage to Tom represents a balance between head and heart, utilitarian reasoning and emotion, and should not simply be dismissed as a loveless marriage. After all, there has always been a “warm corner” in Lucilla’s heart for Tom (487). Though Tom is clumsy and not terribly bright, he does have the sense to love and admire Lucilla, and it is only in Tom’s presence that Lucilla comes close to showing symptoms other wooed heroines exhibit. When Lucilla is first aware that Tom has arrived home unexpectedly from India, the usually unruffled Lucilla can be seen to have “changed colour, and given a great start, and put her hand to her breast” (467). When Tom finally does propose, Lucilla “relinquishe[s] her superior position for the time being, and suffered him to make any assertion he pleased, and was so weak as to cry” (474). Only for a man she truly cares about would Lucilla allow herself to be so vulnerable.

But importantly, Lucilla’s marriage is not simply about a selfish desire to gratify her personal taste; rather, her marriage will have positive effects on others as well as herself.
Though Lucilla lets Tom have his way for a while, she quickly gets swept up in her new plans for the future, forgetting all about Tom in the process. Lucilla decides that Tom should buy the Marchbank estate, which would enlarge her sphere of action and allow her to organize the village not far from their new home. “It gave her the liveliest satisfaction to think of all the disorder and disarray of the Marchbank village. Her fingers itched to be at it” (486). This new project confirms in Lucilla’s own mind the correctness of her decision to marry: “It justified her to herself for her choice of Tom, which, but for this chance of doing good, might perhaps have had the air of a merely selfish personal preference” (486). Though Lucilla’s rationalization is amusing and though she might still tend to favor public over private concerns, this quotation nonetheless reveals her goal of trying to balance both head and heart. In the end, Oliphant is able to have her heroine marry without turning her into the typical humorous, sentimental Victorian heroine. And appropriately, just as Carlingford had expected Lucilla to marry Cavendish, Archdeacon Beverely, and Ashburton, so they fail to expect her to marry Tom, leaving them to feel “the unexpected sensation of finding at last a distinct bit of romance to round off Lucilla’s history” (493).

One of the recurring themes of this project is provincial characters who make “crises” out of small, everyday concerns. But more than in any of the other novels I have examined, it is in Miss Marjoribanks that the main character’s habit of treating the trivial seriously is so consistently validated and rewarded. While witty characters create divisions instead of networks between neighbors, Lucilla’s humorlessness succeeds in bringing people together. And though Lucilla never gains a sense of humor, she does remain an object of reader sympathy, especially as we see her struggle to reconcile her utilitarian education with her own desires. Though we may begin, like Mrs. Woodburn and Doctor Marjoribanks, by laughing at Lucilla, we
increasingly come to admire and like her, and are drawn into the world of Carlingford that she has organized so well.
CHAPTER 6
NEITHER COMEDY NOR TRAGEDY: PATHOS AND REALISM IN ELIOT’S PROVINCIAL NOVELS

Readers associate George Eliot, perhaps more than any of the other authors I have studied in this project, with novels having provincial settings and focusing on the everyday lives of rural characters, townspeople, and the surrounding gentry. But in contrast to the other country town novelists I have studied, George Eliot chooses to set her provincial stories in times of crisis and change prior to the first Reform Bill rather than at mid-century in more idyllic country town settings. Furthermore, Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871), centering on the country towns of St. Ogg’s and Middlemarch respectively, generally are not considered great comic novels; in contrast to Gaskell, Trollope, and Oliphant, Eliot’s purpose is not primarily to make readers laugh, but rather, as one of the foremost realists of the nineteenth century, to extend our sympathies and our moral sentiment for ordinary men and women, usually through a tone of high moral seriousness.

While George Levine has shown in *The Realistic Imagination* that the “primary form in which most nineteenth-century English realism manifests itself is comedy” (21) (a statement that is applicable to Gaskell, Trollope, and Oliphant), Eliot’s writing about realism, in both her fiction and non-fiction prose, clearly reveals her belief that life is made up of an equal amount of comedy and tragedy. While small-scale crises are used for great comic effect in Gaskell, Trollope, and Oliphant, in Eliot, the everyday and quotidian are important, but not always funny. Scenes in Eliot’s works that may start out being humorous often become painful. Thus, my purpose in this chapter is to pay attention to those moments when we can see in Eliot’s works a movement from the funny to the unfunny, and to show how Eliot’s writing violates many of the conventions I have been tracing in this project. I will ask why, if George Eliot’s novels contain
many of the same elements as other comic country town novels, she chooses not to use a consistently comic tone.

Clearly emphasizing the importance of the everyday and the ordinary, Eliot outlines her definition of realism in the frequently cited chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* (1859). Let us “always have men,” Eliot’s narrator urges, “ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things” (187). The speaker desires to give her affection to her “everyday fellowmen” because, she argues, if we leave them out of our art, it is likely we will leave them out of our religion and philosophy, thereby framing theories which only fit a “world of extremes” (187). But the prophets, beautiful women, and heroes who comprise this world of extremes are rare, and thus we should give the bulk of our sympathy to ordinary people. The consequences of withholding our sympathies from the “tragedy” and “humour” in the lives of our fellowmen, Eliot writes in “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), would be extremely harmful; hence, the mobilization of sympathy for the common and the quotidian is a serious affair in Eliot’s aesthetic (qtd. in Pinney 271).

Of course, Eliot’s plea for realism in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856), though sincere, is very funny. These silly lady novelists of the “mind-and-millinery species” show an interest only in the heroine who is an “ideal woman in feelings, faculties, and flounces,” and in the hero who is at least a “great landed proprietor” (1343). But if their portraits of high life are unrealistic, these novelists have even less conception of ordinary individuals. Eliot’s observation that the ability of the lady novelist to “describe actual life and her fellow-men, is in inverse proportion to her confident eloquence about God” not only emphasizes the preachy, didactic tone of these novels but also hints at the preposterous diction used (1345). The slightest events, Eliot tells us, are treated in an elevated style, and characters in English villages act as if they have
stepped out of a melodrama or romance. Though Eliot’s tone is comical throughout, her message in “Silly Novels” is serious: female writers have a moral responsibility to write for the right reasons, not out of vanity. Furthermore, we will see that the insistence on the diminishment of dramatic excess emphasized in this essay is a principle Eliot practiced in her fiction.

Though Eliot’s realist aesthetic has been of much interest to scholars, the relationship of realism and comedy in her work is rarely discussed.\(^1\) And scholars who tackle the topic of Eliot and comedy often try to catalog the funny parts of her novels, or chart a simple shift from comedy to tragedy. Instead of an “either comedy or tragedy” approach, I want to show how Eliot’s realism is an unavoidable mixture of the two.

