In cultures around the world and at different times within the same culture, the freedom allowed women to accept or refuse a marriage proposal differs markedly. The distinguished Kenyan novelist, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, was imprisoned for a year after the performance by peasants and workers of his coauthored play in Gikuyu, *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I Will Marry When I Want)*. Even in present-day Nepal, upper-caste Brahmin marriages are arranged by elaborate negotiations between the two families. The bride and groom are not supposed even to have seen one another, except by way of complex indirects, before the wedding ceremony.

Henry James’s *The Awkward Age* (originally published in *Harper’s Weekly*, 1898–99) records a transitional moment between Victorian and modern assumptions about marriage in Western culture. The heroine, Nanda Brookenham, is rendered unmarriageable, because she knows too much about sex and about the sexual behavior of those around her. She has figuratively lost her virginity. She does nevertheless exercise a woman’s right to choose. Her refusal of Mitchy’s proposal expresses the double bind of her particular social, historical, and cultural moment. The man she loves, Vanderbank, will not propose marriage to her because she knows too much. She is not virginally pure. She is a piece of damaged goods. She will not accept Mitchy’s proposal because he does not care what she knows. That makes him an unsuitable husband for her. The result, as she says of herself, is that she will never marry. “I shall be one of the people who don’t,” she says at one point. “I shall be at the end . . . one of those who haven’t” [9: 232]. To her mother, later in the novel, she says, “Oh, . . . I shall never marry” [9: 329]. These are not just constative statements. They are also speech acts—promises or declarations.

Sethe, the heroine of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), can choose to marry Halle, slave though she is, although she must ask permission of her owner’s wife, Mrs. Garner. The pathos of her situation is that she wants a wedding, but finds no official marriage ceremony can take place to indicate community sanction for her union with Halle, no ring, no public exchange of vows, no blessing by the minister, no uttering of the words, “I pronounce you man and wife.” She is just expected to move into Halle’s bed, and that is that. They have already been sleeping together surreptitiously, outside, in a cornfield. Sethe, in *Beloved*, makes a special dress for herself out of sacking, so there will be something to signal her marriage. The sovereign authority of the slaveowner, however, is the primary public ratification of her union with Halle. Mrs. Garner gives Sethe a pair of earrings as a sign of her approval of the marriage.

In a somewhat similar, but of course not quite identical, way, same-sex partners today are in most places in the United States denied the right to marry in any legally binding way.

1. See the brilliant doctoral dissertation on this topic by Sarah Miller, Twice-born Tales from Kathmandu: Stories That Tell People.
way. They are also denied the lawful privileges that come with marriage, even though society often, somewhat grudgingly, tolerates their living together. This means that at least eight percent of the United States population is treated in this area more or less as black slaves were before emancipation. They can couple but not legally marry.

My focus here will be on Victorian middle- and upper-class courtship as represented in novels by Anthony Trollope and on the differences between Trollope and James in their treatment of this topic. In Trollope’s novels, a woman’s absolute right to say no to a proposal of marriage is a fixed and unchallenged convention. The woman is not required to give any reason for saying no. She can say no in the face of all the pressure put on her by her family and by the surrounding community. She must not speak her love until her lover declares his love, but once his proposal is uttered, the privilege of saying either yes or no is inalienably hers. This privilege was an essential part of what was a temporary, unstable, and somewhat contradictory Victorian bourgeois and upper-class ideology governing courtship and marriage. An ideology, we know, is, as Louis Althusser said, an imaginary construction of a real condition of existence [166–67]. Other features of this ideology were the assumption that a woman is “owned” by her father, who “gives” her to her bridegroom in the marriage ceremony; the assumption that being in love, for either a woman or a man, is what one might call a metaphysical condition, a spontaneous commitment, for life, of the whole self, body and soul, to the other; the assumption that interclass marriage is taboo, comparable in this to the taboo against miscegenation that used to hold sway in the United States; the assumption that even if both the man and the woman belong to the same class, they may not marry without sufficient money in hand; the assumption that once a marriage has been solemnized, the couple are “one flesh” (“Whom God hath joined, let no man put asunder”) and therefore that divorce should be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Just so I may not be misunderstood, let me assert, here at the outset, that I find this ideology absurd and unjust. It was a way of keeping women subordinate. Like all ideologies, however, it works beautifully if you accept its premises. I want to show just how it seemed to make sense, to both men and women, when experienced from the inside, at least if a novelist like Trollope can be trusted to have told the truth about the English society of his day. I rejoice, however, that most people today, me included, no longer accept the premises. The collapse of this repressive ideology is one thing that is meant by “women’s liberation.” The fatal contradiction in this ideology was the granting of women that one essential moment of freedom, the freedom to accept or refuse a marriage proposal. A little freedom, however, is likely to go a long way, in this case eventually to cause the whole ideological structure to collapse. Societies that have arranged marriages, or, to speak more plainly, coerced marriages, like the Nepalese society I have mentioned, are exempt from this contradiction. They may therefore have more staying power.