Looking at other texts in which Eliot describes her realist aesthetic, one will notice that the terms comedy and tragedy frequently appear. In “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton” (1858), another early work, Eliot interrupts her narrative as she does in Adam Bede to discuss the philosophy behind her realism. Eliot first undermines the simplistic definitions of comedy and tragedy held by an imaginary female reader, to whom tragedy means “ermine tippets, adultery, and murder; and comedy, the adventure of some personage who is quite a ‘character’” (36). Then, in urging her readers to sympathize with her ordinary, unheroic main character, Amos Barton, Eliot addresses her readers, telling us that we would “gain unspeakably” if we would learn to see the “poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy,” within the

\(^1\) Most studies of George Eliot and realism generally agree that, in the words of George Levine in The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot, the “energizing principle of George Eliot’s art was her realism” (7). However, many scholars also focus on the ways in which George Eliot pushes the limits of realism. U. C. Knoepflmacher’s George Eliot’s Early Novels: The Limits of Realism (1968) concludes that Eliot’s realism consisted of dual aims: the desire to adhere to the logic of the real world, and the need to guide readers toward the ideal. In a more recent work, Nineteenth-Century Literary Realism: Through the Looking Glass (1996), Katherine Kearns, whose main focus is on British and American novels not typically considered realist, argues that while “sublimity, rarity, and romantic oddity” are rare in Eliot’s realism, she does not consider them non-existent (35). Harry E. Shaw’s Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot (1999), which focuses on historical realism, provides an interesting discussion of the intersection of narrator, readers, and characters in Eliot’s work, ultimately arguing that by placing the narrator and characters under the constraints of history, Eliot reminds readers of their own responsibility as historical beings.
ordinary human soul (37). Eliot’s work therefore can be seen as an example of Erich Auerbach’s argument in *Mimesis* that modern realism developed as literature began to intermix high and low styles, including treating everyday reality seriously. These passages suggest Eliot’s belief that even ordinary individuals can have both tragic and comic experiences, though not the extreme absolutes of classical high tragedy (available only to gods and very powerful men) and low comedy (the slapstick adventures of the foolish and powerless). Returning to the passage from *Scenes of Clerical Life*, one should note that Eliot introduces another mode besides comedy and tragedy, namely pathos, that comes to be just as important (if not more so) in her novels. Eliot uses the term pathos to mean sympathizing pity, rather than one of the three Aristotelian modes of persuasion in rhetoric.

But though Eliot seems to suggest that common men and women can have their tragedy just as well as their comedy, she also demonstrates, in *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*, that characters in provincial society can never really achieve genuine comic or tragic status. In other words, Eliot believes that her subject matter is smaller than tragedy but worthier of attention than slapstick comedy and therefore deserves our sympathy above all, rather than primarily our admiration or derision. Because realism defines itself against romantic and sensation literature, there is a continual movement toward a “diminishment of dramatic extremes, as from tragedy to pathos” (Levine 13) and a “refusal of heroism” (Levine 16). This is certainly the case in George Eliot’s novels where characters—even the most admirable ones—are not allowed to be mock queens, kings, or heroes, let alone epic ones. Though we at first laugh at a character like Oliphant’s Miss Marjoribanks who fancies herself queen of Carlingford, we quickly come to think of her as just that—a queen—as we watch her successfully accomplish one goal after another. Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver, on the other hand, can only be a queen in her
dreams while Dorothea Brooke, though likened to St. Theresa, is continually thwarted in everything she attempts to do.

Granted, Eliot is redefining what is heroic. It is foolish of Maggie and Dorothea to aspire to be queens and saints because what they actually are, fallible human beings who are nevertheless striving to accomplish significant things and resist significant temptations, is more extraordinary than what a queen or traditional saint is. Nevertheless, in this chapter, I will show that Eliot continually collapses epic and mock epic to produce realism, thereby insisting on the necessity of another narrative mode besides tragedy and comedy, namely pathos.\(^2\)

Because of the efforts George Eliot takes to expand reader sympathy, it is not surprisingly that she favors the use of humor (laughing with) rather than wit (laughing at). But, importantly, because Eliot increasingly erases the distance between readers and characters, our sympathy comes to outweigh even our ability to laugh humorously with characters in both *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*. Comedy and sympathy, in fact, often are mutually exclusive in Eliot. To illustrate this principle, I will turn in the last section of this chapter to one of Eliot’s funniest works, “Brother Jacob” (1864), where we have the pleasure of laughing continually at the petty rural characters because George Eliot never asks us to sympathize with any of them.

On the surface, *The Mill on the Floss* seems to illustrate a simple movement from comedy to tragedy. Contemporary reviews, including one from *The Times*, noticed both forms: “In form we have the modern novel, with its every-day incidents and its humorous descriptions, but in spirit we have the Greek play, with its mysterious allusions and its serious import” (455). And while the *Saturday Review* praises Eliot’s “subdued comedy” (445) it also regrets that there

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\(^2\) Though I do not wish to equate epic and tragedy, or mock epic and comedy, it is true that because epic concerns the rise and fall of nations, it has great tragic potential, and though there are many kinds of comedy, the country town subgenre favors mock epic.
is “too much that is painful” in the novel (448). Furthermore, many reviewers agree with Henry James that the “chief defect” of the book is its conclusion, the tragedy of which seems out of joint with the first two volumes of the novel (465). But in actuality, the novel shows that because of the provincial narrowness of St. Ogg’s, characters are not able to rise about the level of tragic-comedy.

First, however, it is important to note that in early sections of *The Mill on the Floss* Eliot does employ the kind of comedy that I have been tracing throughout this dissertation by creating distance between a character’s (usually one of the Dodson sisters) perception of a “catastrophe” and the reader’s contrasting perception of the small scale of the “crisis.” However, in the works of Trollope, Oliphant, and Gaskell, our laughter at characters’ small-scale catastrophes is often balanced by our growing sympathy for them, but in *Mill* this kind of comedy does not increase our affection for the Dodsons. Contemporary reviewers generally praised Eliot’s characterization of the Dodsons though many, such as E. S. Dallas, still ultimately found them to be “stingy, selfish wretches, who give no sympathy and require none” (452); or, as the same reviewer succinctly puts it, they are the “most thorny set of people ever introduced into a tale” (457).

Usually characters who make much ado about nothing have the luxury of doing so, and Sister Pullet is no exception: she had “married a gentleman farmer, and had leisure and money to carry her crying and everything else to the highest pitch of respectability” (50). Thus, when the sisters and their husbands begin to arrive at the Tullivers’ to discuss how Mr. Tulliver plans to educate his son Tom, it is irresistibly funny to see the state Mrs. Pullet has worked herself into because a woman she barely knew has died. Mrs. Pullet pulls up in her chaise in tears because old Mrs. Sutton has died, though as her sister Glegg reminds her, “she’s no kin o’ yours, nor
much acquaintance as I’ve heard of” (49). The narrator explains that Mrs. Pullet is an example of “the complexity introduced into the emotions by a high state of civilization—the sight of a fashionably dressed female in grief” (48). In other words, the highly civilized and elaborately dressed Mrs. Pullet must gradually cease her crocodile tears in a subtle manner so that she does not accidentally crush her sleeves as she enters the house. Indeed, Mrs. Pullet recovers quickly so that she amusingly is able to freshen up her appearance once safely inside the Tullivers’ home.