The right to say no is the privilege to utter a “felicitous” performative in response to the performative invitation of the proposal. It is felicitous in the sense that it works. It makes something happen. It is a way of doing things with words. The proposal is a bona fide speech act because it puts the woman in the position of having to answer either yes or no, or perhaps a temporizing “maybe.” The proposal cannot lead to publicly acknowledged engagement and then to marriage, procreation, and the redistribution of property and, often, rank unless the woman says yes. Everything depends on that little word. This is so, even though the unmarried daughter was still, in that culture, in a manner of speaking, and in more than a manner of speaking, her father’s property, just as she became her husband’s property when she married. The father’s ownership was signaled in the marriage ceremony by another performative event, as the bride’s father “gave away” the bride: “Who gives this woman to be married?” “I do.” Only the father, in that culture, could pronounce the “I do” that authorized the “I do’s” of the bride and groom.
The unmarried woman’s yes or no fits the standard definition of a felicitous speech act, as given, for example, by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*. Nevertheless, it is a special kind of speech act. All speech acts are ways of doing things with words, but many different modes exist. A promise is not the same thing as a bet, and neither of these is the same thing as a bequest, or a warning. The woman’s “yes” is not the same kind of speech act as the minister’s “I pronounce you man and wife.” Each kind of performative has to be analyzed separately, its differentiae identified. What is special about the unmarried woman’s yes or no to a marriage proposal is that it is to a considerable degree life-determining. It is a big deal. If I promise to meet you for coffee at three in the afternoon tomorrow and then do not show up, that is a failure to fulfill a promise, a social breach, but it is not likely to be the end of the world for either of us, or even necessarily the end of our friendship. It is no big deal, especially if I can come up with a plausible excuse (another special form of speech act). The woman’s yes or no to a marriage proposal, however, determines (or did determine in the Victorian period) the conditions of existence for that woman, for good or for evil, for the rest of her life, as in Isabel Archer’s “yes” to Gilbert Osmond, discussed below. It was also determining for the man, though not so extravagantly. The “double standard,” for example, allowed a married man to have extramarital sex more or less with impunity, whereas adultery for a married woman led to social ostracism.

Whether Trollope represents things as they really were at that time in Britain is another question. Much sociological and cultural research would be necessary to decide one way or the other. Trollope’s accounts of Victorian courtship, however, have the ring of truth about them. It is certain, moreover, that Trollope’s novels, even if they do not correspond exactly to the way people “lived” then, nevertheless provided for their multitudinous readers, over the thirty or so years of their publication (1855–84), models for how people should behave. This includes many examples of how young women should behave when receiving a proposal of marriage. Novels supplemented, in this regard, conduct manuals.

Why do I choose Trollope? Partly because I have long been fascinated by his novels and have been reading them for many years. I consider them to be to a considerable degree a fantasy world, in spite of their presumed reflection of Victorian bourgeois society. They are fantasies not only in the way almost all of them end happily in the triumphant reaffirmation of the ideology I have described, but also in their promulgation of that ideology in other ways, and in such features as the assumption that his characters are transparent to one another, can see spontaneously into one another’s minds and hearts, or as in the assumptions that lie behind the climactic moments in so many of Trollope’s novels in which the weak, usually the heroines, stand up to the strong (in the form of parents, friends, siblings, other authority figures) and prevail. I consider Trollope to be probably the purest expression of Victorian middle-class ideology, including the ideology of “family values” and of the rights of unmarried women, at least as seen from a male perspective. That qualification is important. Victorian female novelists, George Eliot or Elizabeth Gaskell, not to speak of the Brontës, saw these matters somewhat differently. I choose Trollope partly because his novels are, for the most part, about middle- and upper-class courtship and marriage in Victorian England. That is my topic in this essay. More precisely, Trollope’s novels often, though not always, focus on the situation of unmarried young women in England at that period. I find Trollope of great interest, finally, for the many ways he not only reinforces the Victorian ideology of courtship and marriage, but also, often subtly or even unostentatiously, puts that ideology in question. He Knew He

2. Anthony Trollope lived from 1815 to 1882. The Warden was published in 1855. Though he published several novels before that, The Warden was his first great success. An Old Man’s Love, Trollope’s last completed novel, was published posthumously in 1884. There are about forty-seven Trollope novels all told.
Was Right (1869) quite explicitly performs that putting in question. It is, in my judgment, partly for that reason, one of Trollope’s greatest novels, as I shall argue.

Henry James, in a comprehensive appraisal of Trollope’s work, written soon after the latter’s death, says of Trollope:

After this, however [that is, after the presentation of Eleanor Bold in Barchester Towers], Trollope settled down steadily to the English girl; he took possession of her, and turned her inside out. He never made her a subject of heartless satire, as cynical fabulists of other lands have been known to make the shining daughters of those climes; he bestowed upon her the most serious, the most patient, the most tender, the most copious consideration. He is evidently always more or less in love with her, and it is a wonder how under these circumstances he should make her so objective, plant her so well on her feet. But, as I have said, if he was a lover, he was a paternal lover; as competent as a father who has had fifty daughters. He has presented the British maiden under innumerable names, in every station and in every emergency in life, and with every combination of moral and physical qualities. She is always definite and natural. She plays her part most properly. She has always health in her cheek and gratitude in her eye. She has not a touch of the morbid, and is delightfully tender, modest and fresh. Trollope’s heroines have a strong family likeness, but it is a wonder how finely he discriminates between them. One feels, as one reads him, like a man with “sets” of female cousins. Such a person is inclined at first to lump each group together; but presently he finds that even in the groups there are subtle differences. [“Anthony Trollope” 1349–50]

This is said with remarkable justice and accuracy. I can only say, “yea verily” to what James says. I endorse his propositions with my “yes.” I would add only that the tenderness, modesty, and freshness of Trollope’s English girls, their gift for playing their parts most properly, is especially displayed in their charmingly correct behavior during courtship, and in their acceptance, with “gratitude,” of their subordinate role. Most of Trollope’s novels center on the question of what man the delightful English girl will marry. Once she is married, she is comparatively uninteresting, though Trollope’s Lady Glencora, in the Palliser novels, is a brilliant exception to that rule. When a British maiden has reached marriageable age, she is the focus of anxious and absorbed attention by her parents and siblings, her friends, the whole circle of her “community.” Whom will she marry? Until she marries, her selfhood, insofar as it depends on her subject position as the wife of so-and-so, has not yet been settled. She is a wild card, without a fixed value, unpredictable. She is even dangerous to the status quo, since it is impossible to predict with certainty to whom she will say yes or no, how she will employ her right to “marry when she wants.”