Unlike Lucilla Marjoribanks, whose earnest treatment of clothes and décor was productive and beneficial to others, or the Cranford ladies’ elegant economy that later allows them to help support bankrupt Miss Matty, Mrs. Pullets’ melancholy treatment of fashion, though funny, is useless, even to herself. In another comical scene, Mrs. Tulliver, her children, and their cousin Lucy go to Garum Firs to visit Uncle and Aunt Pullet. The women folk mount a polished staircase, which, the narrator tells us, would have been like a “trial by ordeal” in barbarous times, to sneak a peak at Mrs. Pullet’s bonnet that is locked and wrapped carefully away in the “best room” (75). There is a “funereal solemnity” to the scene as Mrs. Pullet reveals the prized bonnet (which she has only worn once) and even begins to cry a little, leaving the young uncomprehending Maggie feeling that there is “some painful mystery about her aunt’s bonnet” (77).

Mrs. Tulliver is closer with Mrs. Pullet than with her other sisters because of their mutual love of millinery and other finery and she, like Mrs. Pullet, overvalues the trivial. But, in contrast to Mrs. Pullet, Mrs. Tulliver’s investment in the trivial is not funny but curiously touching. In the chapter entitled “Mrs. Tulliver’s Teraphim, or Household Gods,” soon after Mr. Tulliver has bankrupted his family in an unsuccessful lawsuit, we see Mrs. Tulliver worry more
about the impending loss of her linens and tea set than about her ailing husband. Maggie’s mother is more sympathetic because of the real nature of her suffering. Despite Mrs. Tulliver’s suffering, the wealthy uncles and aunts do little to prevent the Tullivers from having to sell their belongings. As I have shown in previous chapters, the aesthetic distance built in to country town novels diminishes as the reader is drawn in to the miniature environment, laughing sympathetically with, rather than at, characters. However, because the Dodsons are so “thorny,” readers remain distanced and only laugh at them, while their small world strikes us as overly sterile, uncomfortable, and petty.

Like her aunt Pullet, young Maggie Tulliver, Eliot’s heroine, experiences many minor catastrophes, which some readers are tempted to laugh at, knowing a child’s woes are not too serious. But unlike the Dodsons, Eliot ensures that readers are close to and sympathize with Maggie, in part, because the narrator reminds us that a child’s feelings are important and legitimate. In his essay on “Humour” (1928), Sigmund Freud argues that humor allows one to evade the compulsion to suffer, and in assuming a humorous attitude, one is in essence adopting toward another the attitude of an adult toward a child, “recognizing and smiling at the triviality of the interests and sufferings which seem to the child so big” (218). In The Mill on the Floss, the adult reader is allowed to adopt a humorous attitude toward young Maggie, but only to a certain extent. The most important thing in the world for affectionate Maggie is the love of her older brother Tom, who is quick to withhold his love. Maggie’s crises include forgetting to feed Tom’s rabbits, eating the bigger piece of jam puff, cutting her own hair, and pushing Lucy in the mud and running away to the gypsies, each of which seems like a crisis to Maggie only after Tom is unnecessarily hard upon her. In the first instance, after a mill employee forgets to feed Tom’s rabbits and Maggie does not remember to check on them, Tom tells his sister that he
doesn’t love her anymore; and later, after urging Maggie to eat the larger half of a pastry, Tom scolds her for being greedy.

The latter two incidents snowball only after Maggie is teased and laughed at. After hearing her hair criticized yet again by her mother and relatives, Maggie decides to cut it short, initially feeling a sense of freedom. But when Tom laughs at her, she begins to cry and feel a “bitter sense of the irrevocable which was almost an everyday experience of her small soul,” and also that “if Tom had laughed at her, of course everyone else would” (55-6). Similarly, one of the main causes leading up to Maggie’s pushing Lucy into the mud is Tom’s laughing at her for being a “stupid” girl who is not skilled at building card houses (73). But instead of joining in Tom’s laughter at Maggie, readers are more likely to sympathize with Maggie once we witness Tom’s ill-spirited laughter and unjust reactions toward his little sister.

George Eliot tempers our desire to laugh at these amusing childhood incidents through asides from the narrator reminding us of the seriousness of the troubles of childhood:

Is there any one who can recover the experience of his childhood, not merely with a memory of what he did and what happened to him. . .but with an intimate penetration? . . . Surely if we could recall that early bitterness, and the dim guesses, the strangely perspectiveless conception of life that gave the bitterness its intensity, we should not pooh-pooh the griefs of our children. (56-7)

Such a lack of perspective usually yields comedy, but in Eliot it calls for seriousness and sympathy. The “trivial” can be just as detrimental as the supposedly “real troubles of mature life,” and though Maggie’s anguish may seem trivial to those who must think of “Christmas bills, dead loves, and broken friendships,” it is no less bitter, and perhaps more bitter, to her (56). From a distance, Maggie’s eating the bigger piece of pastry or cutting her hair and later regretting it is funny, but by erasing this distance, Eliot asks us to sympathize with Maggie even more than she asks us to laugh with her.
Eliot’s juxtaposition of the trivial with “real troubles” emphasizes how often she asks readers to make connections between small and large incidents. In book four of *The Mill on the Floss*, the center of the novel, the narrator states that we “need not shrink from this comparison of small things with great” (223). The narrator describes the stifling, dull, vulgar villages on the Rhone (in contrast with the sublime, romantic villages on the Rhine) so that readers understand the “oppressive narrowness” that was acting on Tom and Maggie in St. Ogg’s, a place without any poetry, imagination, or religion to speak of (222). But the narrator makes it clear that the small example of Tom and Maggie has much larger implications. Just as natural science attempts to find a unity between small and large and examines how a single object can suggest a “vast sum of conditions,” so must our observation of human life. In other words, Eliot emphasizes in this passage a cornerstone of her sympathy, namely that sympathy is inspired by a mixture of the personal and the universal; Maggie and Tom’s personal circumstances have universal implications (223). Like many youth, they have risen above the “mental level” of their generation, but nonetheless are tied permanently to that generation (222). But while a unity between small and great is possible in the world of science, such a unity ultimately is impossible in the world of *The Mill on the Floss*. George Eliot wants readers to feel the narrowness of circumscribed St. Ogg’s, or the “small pulse of the old English town,” while the other novelists highlighted in this project ensure that readers come to feel that the country town is wonderfully all in all (as do the characters) and that no environment could be more comfortable (222).

In contrast to Trollope, Oliphant, and Gaskell, who create not only fodder for comedy but also positive results when elevating the trivial, Eliot prefers to emphasize how the smallest things can cause the greatest grief. Accordingly, we learn from the narrator that we can spoil the lives of our neighbors simply by “trivial falsities,” “small frauds,” and “small extravagancies” (22),
while Mr. Tulliver discovers the hard way that “everyday things” are sure to have a “cumulative effect that will be felt in the long run” (65). But more than any of the other characters, it is Maggie who struggles with everyday life and how to reconcile it with her passionate nature. Maggie continually makes “dream-worlds” to try to “dull her sensibility to her actual daily life,” and she longs for an explanation of this “hard, real life” and its “little sordid tasks” (233-34). Like some of the great comic characters that I have discussed in earlier chapters, Maggie is “always in extremes” (as her brother Tom complains) and apt to throw “excessive feeling” into “trivial incidents” (as the narrator remarks), but in Maggie’s case this habit only gets her into numerous and increasingly serious scrapes in unsympathetic St. Ogg’s (317, 305). As Maggie herself declares, “I was never satisfied with a little of anything” (267). Hence, Maggie tries to escape reality through her dream worlds, as when she runs away as a child to be queen of the gypsies, or when she fancies a world where people never get any larger than children and she again is the queen (though she looks like Lucy), and when she becomes absorbed in the books she reads, though all of these efforts ultimately are unsuccessful.

In one sense, Maggie’s tragedy is that she truly is queenly but lives in a provincial society that does not allow one to live an epic life. After all, the narrator reminds readers that millers like Mr. Tulliver and other “insignificant people” are just as likely to have tragedies as are noblemen in “regal robes” (162). But though The Mill on the Floss unquestionably moves from comedy to tragedy with Mr. Tulliver’s downfall and Maggie and Tom’s deaths, it is also true that Eliot prevents these provincial characters from being truly tragic. Eliot argues that family life on the Floss is never raised above the “level of the tragi-comic” (222). For example, when Maggie pushes Lucy into the mud, the intensity of her passions might have created a tragedy, but the narrator, following Aristotle’s definition of tragedy, concludes that Maggie’s action was not of
an appropriate magnitude for tragedy (85). One could, however, make the counterargument that this episode foreshadows the more serious tragedy that occurs when Stephen leaves Lucy for Maggie. Nevertheless, there is a continual movement away from pure comedy or tragedy and toward pathos. In *The Mill on the Floss*, we are meant to sympathize with and pity characters more than we are meant to laugh heartily at them or feel terror on their behalves.

In the end, the most telling sign of the unsympathetic nature of the St. Ogg’s community is its persistent need to fuss and laugh at Maggie Tulliver. Early in book one, Maggie describes to a neighbor a picture in the book she is reading, Defoe’s “The History of the Devil,” explaining that the woman in the water is a witch and if she swims she is a witch, and if she drowns she is innocent, a striking example of the bitterly unfunny. Also illustrated in the picture is a blacksmith “with his arms akimbo, laughing,” who Maggie believes is the devil (16). Many critics rightly have pointed out that this story foreshadows Maggie becoming an outcast and drowning in the Floss, but it is also worth noting that the blacksmith not only stands by passively but laughs. Maggie’s life imitates art when, toward the end of the novel, she returns from her extended boat ride with Stephen Guest and becomes to the women of St. Ogg’s someone to be shunned and about whom “gentlemen joked” (410). There is an enormous distance at this moment between the characters who make low comedy of Maggie’s tragedy and readers (and a few characters like Dr. Kenn) who feels mainly pathos.

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot initially provides us with two contrasting ways of understanding Dorothea Brooke’s character: as a mock-epic Don Quixote who quixotically sees what she wants to see and as a modern-day St. Theresa living an epic life. Yet Eliot undercuts the former by asking us to sympathize with and admire her earnest heroine rather than laugh at her, and the latter by showing how Dorothea, like Maggie Tulliver, continually is thwarted by
everyday life in provincial Middlemarch. In *Middlemarch* it is the witty characters who can better cope with everyday realities because, in laughing at themselves and others, they tend to be more clear-sighted and less apt to suffer from illusions than their more earnest counterparts, revealing that George Eliot is much more comfortable letting wit remain unchecked in this novel than an author such as Trollope who, as I explained in Chapter 2, carefully balances wit and humor.

Arguably, it falls to the narrator of *Middlemarch* to balance the novel’s wit and its sympathy. The narrator regulates irony, and the largeness of the narrator’s sympathy includes even Casaubon, Bulstrode and Rosamond. While the narrator uses ridicule to point out the ironies of most of the characters, she also asks us to understand and sympathize with them. But we must also remember that the narrator favors certain characters. Thus, though Dorothea and Casaubon are both subjects of irony, the witty remarks about Casaubon are more likely to stand in relief than are those about Dorothea, because we sympathize more with the novel’s heroine or, as Harry E. Shaw argues, because Dorothea comes to function as a “role model for the narrator” (255). Thus, while the wit of characters goes relatively unchecked, the narrator’s wit more often then not gives way to sympathy.

Preceding the second chapter of *Middlemarch*, when Dorothea first meets Casaubon, Eliot takes as her epigraph a section of Cervantes where Don Quixote sees a cavalier on a noble steed with a golden helmet while down-to-earth Sancho Panza merely sees a man on a grey ass. At the beginning of the novel, readers frequently smile at Dorothea’s “Quixotic enthusiasm” and the large inferences she repeatedly makes (400). Just as Tom complained to Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss* that she was “always in extremes,” so does the narrator of *Middlemarch* suggest that a “love of extremes” is one of Dorothea’s faults (5). While Dorothea’s friends and family see in
Edward Casaubon a plain, unattractive gentleman, she sees a man who resembles Locke; while they see a bookworm, she sees the most knowledgeable person of her acquaintance; and while they see a middle-aged bachelor, she sees a lover. Many readers cannot help smiling when Dorothea thinks that marrying Casaubon will be “like marrying Pascal” (24). Dorothea’s quixoticism leads her repeatedly to romanticize Casaubon.