I would add also that James’s own first great masterpiece, The Portrait of a Lady, is perhaps his most Trollopean novel. It was published in 1880, while Trollope was still alive. James’s long obituary essay on Trollope was published in 1883, just three years after The Portrait of a Lady. James’s novel, like most of Trollope’s novels, centers on the question of whom the heroine will marry. As in Trollope’s novels, so in The Portrait of a Lady, the heroine, Isabel Archer, is accorded the right to say yes or no to proposals of marriage. She exercises that right, repeatedly, by saying no over and over to Caspar Goodwood and to Lord Warburton, to the amazement of her friends and relatives, particularly in the case of Lord Warburton, who would be a splendid match. She refuses the villainous Gilbert Osmond once, too, and then, in an event that occurs offstage, as it were, since it is not directly narrated, Isabel, failing to “read him right” [4: 192], makes...
the disastrous mistake of accepting Osmond’s second proposal. Having said no over and over to three different men, she finally says yes to the wrong one of the three. She brings thereby lifelong sorrow on herself and, it should be said, on him too. He has also misread her. In marrying her he has, as his sister, the Countess Gemini, somewhat maliciously thinks, “found his match” [4: 226].

After Isabel has accepted Osmond, three people who love her and have care over her, Caspar Goodwood, her Aunt Touchett, and her cousin Ralph Touchett, ask her the same question, each saying, in effect: “Why in the world have you said yes to this awful man?” In all three cases she gives variations of the same answer, in each case using the word “explain.” To Caspar: “Do you think I could explain if I would?” [4: 51]. To Mrs. Touchett: “... I don’t think it’s my duty to explain to you. Even if it were I shouldn’t be able. So please don’t remonstrate; in talking about it you have me at a disadvantage. I can’t talk about it” [4: 55]. To Ralph: “I can’t explain to you what I feel, what I believe, and I wouldn’t if I could” [4: 72]. For James, as for Trollope, a woman has an inalienable right to say no. It is, moreover, not her duty to explain herself, to give her reasons, even if she were able to do so. As Ralph Touchett says, though mistakenly in what comes after his “but,” Isabel will “please herself, of course; but she’ll do so by studying human nature at close quarters and yet retaining her liberty” [3: 396]. Her liberty is just what she loses by marrying Osmond. Mrs. Touchett, Ralph’s mother, tells him, in response to what he says about Isabel pleasing herself, “The two words in the language I most respect are Yes and No. If Isabel wants to marry Mr. Osmond she’ll do so in spite of all your comparisons. Let her alone to find a fine one herself for anything she undertakes” [3: 395]. Plausible figurative comparisons, Mrs. Touchett is saying, such as the ones Ralph employs, can be found to justify any decision and make it seem rational.

The process of decision-making is, after all, what I am scrutinizing. What counts, for Mrs. Touchett at least, is the performative utterance itself, not any cognitive statements, such as metaphorical comparisons, that, falsely, seem to support it. The woman’s yes or no is, for James in this novel at least, to some degree inscrutable, inexplicable, without ascertainable reason. That does not prevent it from having implacable performative force as a way of doing things with words. Once Isabel has said yes to Osmond’s proposal, everything is different for everyone around her, and especially of course for herself. The suspension about which way she will jump is broken. The community of those who know her, that is, all the characters in the novel, now can go forward on the new basis. That is true in Trollope’s fictional worlds too, but with a fundamental difference. It is a difference not just between two novelists whose productive careers just barely overlapped. It might perhaps also be taken as a differentiating feature allowing a distinction to be made between Victorian and modernist fiction. The difference is obvious: in Trollope’s novels the girl’s final saying yes almost always, though not quite always, leads to a happy ending in a successful marriage. The novel ends with the heroine destined to live happily ever after. In James’s novels this almost never happens. Marriages, for James, are usually either disastrous failures or never come off at all. Think not only of _The Portrait of a Lady_, but of _The Awkward Age, What Maisie Knew, The Ambassadors, The Wings of the Dove_, or _The Golden Bowl_. What a panorama of misery! Why is this? What is the reason for this striking difference in the treatment of the same materials: courtship and marriage in United States or English middle-class culture? To answer this question and to identify how Trollope makes happy marriage plausible, it will be necessary to look in some detail at some examples of Trollopean girls saying yes or no, exercising their right to choose, in his work.

I choose, somewhat arbitrarily, out of what James calls “innumerable” examples, Lady Glencora, in _Can You Forgive Her?_ (1864–65), Ayala, in _Ayala’s Angel_ (1881), Nora, in _He Knew He Was Right_ (1869), Lily Dale, in _The Small House at Allington_...
Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *Double Fantasy 2 (Sex)*
“Directed Dreaming,” installation view
March–April 2006 at Postmasters Gallery, New York
and The Last Chronicle of Barset (1867), and Madame Goesler, in Phineas Finn (1869) and Phineas Redux (1874). I cannot of course do full justice in a short paper to Trollope's amplitude and subtlety in representing these women saying yes or no to marriage proposals. My citations are no more than salient tips of icebergs. The reader is encouraged to look at these scenes for herself or himself. A large part of their force lies in the minute detail with which they report the give-and-take of dialogue and the moment-to-moment thoughts and feelings of the women in these episodes.

Speaking of Lady Glencora's love for the "worthless" Burgo Fitzgerald and her marriage to Plantagenet Palliser, whom she does not love (in Can You Forgive Her?), Trollope comments in An Autobiography: "To save a girl from wasting herself, and an heiress from wasting her property on such a scamp was certainly the duty of the girl's friends. But it must ever be wrong to force a girl into a marriage with a man she does not love" [119]. The reader will note that Trollope speaks of Glencora's person as a quasi-monetary commodity, not unlike her fortune, as something that can be "wasted" and should not be wasted. Glencora ultimately decides to say no to Burgo's illicit proposition. She is a somewhat anomalous figure among Trollope's heroines. She does yield to the persuasions of her friends in refusing Burgo, but she also had earlier yielded to them in agreeing to marry Plantagenet Palliser, though she does not love him. What is anomalous is that she has a relatively happy life and is apparently much admired by Trollope's narrator. She is forgiven, it seems, in spite of Trollope's stern universalizing judgment: "But it must ever be wrong to force a girl into a marriage with a man she does not love." Glencora has succumbed to just such pressure.

Ayala Dormer, the heroine of Ayala's Angel, thinks only an Angel of Light come down from heaven would be a good enough mate for her. Early in the novel, after Ayala has already refused one suitor, Tom Tringle, she meets the red-haired and not-very-handsome Jonathan Stubbs at a ball. She dances with him, but tells herself that one thing is sure, he is not that angel she is waiting for: "Neither the one nor the other [neither Tom Tringle nor Jonathan Stubbs] was to be spoken of in the same breath, or thought of in the same spirit, as the Angel of Light" [155]. Ayala pertinaciously refuses Jonathan Stubbs's repeated proposals of marriage and then, finally, in the climax of the novel, accepts him. She says no and no, but finally says yes. When her friend Lady Albery, quite understandably, asks Ayala when it was that she began loving Stubbs, she answers, to Lady Albery's amazement, "I think I fell in love with him the first moment I saw him" [538]. She gives a similar answer to Stubbs when, not unreasonably, he asks her why she has refused him so often if she loved him from the first: "I did love you then, almost as well as I do now. . . . I think that if you had asked me on that first day at the ball in London I should have said yes, if I had told the truth" [544]. The reader, this one at least, assumes he or she must have missed something. A return to the narrator's account of that first meeting at the ball shows, however, no textual evidence whatsoever that Ayala fell in love with Jonathan Stubbs at first sight. Quite the opposite.

Trollope is innocently pre-Freudian. Little if any notion of the unconscious is present in his work. For Trollope, the self is almost always in full possession of itself, in lucid self-consciousness. Even so, it looks as if, in this late novel at least, Trollope believes you can be in love without knowing it. The narrator cannot tell the reader that Ayala loves Jonathan until she becomes aware of it herself. This follows a convention that limits the narrator to recording what the character thought and felt at a given moment. Or perhaps there is, after all, some kind of Nachträglichkeit at work. A later event, such as Ayala's fear that Jonathan may never again ask her to marry him, triggers the coming to consciousness, as an effective motive for decision, a being in love that was there all along, since the first time she met him. In any case, it is clear that, for Trollope, in order for Ayala to be a proper, modest, and frank young woman, she must say no to Jonathan's proposals.
as long as she is not aware of being in love with him. She must also accept him, when he asks for her hand, once she is aware that she does love him.

My next example comes from He Knew He Was Right. That admirable novel is unique among Trollope’s fictions. It tells the story of marital disaster caused by a husband’s gradual going mad through unjustified jealousy. The novel has a number of subplots of courtship, parallel to the main plot. They are analogous to it by negation, since all of them end happily. In one of them, Nora Rowley, the heroine’s sister, refuses two proposals from the heir to a rich peer, Mr. Glascock, even though her parents pressure her to accept him. She eventually marries her true love, Hugh Stanbury, a journalist, over the initial strenuous objections of her father. The father objects because Stanbury is poor and politically liberal. She disobeys that law against marrying across class lines I mentioned earlier.

My interest here is in the scene of Nora’s rejection of Mr. Glascock’s second proposal. She has refused the first proposal because she realizes that, admirable as he is, she does not love him. “I do not—love you,” she says [125]. When Glascock comes to propose a second time, Nora enters the room where he waits to ask her hand, determined to accept him. Everyone has told her this would be a splendid match: he is a nice man, she likes him well enough, he is “head over heels in love with [her]” [119], and so on: “She would go to the encounter boldly and accept him honestly. It was her duty to do so” [157]. His second proposal misfires, however, when he makes the mistake of asking her again whether she loves him or can come to love him. She cannot bring herself to lie about that, since she is a good girl. Good girls, in Trollope’s world, don’t tell lies. So Nora refuses him again, once and for all, against her intentions, against her worldly good, and against the wishes of all her family and friends. The chapter is Trollope at his finest in the presentation of scenes in which the woman says no:

“Miss Rowley, may I hope that you can love me?”
She did not answer him a word, but stood looking away from him with her hands clasped together. Had he asked her whether she would be his wife, it is possible that the answer which she had prepared would have been spoken. But he had put the question in a different form. Did she love him? If she could only bring herself to say that she could love him, she might be lady of Monkhams before the next summer had come round.

“Nora,” he said, “do you think that you can love me?”
“No,” she said, and there was something almost of fierceness in the tone of her voice as she answered him.

“And must this be your final answer to me?”
“Mr. Glascock, what can I say?” she replied. “I will tell you the honest truth;—I will tell you everything. I came into this room determined to accept you. But you are so good, and so kind, and so upright, that I cannot tell you a falsehood. I do not love you. I ought not to take what you offer me. If I did, it would be because you are rich, and a lord; and not because I love you. I love someone else. There;—pray, pray do not tell of me; but I do.” Then she flung away from him and hid her face in a corner of the sofa out of the light. [158]

When Nora tries to explain to her sister why she has said no, she repeats what she has said to Mr. Glascock, after having enunciated the social law that governs all such scenes in Trollope: “I suppose a girl may do what she likes with herself in that way” [159].