In a tongue-in-cheek manner, the narrator tells us that Dorothea’s habit of seeing her future husband through rose-colored glasses is not unusual and that life would not have gone on without this “liberal allowance of conclusions, which has facilitated marriage under the difficulties of civilization” (18). But if Dorothea’s liberal allowances are comic during her courtship, they come to have tragic overtones after she marries and begins to see, ironically, the smallness of Casaubon.³

Like the clergymen I examine in Chapter 4, the Reverend Edward Casaubon has, up until the beginning of the novel, put his scholarly pursuits above both guiding his parishioners and finding a wife. But if the inability of the clergymen in Chapter 4 to navigate courtship rituals initially makes them targets of wit, they gradually become included in our sympathy as objects of and participants in humor as they marry and become good husbands, pastors, and members of the larger country community. Casaubon, however, consistently remains a target of witty remarks until he becomes something near tragedy. Marrying does not make him a better man or a better clergyman. Despite the narrator’s attempts to foster reader sympathy for him, such as the famous passage in book three when the narrator insists that Casaubon’s point of view is just as important as Dorothea’s, it is arguable that she doesn’t succeed in this task. In a way, it is

³ With the exception of Cranford, the novels I have dealt with in this dissertation largely are about courtship. In The Mill on the Floss and Middlemarch George Eliot gives less attention to courtship, and Middlemarch, of course, is primarily about marriage.
Casaubon’s realization of his own smallness—and the knowledge that others realize it too—that causes him to be weighed down by petty jealousies and self-doubt, leading to both his personal and professional failures. As Will says, Casaubon is an “elaborator of small explanations” (195) while Lydgate, who as Casaubon’s doctor has ample opportunities for observing his patient, describes his lot as “below the level of tragedy” (402). The smallness of this frigid character makes it difficult for readers to sympathize entirely with one who never gives any sympathy himself.

Q. D. Leavis notices a change in tone after Dorothea’s marriage to Casaubon. In her 1969 introduction to Oliphant’s *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866), Leavis makes the intriguing suggestion that this novel influenced the production of Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871). Leavis argues that Oliphant’s consistent ironic handling for her heroine, Lucilla, inspired Eliot to attempt a similar treatment of her heroine, Dorothea. But after Dorothea’s marriage, Leavis notes, Eliot abandons her ironic treatment and turns to sentiment and a more “congenial compassion” for Dorothea (13). Leavis’ observation about the change from irony to congenial compassion in *Middlemarch* complements my argument that sympathy comes to overwhelm the novel’s humor.

But if George Eliot does not maintain a mock-heroic treatment of Dorothea, neither does she allow her full epic potential. As evidence that Dorothea is not allowed by society to live an epic life, many critics point to how she continually is thwarted in the public sphere. For example, Sherry L. Mitchell argues that Dorothea is “incapable of sustained useful and satisfying activity outside of the domestic sphere” (36), while June Skye Szirontny suggests that Eliot’s heroine has “no meaningful work outside marriage” (21). But it is also important to note how the private world can also be limiting for her; in the Prelude, we are told that though “domestic
reality” was an obstacle to St. Theresa as a child, she eventually “found her epos in the reform of the religious order,” but Dorothea never successfully manages to overcome such domestic realities (1). Or, as Leavis observes, while Dorothea fights convention “naively,” a character like Lucilla Marjoribanks fights convention by comically and “cleverly making use of it” (12). Dorothea, rather, has no sense of humor about herself or anything else; she is too serious.

Unlike many other characters in the comic country town tradition, Dorothea does not use everyday domestic objects to her advantage.⁴ Initially, though, Dorothea sounds very much like Miss Marjoribanks when, imagining a union with Casaubon, she states that there would be “nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the greatest things” (24). But it is unclear from this passage how Dorothea defines “everyday-things,” and how they differ from the “trivial” in her mind, and it actually seems like she wants the opposite of everyday domesticity when in the same passage she talks of desiring to lead a “grand life here—now—in England” (24). While Lucilla gains agency from such everyday things as inspiring others to wear white dresses (high) and re-decorating her drawing room in green, Dorothea dresses plainly and shows no interest in making any changes to the furnishings at Lowick (to the surprise of her sister and uncle). Dorothea also frequently rejects material possessions—possessions Lucilla surely would have embraced—such as her mother’s jewels (except for the emerald ring and bracelet, which she justifies by merging her delight in the colors with her mystic religious joy), the cameos she purchases in Rome, and Sir James’ present of a puppy. But we should remember that Dorothea is a different kind of heroine from Miss Marjoribanks, with grander ambitions, like

⁴ In her chapter on Middlemarch in Nobody’s Angels, Elizabeth Langland makes the point that Eliot, in contrast to Oliphant, “continually erases the place of women in domestic management and thus in the political life of England” (207), in the process giving more weight to gender rather than class constructions. It is for this reason, Langland believes, that Eliot’s politics have been more acceptable than Oliphant’s (184).
sketching plans, building model villages,\(^5\) and convincing Middlemarchers that the charges against Lydgate are false. Therefore, we are meant to admire her good intentions and sympathize with her struggles, not just laugh at her.

Many scholars find little to laugh at in *Middlemarch*, while the few studies that examine comedy in the novel often point to the same few comic elements including the funny minor characters such as Mrs. Cadwallader, Mary and Fred, and Mr. Brooke, as well as the amusing first book in which Casaubon is the butt of many jokes.\(^6\) Tellingly, each of these characters either is a wit or is the target of witty barbs. While Eliot’s realism is most known for its sympathy, it is important to note that when asked which passages in *Middlemarch* are laugh-out-loud funny, readers consistently cite instances of wit / ridicule, a kind of comedy that implies distance rather than sympathy. The philosophy behind Eliot’s realism, as I discussed earlier in the chapter, is that detailing the quotidian will lead readers to grow morally and enlarge their sympathies. In this novel, however, readers most enjoy instances of wit; hence, comedy seems to work against the goal of realism in *Middlemarch*. Yet, though the witty characters may not be the most sympathetic, their perspectives are still important, because they tend to be more clear-sighted than their earnest counterparts.\(^7\)

\(^5\) Though, of course, Miss Marjoribanks does take on the building of villages by the end of the novel.

\(^6\) Jeanie Thomas strives to “revive regard for the minor characters of *Middlemarch* and for the humor essential to their presentation” (69). In “Mrs. (Polly) Lewes’s Comic *Middlemarch,“ Mark Irvine states his goal of going beyond a discussion of funny minor characters in *Middlemarch* so that he can examine the narrator’s wit regarding major characters and, in the process, he provides “a number of examples” of comedy in book one (35). Laura Mooneyham’s “Closure and Escape: The Questionable Comedy of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*” comes closest to my own view that Eliot’s realism mixes comedy and tragedy. Mooneyham notes that the comic mode of *Middlemarch* is “challenged and compromised” (137), though she ultimately concludes that the novel is firmly bound in the comic tradition (147).