“But what did you say to him, Nora?”
“What did I say to him? What could I say to him? Why didn’t he ask me to be his wife without saying anything about love? He asked me if I loved him. Of
course I don’t love him. I would have said that I did, but it stuck in my throat. I am willing enough, I believe, to sell myself to the devil, but I don’t know how to do it.” [159]

The reader can see that Victorian middle-class culture, at least as represented in fictions by Anthony Trollope, granted an unmarried woman the right to dispose of herself as she liked. The reader can see also that Trollope’s good girls were unable to tell a lie even when it was greatly in their interest to do so. Ethical integrity depends, for Trollope’s “British maidens,” on a self-awareness of what they really think and feel. Integrity depends also on an inability to speak or behave except in ways that follow directly from that inner self-possession. Their noes and yesses have all its force as support. That explains Nora’s tone almost of fierceness when she says “No” to Mr. Glascock. The reader can also see, finally, that, for Trollope, being in love or not being in love are absolutes, in the etymological sense of “untied.” They are inexplicable commitments of the whole self to another person, or the absence of such commitment. Falling in love is like religious belief or conversion, to which it is often implicitly compared: “[Nora] had dreamed, if she had not thought, of being able to worship a man; but she could hardly worship Mr. Glascock. She had dreamed, if she had not thought, of leaning upon a man all through life with her whole weight, as though that man had been specially made to be her staff, her prop, her support, her wall of comfort and protection” [123]. I have mentioned the gender difference in attitude toward the Victorian ideology of courtship. Here is a splendid example. It is wonderfully reassuring to a man to think that a good girl might come to worship him, and justifiably so, because she loves him with her whole heart and soul. From a feminist perspective, a perspective also held by some Victorian female novelists, as well as by a few male writers, such as John Stuart Mill, the ideology of love was no more than a device to facilitate moving a young woman willingly from subjection to her father to subjection to her husband.

Nora is altogether justified in deciding, acting, and speaking on the basis of being in love or not being in love, even against the combined social pressure of all her family and friends. “All others of her friends,” Nora thinks to herself, as the free indirect discourse of the narrator reports, “would certainly rejoice [if she accepted Glascock], would applaud her, cover her with caresses, and tell her that she had been born under a happy star” [157]. Being in love, the reader can see, is wild, extravagant, unpredictable, outside community bonds, but once it happens it is for life. For those lucky young women who are loved by those they love, this extrasocial commitment of the self, body and soul, to another assimilates them into the community in socially sanctioned marriage, wifehood, and motherhood. The wild is tamed. The English girl can live happily ever after in subordination to her husband, worshipping him. It is a wonderfully satisfying male fantasy.

The private “yes” said in response to a proposal of marriage has a quite different performative force from the public “I do” in the marriage ceremony. The “yes” is inaugu-
ral, initiatory, anomalous. It has no public sanction or prior societal grounds. It obeys no external law. It has no reason outside itself, beyond the ideological coaching that has led the young woman to believe there is such a thing as being in love. A man comes her way, and she falls in love with him. In a sense, falling in love and then saying yes are like the United States Declaration of Independence. The yes-saying creates a bond between two people that did not exist before and that is not grounded on anything beyond the woman’s private feelings, her conviction that she is in love, along with, I should add, the man’s similar conviction. The “I do” of the marriage ceremony, on the contrary, is a paradigmatic example of a performative utterance that draws its “felicity” from what Austin calls “an

3. I am thinking of Mill’s The Subjection of Women (1869).
accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances” [14].

My antepenultimate and penultimate examples of a woman’s saying no come from one novel, *The Last Chronicle of Barset*. A given novel by Trollope will often have several parallel examples of how an English girl ought to behave when receiving a proposal. The same ethical laws apply in each case, but each case is different from all the others, in potentially infinite variations, like those sets of girl cousins of which Henry James speaks.

Grace Crawley, the daughter of an impoverished clergyman, is one of Trollope’s most charming young women. She dearly loves Major Grantly, the son of Archdeacon Grantly. She nevertheless refuses his proposals as long as her father is under a cloud of disgrace. He has been falsely accused of stealing a check for twenty pounds and may go to prison if convicted. Grace’s situation is quite different from Nora Rowley’s when Mr. Glascock proposes marriage. In both cases, however, the same responsibilities determine behavior. You are either in love or not in love. Your decisive speech acts should be governed, above all, by that spontaneous commitment of the whole self, body and soul, to another, or by the absence of such commitment.

When Major Grantly comes to propose to Grace Crawley, he says more or less the same thing Mr. Glascock says, though with a slight but significant difference. Mr. Glascock says, “Miss Rowley, may I hope that you can love me?” Major Grantly says, more straightforwardly, “Grace, do you love me?” She answers, “I love no one now,—that is, as you mean. I can love no one. I have no room for any feeling except for my father and mother, and for us all. . . . [T]hey tell me that my father will be found guilty, and will be sent to prison. Putting ourselves out of the question, what would you think of a girl who could engage herself to any man under such circumstances? What would you think of a girl who would allow herself to be in love in such a position? Had I been ten times engaged to you I would have broken it off.” Major Grantly makes the correct deduction from this. He says, “I declare that we are engaged” (a performative utterance of the most paradigmatic kind). He asserts, against her protests, that “You have told me that you loved me,” basing this, correctly, on his claim that “There are other ways of speaking than the voice; and I will boast to you, though to no one else, that you have told me so. I believe you love me.” “Then he took her in his arms before she could escape from him, and kissed her forehead and her lips, while she struggled in his arms” [1: 308–09]. Major Grantly then hurries out of the room, correctly persuaded that Grace loves him, in spite of her firm refusal of his proposal. The truth will out, in the case of a pure and honest girl like Grace. The truth will out in spite of her verbal denials, and in spite of the reader’s persuasion that she does right to say no, under the circumstances, even though she loves him with her whole heart. Here is a case where it is correct for a woman to say no even though she loves the man who has asked her to say yes.

I find a later scene involving Grace quite moving, for reasons no doubt having to do with that male fantasy I have mentioned. In this scene, the Archdeacon, Major Grantly’s father, comes to confront Grace, “hating the girl, and despising his son” [2: 169]. The Archdeacon is determined to persuade Grace not to marry his son. When he sees her face-to-face and hears her unprompted promise that she will never marry Major Grantly as long as people think her father is a thief, his whole opinion of her changes. He sees that she would be a perfect wife for his son: “Now that he was close to her, he could look into her eyes, and he could see the exact form of her features, and could understand,—could not help understanding,—the character of her countenance. It was a noble face, having in it nothing that was poor, nothing that was mean, nothing that was shapeless. It was a face that promised infinite beauty, with a promise that was on the very verge of fulfillment. . . . Why had they not told him that she was such a one as this? Why had not Henry [his son]
himself spoken of the speciality of her beauty?” [2: 167]. By the end of the interview, the Archdeacon has been completely won over. In response to Grace’s promise, an echo of her declaration to the Major (“There is my promise. As long as people say that papa stole the money, I will never marry your son” [2: 168]), the Archdeacon makes a counterpromise: “When this cloud has passed away, you shall come to us and be our daughter” [2: 169]. Then “he stooped over her and kissed her” [2: 169], just as his son had kissed her. Grace is presented as preeminently and more or less irresistibly kissable.