\(^7\) This is considerably different from *Miss Marjoribanks*, where witty individuals are divisive and disqualified from being leaders of society while humorless Lucilla is successful *because* she lacks a sense of humor (see Chapter 5).
Mrs. Cadwallader, the busybody wife of the rector, leads the campaign to find someone to prevent Dorothea from marrying Casaubon, and her barbs against Dorothea’s future husband are often labeled as some of the memorable comic lines in the novel. Mrs. Cadwallader explains her comic propensity by noting that because her husband, with his “solid imperturbable ease and good-humor” (61-2), finds everybody “charming” (52) and thus fails to attend to the decencies, she must hide it by “abusing everybody herself” (53). In other words, they are the perfect pair because they balance each other. Mrs. Cadwallader, a classic wit, cuts jokes with a sharp “turn of the tongue that let you know who she was,” including when she refers to Casaubon’s soul (which Dorothea has called a great soul) as a “great bladder for dried peas to rattle in” (52) and his blood as being “all semicolons and parentheses” (65).

Granted, the narrator warns us against developing a prejudice against Casaubon because of “Mrs. Cadwallader’s contempt for a neighboring clergyman’s alleged greatness of soul, or Sir James Chettam’s poor opinion’s of his rival’s legs . . . or . . . Celia’s criticism of a middle-aged scholar’s personal appearance” (77). Yet Casaubon’s detractors have realized what Dorothea is unable to see, that Edward Casaubon is not a suitable husband for her, though they come to this conclusion by faulty reasoning. Casaubon is not a bad husband because of his personal appearance, legs, or diminished masculinity, but because of his coldness and inability to love. However, I would argue that though it might be easier for them to express their concerns by ridiculing Casaubon’s personal appearance, behind such attacks lie nervousness about his lack of feeling. Jeanie Thomas rightly notes that Sir James’ question about whether Casaubon has a heart is “right on the mark” (73). At any rate, the point worth stressing is that Mrs. Cadwallader’s jokes begin to get to the truth of Casaubon’s character in a way that her husband’s desire to think the best of him does not.
Another instance where a witty perspective reveals an important truth, though at the expense of sympathetic humor, concerns Mr. Brooke’s run for Parliament and his speech to the Middlemarch electors. Though good-natured, Mr. Brooke exhibits that “fundamental principle of human speech” of repeating himself, not to mention his tendency to muddle his thoughts and contradict himself; indeed, Eliot’s narrator makes sure that readers mostly laugh at him rather than with him (33). Not only do Mr. Brooke’s rhetorical deficiencies make him ill-prepared for political speechifying, but of even more consequence is the fact that though he ostensibly wants to enter Parliament so that he can improve the conditions of the people, his own tenants live in some of the worst conditions in the county. All of these elements lead the crowd to erect an effigy of Mr. Brooke as the tipsy landowner incoherently fumbles his way through his speech. The crowd laughs and taunts him as a mocking echo can be heard after everything Brooke says. Even Brooke’s own committee is in danger of succumbing to the infectious laughter. While Mr. Brooke’s closest friends (and Dorothea) had frequently dropped hints that he was going about the election in the wrong way and fails to understand the pulse of the people, it takes seeing his own caricature for him to fully comprehend his mistake, at which point Mr. Brooke withdraws from the election and briefly flees to Europe. Significantly, it was the wise Mrs. Cadwallader who, early in the novel, warned Brooke that he would “make a Saturday pie of all parties’ opinions, and be pelted by everybody,” which is more or less what actually happens (48).

If *Middlemarch* is about (mis)perceptions and the continual need to readjust our focus and learn to see better, one can conclude that Mary Garth is one of the best readers in the novel. And Eliot connects her clear-sightedness with her witty nature. Because she does not labor under false expectations, she does not set herself up for unhappiness, but rather can laugh at things as they come. Mary consistently laughs, smiles, and smirks spontaneously, having
decided to “take life very much as a comedy” (299). At times, Mary is a detached wit, sitting back and observing the folly around her; as Mr. Farebrother notes, she “gauges everybody,” (166) while the narrator describes her eyes as “clear windows where observation sate laughingly” (131). Fond of her own thoughts, Mary often re-plays the scenes of the day, her lips “curling with amusement at the oddities to which her fancy added fresh drollery” (299). The narrator tells us that Mary’s chief virtue is her honesty and truth-telling and ability never to indulge in illusions (105); in fact, she thinks others are ridiculous in their illusions (299).

But not all illusions are comical in Mary’s eyes, such as her realization that Mr. Featherstone will not leave his money and property to Fred, as Fred hopes. Thus, with good-natured Fred, the person for whom Mary cares most, she not only teases but also seriously urges him to find a profession and learn to become steady and responsible. Mary stipulates that she will not marry Fred if he becomes a clergyman because to see him in such a role would be like looking at a “caricature” (492). In other words, Mary realizes that the horse-riding, pleasure-seeking, gambling Fred is not cut out for giving sermons, importantly showing Mary’s realization that comedy is not the appropriate response for every occasion. Though Mary can be a detached spectator who enjoys laughing at her neighbors, the narrator assures us that she is prevented from becoming cynical or bitter because of her gratitude and respect for her parents and her desire to better the man she loves.

In contrast to the witty characters in *Middlemarch*, the earnest, humorless characters like Lydgate, Rosamond, and Dorothea, are more likely to be deluded and to suffer from false expectations. When Lydgate first meets Dorothea, he decides she is a “good creature,” but a “little too earnest” (86). The society of such a woman, he thinks, would be “about as relaxing as going from your work to teach the second form,” and he instead desires to recline “in a paradise
with sweet laughs for birdnotes, and blue eyes for a heaven” (88). Rosamond Vincy, often likened to a bird and described as having “melodic charm,” undoubtedly is the inspiration for Lydgate’s ideal (87). Though Lydgate does not know either Dorothea or Rosamond well by this early stage of the novel, he has an initial preference for the latter rather than the former primarily because Rosamond seems the kind of woman who would laugh sweetly.

But while laughter and smiles usually are spontaneous and natural (as they are for Mary Garth), for Rosamond, they are only called upon or shown as part of her effort to play the proper, accomplished female. The narrator tells us that Rosamond “catches every tone except the humorous,” and that she never jokes, which perhaps is the most “decisive mark of her cleverness” (150). Though Rosamond dislikes her dimples and smiles little in society, she occasionally chooses to reveal a smile or show her dimples, but only on what she deems to be the right occasion. At an early meeting between Lydgate and Rosamond at Mr. Featherstone’s, the miserly old man tastelessly emphasizes Rosamond’s charms, and Lydgate admires how she waves away the attention while not showing her dimples. But knowing that Lydgate watches her, Rosamond later shows her dimples when speaking to Mary, thereby revealing to Lydgate her “adorable kindness” (109).

Lydgate must readjust his notion of the superiority of “sweet laughs for birdnotes” rather than an earnest wife after his profession fails in provincial Middlemarch and he and Rosamond disagree about how to get out of debt. Rosamond refuses to interest herself in plans to economize, and though Lydgate himself by no means likes the demands of poverty, he can imagine that two people who love each other and think in common might “laugh over their shabby furniture, and their calculations how far they could afford butter and eggs” (we can picture a couple like Fred and Mary doing this) (667). But Rosamond is unable to accept their
situation, much less laugh at it; her once silvery, melodic voice begins to trickle like “cold water-drops” on her husband’s ears (627). Rosamond’s coldness and unsympathetic nature are directly related to her humorlessness.

During this crisis, the doctor’s thoughts recall Dorothea’s “passionate cry” to know how she might comfort her ill husband, whom Lydgate was called in to examine (562). Later, when Dorothea is the only one who believes Lydgate is innocent of taking a bribe in return for his silence regarding Bulstrode’s culpability in Raffles’ death, Lydgate feels comforted by her “simple earnestness,” sympathy, and desire to help him (724). Hence, Lydgate has been doubly mistaken: not only does he reject sympathetic earnestness too quickly, but he does so for sweet laughs, which have never been a main characteristic of Rosamond’s anyway. Through Rosamond’s humorlessness, Eliot reinforces the idea that she is acting or regulating herself at times when she should be natural and spontaneous; ironically, however, on the rare instance when Rosamond shows natural tears (the opposite of laughter) because Lydgate has been staying away to avoid gossip, he is so moved that he foolishly proposes.

Though Dorothea’s ready sympathy is preferable to Rosamond’s icy disengagement, George Eliot nevertheless shows us that Dorothea must learn to enjoy life, which is what Will Ladislaw finally teaches her. Ironically, it is Dorothea’s deep sympathy that initially prevents her from enjoying. When she states on her honeymoon that art does not seem to make the world better as she would wish, Will is promoted to refer to Dorothea’s “fanaticism of sympathy” and to urge that “the best piety is to enjoy” (209). Will is the perfect teacher; like the reader, he is an outsider to Middlemarch and can therefore clearly detect absurdities. Though he struggles between laughing aloud and “scornful inventive” at the match between Dorothea and his grave
cousin, he usually manages to content himself with a “merry smile,” and thus is not mean-spirited (195).

When conversing with Will at different points throughout the novel, Dorothea’s face frequently breaks into a smile, and she can even jokingly envision a kind of mock-heroic life for herself when in his presence. Because Will always sees more in what Dorothea says than she herself does, she enjoys being able to “rule beneficently” in his company by making the “joy of [his] soul” (343). Further, when Will vows not to take any actions of which Dorothea would disapprove, she smiles and says, “I shall have a little kingdom then, where I shall give laws” (349). Eliot’s gesture toward the mock epic is funnier here than when Dorothea imagined she would be marrying Pascal because, importantly, she is no longer deluded; she is in on the joke rather than the butt of it. When Dorothea marries Will, it is for love and happiness, not ambition, and she will accordingly be rewarded with more scope for action. In the end, Will becomes more earnest and steady and joins Parliament with Dorothea’s help, while Dorothea, though she never gains a sense of humor, does begin to enjoy life with Will much more than she did when married to stern Casaubon. Her newfound ability to enjoy is evidenced by the rapid conception of their child, which also hints at the orgasmic nature of laughter.

We have seen that comedy and sympathy often are mutually exclusive in George Eliot’s fiction, and therefore it should not be a surprise that readers feel no sympathy for the characters in her most broadly and consistently comic work, “Brother Jacob,” written in 1860, though not published until 1864. This witty fable tells the story of an egotistical confectioner, David Faux, who believes he has a better chance of making a name for himself in the West Indies and

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8 Ironically, Will misjudges Dorothea the first time he meets her because he thinks she is laughing at him. At Lowick, Mr. Brooke asks Dorothea’s opinion of Will’s sketch and she pleads that she is no judge of art. But Will incorrectly believes there is “too much cleverness is her apology: she was laughing at both her uncle and himself” (73). Later, the remembrance of this episode causes Will to laugh aloud in the “pure enjoyment of comicality” (74).
therefore attempts to steal his mother’s guineas to afford the voyage. But he is thwarted temporarily by his “idiot” brother Jacob whom David must bribe with lozenges before he can escape (thereby associating himself with candy in Jacob’s mind forever more). Six years later, after having failed to impress the West Indians, David turns up back in England, calling himself Edward Freely, and opens a confectionary shop in the country town of Grimworth. David creates an impressive background for himself and is on the brink of marrying into a well-to-do Grimworth family when, once again, Jacob shows up and foils his plans, revealing that Edward Freely is really David Faux, and showing the moral of the “unexpected forms in which the great Nemesis hides herself” (87).

“Brother Jacob” is the anomaly of George Eliot’s oeuvre not only because of its sustained comedy but also because it is the only work in which she takes a villain (albeit a petty one) as her main character. U. C. Knoepflmacher’s observation that David Faux is the “most unpleasant character in George Eliot’s fiction” speaks to the fact that he is an antihero (224). Similarly, Rosemary Ashton notes that the story is “remarkable for the complete absence of family or conjugal love between any of the characters” (245). David himself is not of an “affectionate disposition” (56) and though he “liked to be envied; he minded less about being loved” (86). Readers never come to love Faux and instead laugh at him because, though he believes himself to be a “fine fellow,” the narrator continually reminds us how very average he is (50). His small-scale roguery mirrors the small-scale of the backward town he attempts to dupe, and by peppering her story with mock-epic language, the narrator assures us that this character eventually will be deflated. In fact, we are told that a “fine peripateia” will check the progress of David’s corruption, making it unnecessary for us to sympathize with the victims just as it is impossible for us to sympathize with the unscrupulous pastry chef (64).
There is a limited amount of scholarly work available on the story Eliot described in her journal as a “slight Tale” (qtd. in Harris 86), and in a June 1864 letter as a “trifle” (qtd. in Haight 157). Many book-length studies of George Eliot merely mention “Brother Jacob” in passing and usually look to Eliot’s personal life for her motivation in writing it. Knoepflmacher suggests that “Brother Jacob” provided Eliot “relief” from her realization of the imperfect ending of *The Mill on the Floss*, and that the former work gave her the motivation to write *Silas Marner*. Similarly, Rosemary Ashton argues that just as Eliot wrote another short work, “The Lifted Veil,” to “give vent to negative feelings” while planning *The Mill on the Floss*, so did she write “Brother Jacob” while working herself up to *Romola*. Like Knoepflmacher and Ashton, Rosemarie Bodenheimer characterizes the writing of “Brother Jacob” as cathartic for Eliot, and Bodenheimer concludes that the work is Eliot’s “coming-to-terms with the extended crisis of pseudonymity” she had suffered the year before drafting what was then titled “Mr. David Faux, confectioner” (148). In my view, it is almost as though Eliot was exhausted by her own effort of sympathy with the “emmet-like” inhabitants of small towns (*Mill* 222), and wrote “Brother Jacob” with a witty, detached voice as a relief. Though some recent articles on this story emphasize its connection to empire, I will focus on the provincial aspects of the tale, in the process showing that “Brother Jacob” deserves to be considered beside other portraits of mid-Victorian country towns.9