I have said that I find this scene moving. It moves me not just because I am persuaded to believe (in imagination of course) in Grace’s graceful beauty and nobility, to believe that she has acted correctly in difficult circumstances, but also because the scene exemplifies a Trollopean presupposition that I wish with my whole heart were true in the real world, though I do not believe it is. This is the assumption, fundamental in all Trollope’s novels, that, for the most part, one person can see spontaneously into the heart of another. Would that it were so! Trollope’s people, unlike George Eliot’s, say, or Jane Austen’s, are usually almost completely transparent to one another. The vehicle of this transparency is the face of the other. Grace’s face is a perfect index of her character. The Archdeacon cannot help understanding “the character of her countenance.” Her face is the externalizing of her character. More precisely, it is consubstantial with her character, as is indicated by the ascription of moral qualities to her physical features: “It was a noble face, having in it nothing that was poor, nothing that was mean, nothing that was shapeless.” Grace’s beauty is not a matter of sexual allure, but of the externalization of a noble character. She has the “beauty, which shows itself in fine lines and a noble spirit,—the beauty which comes from breeding” [2: 167]. “Breeding” here means both bloodlines and bringing up. Aesthetic beauty and sexual attractiveness are, for Trollope, not separable from moral beauty. That this complex of assumptions is an ideological illusion, even a dangerous one, does not make its dramatization in scenes such as this any the less beguiling. Reading Trollope has always seemed to me, and perhaps was for its Victorian readers too, a species of wish fulfillment, almost a kind of science fiction presenting creatures from another, imaginary planet.

My other example from The Last Chronicle of Barset is an English girl quite different from Grace Crawley. This is Lily Dale. Her story is carried over in The Last Chronicle from its position as the central focus in The Small House at Allington. Lily has given her heart, once and for all, to the villainous Adolphus Crosbie. He foully jilts her in order to marry a noblewoman. Johnny Eames loves Lily with his whole heart. He proposes to her over and over. He cannot bring himself to take no for an answer. His essential selfhood is defined by his love for Lily and by his desire to have her as his wife. All her family and friends think he would be a good husband for her. Nevertheless, she refuses him over and over, in repetitive scenes that recur throughout two long novels. Though she loves him as if he were her brother, she does not love him as Trollope’s good girls love their future husbands. Even though she refuses Crosbie’s renewed suit after his aristocratic wife dies, since she now knows he is a bounder, she cannot bring herself to accept Johnny.

Lily’s refusals are somewhat like Catherine Sloper’s refusal of Morris Townsend when he comes ultimately to propose, after his wife’s death, in Henry James’s Washington Square (1880). It may be surmised, though James does not give the reader textual grounds for certainty, that Catherine refuses Townsend because she now knows that marrying him would be a big mistake. Even so, she is still in love, so it seems, with the ideal illusory image of him she had initially formed. In a somewhat similar way, Lily Dale is still in love with Adolphus Crosbie, though she will not marry him, as she explains in a painful scene with her mother. At one point in this scene, she says, “I think so well of myself that, loving him, as I do;—yes, mamma, do not be uneasy;—loving him, as I do, I believe I could be a comfort to him. . . . I have been weak in not being able to rid myself of him altogether. He would recognize this after awhile, and would despise me for it.
Therefore, mamma, tell him not to come; tell him that he can never come; but, if it be possible, tell him this tenderly" [1: 241–42]. For Trollope, once you are really in love, you cannot cease being in love, even if the object of your love is not worthy of it, or is not the person you think you are in love with. The continuity, stability, and substantiality of your selfhood are grounded on that love. I am because of my love for the other, one particular other. I am in love, therefore I am. That this other is unworthy makes no difference.

Lily Dale’s double bind leads her not just to say no to Johnny Eames’s repeated proposals, but to proffer another odd kind of speech act. She declares herself an Old Maid. She writes, “Lilian Dale, Old Maid,” in her diary as a decision and promise never to change, just as James’s Nanda Brookemham declares that she will never marry. In one proposal scene, Johnny tells Lily that everyone wants them to marry: “There is no one that will not be glad. Your uncle will consent,—has consented. Your mother wishes it. Bell [Lily’s sister] wishes it. My mother wishes it. Lady Julia wishes it. You would be doing what everybody about you wants you to do. And why should you not do it?” [1: 367–68]. She answers by saying, “I will tell you everything, so that you may read my heart. I will tell you as I tell mamma,—you and her and no one else;—for you are the choice friend of my heart. I cannot be your wife because of the love I bear for another man. . . . I think, Johnny, you and I are alike in this, that when we have loved we cannot bring ourselves to change” [1: 368]. A little later in this painful interview Lily tells Johnny: “I will go home and I will write in my book, this very day, Lilian Dale, Old Maid. . . . You I cannot marry. Him I will not marry” [1: 370]. Toward the end of this long novel, Johnny comes one last time to propose and to be refused one last time, in the give-and-take of a stichomythic dialogue. This exchange says no more than the reader expects, though many early readers wished it could be otherwise:

“Lily, will you be mine?”
“No, dear; it cannot be so.”
“Why not, Lily?”
“Because of that other man.”
“And is that to be a bar for ever?”
“Yes; for ever.”
“Do you still love him?”
“No; no, no!”
“Then why should this be so?”
“I cannot tell, dear. It is so. If you take a young tree and split it, it still lives, perhaps. But it isn’t a tree. It is only a fragment.” [2: 383]

The reason Lily gives for this last refusal, the reader will note, is not the same as the reason she gave before. Then she said she still loved Crosbie. Now she vehemently denies that she does. Her “No; no no!” is a denial of that love, not the no that refuses a marriage proposal. Now she says that having once loved Crosbie has disabled her from ever loving again. She is not a whole person. She does not and cannot love Johnny Eames in the marrying way, and that is the end of it, even though she no longer loves Crosbie. This makes her a fragment of a tree, not a whole one. The disaster of her love for Crosbie has made it impossible for her ever to say what Trollope’s good and happy people can declare of themselves, “I am because I love so and so.” Lily can only say, “I am because I am an Old Maid.” In spite of the collective recognition of a woman’s right to choose to say no, being an old maid was in Victorian society, as in most societies, though less so today in the United States, seen as an incomplete or imperfect condition. The proper destiny of Trollope’s English girls is to become wives and mothers. This may be why he passes harsh judgment on Lily Dale in his autobiography. Trollope clearly had great affection for Lily Dale, as did Victorian readers, many of whom fervently wanted her to marry Johnny
Nevertheless, in *An Autobiography* he declares: “she is somewhat of a female prig” [117].4

As I have said, to accept or refuse a marriage proposal is, formally, a decision. When Nora Rowley confronts Mr. Glascock, she laments to herself that a girl is forced in a moment to make a decision and act on it. This decision will determine the whole future course of her life, since divorce was then still almost impossible. To say yes was to commit oneself to a lifetime of sharing a man’s bed, bearing his children, having her social standing and worldly well-being determined by his: “There floated quickly across her brain an idea of the hardness of a woman’s lot, in that she should be called upon to decide her future fate for life in half a minute” [124]. It might be argued, however, that the decision to say yes or no is not a real decision for most of Trollope’s women, since it is preprogrammed by whether or not they are in love with the man who proposes.

In one highly interesting case, however, Trollope presents it as a real decision. He analyzes the process of decision in minute detail. Madame Max Goesler features in both *Phineas Finn* and *Phineas Redux*. She is unusual among Trollope’s women in being not a maiden but the rich widow of an Austrian banker, with a somewhat obscure continental past. Her dead husband may have been Jewish, as, it is whispered, was her father. An obnoxious anti-Semitism runs all through Trollope’s work. Being married to a foreigner, let alone being Jewish, is usually enough to make someone suspect in Trollope’s novels, but Madame Max is a good person, a person of integrity. She is much admired and loved by Lady Glencora Palliser. At one point in *Phineas Finn*, Madame Goesler offers herself and all her fortune to Phineas to aid his political aspirations (and because she loves him), but he refuses [2: 386–96]. In this case it is the man who says no. Ultimately, in *Phineas Redux*, he proposes, and she joyfully accepts. “I have come to tell you that I love you,” he says. She answers, “Oh Phineas;—at last, at last,” and “in a moment she [is] in his arms.” She tells him, “I have never ceased to love you since I first knew you well enough for love” [2: 427–28]. My interest here, however, is in the account of how she decides earlier to refuse the proposal of the unfathomably rich and distinguished old Duke of Omnium. His proposal is proffered more or less on his deathbed.

A decision seems a straightforward, even paradigmatic, speech act. I say, “I decide so and so,” or a judge issues a judicial decision. Such an utterance acts to bring about what the decision decides by making it enter the circumambient social realm. The utterance involves the first-person-singular pronoun and a present-tense indicative verb. Who or what decides? The “who” is an “I,” a self-conscious ego or subject, in full possession of his or her faculties. That “I” is embedded in a social situation and within established institutions that give him or her the responsibility for deciding in this particular case. The “what” enters into a decision as a name for the contingent factors that make me decide in a certain way.

Like each paradigmatic speech act, however—a promise, a bet, or a testament—a decision has its peculiarities. For one thing, people do not usually, in ordinary language, say, “I decide.” They say, “I have decided.” That suggests that the decision is taken as an inward and spiritual act of conscience that is then later on reported, constatively, by saying, “I want you all to know that I have decided.” Austin criticizes such a claim as a high-minded, but false, spiritualizing. “Accuracy and morality alike,” he says, “are on the side of the plain saying that our word is our bond” [10]. A decision, like a promise—Austin, I imagine, would want to argue—takes place when the decision is put in words, not in some inaccessible spiritual realm.

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4. As David Skilton’s textual notes indicate, the first edition (1883), oddly, has “French prig.” Was this a misreading of the manuscript or a sign of Trollope’s francophobia? Who would want to be a “French prig”? 

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Decisions are not quite so simple, however, as examples of life-determining decisions dramatized in literature indicate. One such example is Trollope’s report, in *Phineas Finn*, of how Marie Goesler decided to refuse the Duke of Omnium’s offer of marriage. A woman’s decision to accept or refuse an offer of marriage, as this essay has presupposed throughout, was perhaps the crucial form of decision, for women at least, in Victorian middle- and upper-class society as represented by its novelists. The reader looks in vain for a moment when Madame Goesler says, or could say, “I decide.” What Trollope’s narrator describes is rather several days of agonized indecision marked by a painful awareness that nothing on earth or beyond it can help her decide. This is then followed by the report of a time when she has already decided and needs only write her letter of refusal to the Duke. The moment of decision is, curiously, almost a blank place in the narration. This is, by the way, not unlike Trollope’s report, in *An Autobiography*, of how he decides about the course of a novel he is about to write: “There are usually some hours of agonizing doubt, almost of despair,—so at least it has been with me,—or perhaps some days. And then, with nothing settled in my brain as to the final development of events, with no capability of settling anything, but with a most distinct conception of some character or characters, I have rushed at the work, as a rider rushes at a fence which he does not see” [114].