Because David Faux fancies himself extraordinary, he desires more than provincial society can offer him. He considers himself a “striking young man” (57), speaks highly of himself to his mother (51), and scorns the idea that he could “accept an average” (50). As a

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9 A recent trend in several articles on “Brother Jacob” is a focus on its connection to colonialism. Carl Plasa, in a splendid article, reminds us that confectionary is an “art of the composite and the amalgam,” and that in “Brother Jacob” confectionary therefore “functions as a trope for the very yoking of domestic gratification and colonial oppression” (290). Melissa Valiska Gregory, meanwhile, connects the nemesis figure, so central to Eliot’s moral, to imperialism, arguing that in revealing that “one’s past mistakes always emerge to disrupt one’s present life,” the nemesis has a “cultural resonance” when it comes to imperial domination (283).
youth, David, the son of a British yeoman, chooses to become a confectioner because at that time a confectioner seemed to him a “very prince whom all the world must envy” (49). But he quickly comes to see that not only can one be satiated by sweets, but also that the confectionary line is not “favorable to a soaring ambition” (49) or the best “preparation for the office of prime minister” (50). He therefore looks beyond England to the West Indies as a place where he will be received enthusiastically and, with luck, find a “gullible princess” (60). And after stealing from his mother and ditching his idiot brother without any compunction, that is exactly where he heads.

But the sarcastic narrator makes it clear that David is extraordinary only in his own mind. David’s mediocrity coupled with his lack of moral growth or evolution creates a tale of circularity, even regression. Therefore it is fitting that six years after he traveled to the West Indies, David Faux, a.k.a. Edward Freely, ends up back in England in a “low place,” appropriately named Grimworth, where he once again opens a confectionery (66). Grimworth, “only mentioned with the most scornful brevity in gazetteers” (70), is a country town with little competition and a suspicion of new comers, fearing they might “bring in the system of neck-and-neck trading” (61). Instead, Grimworth residents prefer a more traditional approach to consumption, patronizing the shops where their mothers and fathers had shopped. Grimworth’s lowness is evident by the fact that “even the great people there [are] far behind those of their own standing in other parts of this realm” (70). Even the richest family, the Palfreys, is in a state of decline because of their recent monetary loses, evidenced by their washed out, overgrown farm.

But this does not stop the townsfolk from thinking well of themselves and hoping to ascend the social scale. The narrator treats the Palfreys in a mock-epic style, noting that despite their economic hardships, they still refuse to think of themselves as being on the same level as
the “old-established tradespeople” whom they visit, for: “the greatest people, even kings and queens, must visit with somebody, and the equals of the great are scarce” (69). Hence, when Freely shows an interest in courting Miss Penny Palfrey, her parents support the match, being impressed by Freely’s exciting stories about the West Indies and “his expectations from his uncle in Jamaica,” neither of which is true (74). Eliot elevates the Palfreys merely to deflate them, in contrast to Trollope, Gaskell, and Oliphant who bestow an affectionate measure of elevation on aristocratic clergymen, the Amazons, and Queen Lucilla and her subjects, respectively. Though they are imposed upon by David, the Palfreys and their neighbors garner little sympathy from readers because they have many of the same motivations as David.

Chapter two and three of this three-chapter story consist of the narrator describing “the gradual corruption of Grimworth manners from their original simplicity” (64). But as I have already hinted, this is not simply the story of a villain who took advantage of innocent, rustic, likeable people deserving our sympathy and pity. And the narrator goes on to say that delineating such a corruption would, indeed, be a “melancholy task, if it were not cheered by the prospect of the fine peripateia or downfall by which the progress of the corruption was ultimately checked” (64). Peripateia is a reversal of fortune, such as a fall in tragedy or a success in comedy. Readers therefore are assured that, despite the corruption, Edward Freely will experience a downfall, continuing the theme of circularity/regression, and that the corruption will be of short duration.

David Faux, meanwhile, in choosing the “generous-sounding” name of Edward Freely has styled himself in the manner of an “open-hearted, improvident hero of an old comedy” (63). But instead of “raining sugar almonds, like a new mana-gift,” as one would expect of such a hero, he merely hands over the pastries that have been fully paid for (63). Freely’s corruption of
Grimworth mainly concerns the housewives who, despite initial protestations, gradually cease preparing homemade pastries and instead buy Freely’s. But in accepting Edward Freely, Grimworth goes against its better judgment, highlighting what Helen Small calls their “minor [and repeated] accommodation of principle to interest” (xxxvii). Mr. Prettyman, for example, notices that Freely is a “bit too fond of riding the high horse,” and thinks Freely having gone to the West Indies indicates he “got little credit nearer home” (68). And Penny amusingly expresses one of the text’s major ironies: “only it seemed strange that a remarkable man should be a confectioner and pastry-cook” (70). Yet most of the residents of Grimworth come to accept Freely because of their pride and greed.

Of course, the very essence of Eliot’s comedy is that David is a villain of limited means and limited success, who repeatedly is foiled by a half-witted brother. His actions are all small-scale. We come to find out, for example, that Faux “dared rob nobody but his mother,” and though “Satan” suggested that he rob his master with whom he is apprenticed before emigrating, David lacks the nerve (76). In the West Indies, he fails to impress the natives, finds no princess to wait on him, and discovers that the only way he can make money is by baking. And, in Grimworth, as David edges closer to marrying Penny Palfrey, Jacob arrives looking for “b’other Zavy” and his lozenges (80). As Ashton and others have noted, the lack of familial affection is remarkable for a story by Eliot. Before David is exposed by Jacob, Penny’s brothers and sisters “were rather inclined to sneer [at Freely’s bow legs and sallow complexion] than to sympathize,” with their sister (74). And when Jacob does arrive and claim to be David’s brother, David initially refuses to claim him. When Edward Freely finally is exposed as David Faux (‘Fox would have been more appropriate,” say Grimworth residents), David becomes an “object of
ridicule” of “public derision” (86). He leaves Grimworth, likely for another unsuspecting country town, where he will forever be followed by brother Jacob.

My discussion of “Brother Jacob” and my earlier mention of “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” should silence the notion that George Eliot is incapable of writing in a purely comical vein. Eliot could not have written the novels that she did without subverting the comic country town novels of Gaskell, Trollope, and Oliphant. But unlike these writers, Eliot felt no nostalgia for the milieu in which she set her novels. Rather than asking readers to laugh at characters who make crises out of small events during fairly stable times, Eliot prefers for us to feel the smallness of things, on the one hand, and the all-consuming nature of those same things, on the other hand, until the golden mean of realism is achieved. By mediating readers through this process, Eliot ensures that we will sympathize with, rather than laugh at, the personal lot of her characters and the universal applications that follow.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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