Here is Trollope’s eloquent report of Madame Goesler’s period of indecision about whether or not to say yes to the Duke’s offer of a Duchess’s coronet:

*I have said that she would sit there resolving, or trying to resolve. There is nothing in the world so difficult as that task of making up one’s mind. Who is there that has not longed that the power and privilege of selection among alternatives should be taken away from him in some important crisis of his life, and that his conduct should be arranged for him, either this way or that, by some divine power if it were possible,—by some patriarchal power in the absence of divinity,—or by chance even, if nothing better than chance could be found to do it? But no one dares to cast the die, and to go honestly by the hazard. There must be the actual necessity of obeying the die, before even the die can be of any use. As it was, when Madame Goesler had sat there for an hour, till her legs were tired beneath her, she had not resolved. It must be as her impulse should direct her when the important moment came. There was not a soul on earth to whom she could go for counsel, and when she asked herself for counsel, the counsel would not come.* [2: 252–53]

This account, it seems to me, says something that is the case about true decisions, namely that reasoning does not help you make them. If the decision is preprogrammed by unquestioned assumptions, it is not really a decision. Madame Goesler’s inability to decide is followed four days later by a report of her decision. One moment she is still undecided. The next moment she has already decided:

*But she had given herself to the next morning, and she would not make up her mind that night. She would sleep once more with the coronet of a duchess within her reach. She did do so; and woke in the morning with her mind absolutely in doubt. When she walked down to breakfast, all doubt was at an end. The time had come when it was necessary that she should resolve, and while her maid was brushing her hair for her she did make her resolution.* [2: 268]

The narrator is careful to indicate that what Madame Goesler’s maid says, raising doubts about her freedom as the Duchess of Omnium to do as she might please, has little, if
anything, to do with her decision. The decision just happens: “Then Madame Goesler had made up her mind; but I do not know whether that doubt as to having her own way had much to do with it. As the wife of an old man she would probably have had much of her own way. Immediately after breakfast she wrote her answer to the Duke . . .” [2: 269]. Trollope’s dramatization of the moment of decision would seem to confirm that, for him, the decision is taken inwardly and irrevocably, though in a place to which even the decider does not have access. The decision is then afterwards recorded in speech or writing that externalizes it and makes it felicitously effective as a performative.

What conclusions can be drawn from the evidence I have adduced about a woman’s right to say no in late nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture, as exemplified in novels by Anthony Trollope and Henry James? I have made a good many generalizations along the way, for example about the ideology of being in love, or about the transparency of Trollope’s characters, for the most part, to themselves and to one another. It is hardly necessary to recapitulate those generalizations in detail here. Several concluding points may be stressed, however:

(1) That Trollope’s stories of courtship and marriage almost always end happily, while James’s almost never do, may be explained by a shift in presuppositions about decision-making. In Trollope’s stories, as I have said, decision is not really decision in the sense of a free autonomous choice. The choice is always already made for Trollope’s maidens on the basis of whether or not they love the man who has proposed. This assumes that each person is transparent to himself. I know, for certain, whether or not I am in love, or, in any case, as with Ayala Dormer, I can only justifiably say yes when I clearly know that I am in love. In James’s novels, on the contrary, the ideology of “being in love,” the assumption that it is an ontological condition, is much weaker, much more put in question. Even in such an early novel as The Portrait of a Lady, when Isabel thinks a higher voice tells her to marry Gilbert Osmond, that he is the man destined to make her happy, the narrator makes it clear that she is quite mistaken. As she recognizes in the great scene of her midnight vigil, in a phrase already quoted, “she had not read him right.” Trollope’s characters almost always read one another right, spontaneously and accurately. James’s characters rarely do. One would be tempted to see in this a historical change, to use it as a feature differentiating Victorian from early modern fiction. Alas, it is easy to refute such pseudo-historical generalizations, in this case by pointing to Trollope’s contemporary, George Eliot. Eliot’s assumptions are much more like James’s, as are Jane Austen’s. Even young women as intelligent and sensitive as Austen’s Elizabeth Bennett or Emma Woodhouse make gross errors in their assessments of the men in their lives. Nevertheless, a novelist’s assumptions about the transparency of a person to herself or himself and about the transparency or lack of it of other people make useful yardsticks, even if they are not historically determined. These assumptions establish the context of fundamental presuppositions within which a woman’s right to say no is actualized.

(2) Several final questions are implied by my analysis. Why was Trollope so fascinated by the moment in which a girl must respond to a marriage proposal, so fascinated that he told the same story over and over again, in inexhaustible variations? Why were Victorian readers so interested in such stories? Why am I still so interested? I suggest two contradictory answers to these questions.

First, the reader takes great pleasure in seeing the noble, modest, fresh, ethically correct young woman act in ways that have such charming integrity. We take pleasure in believing, for the moment at least, that being in love is an ontological condition, that it provides solid grounds for behavior and decision. We like to imagine women who know they are right because they know they are right. We also take pleasure, a pleasure especially provided by Trollope’s novels, in seeing a weak, dependent person standing up stubbornly to surrounding social pressure and triumphing. Some of Trollope’s male characters, for example Septimus Harding in The Warden or the Reverend Josiah Crawley
in The Last Chronicle of Barset, also give this pleasure by way of their stubborn defiance. Such pleasure is provided especially, however, when the charming young maiden says no to a marriage proposal against all the pressure and advice of her family and friends, or says yes to a man when all around her disapprove of the match.

Perhaps the pleasure of imagining such women is especially acute, or takes a special form, in us heterosexual men. It is flattering to believe that the woman who loves us has, by loving us, made us the very ground of her being and selfhood, and that this gives her strength to resist all attempts to change her. Even the perhaps homosexual Henry James clearly delighted, with only a soupçon of irony, in imagining having all those Trollopean English girls, endlessly diverse, and yet all the same, as sets of cousins. His real cousin, Minny Temple, who apparently loved James and who died young, was the original, so scholars tell us, of Milly Theale, in The Wings of the Dove. James evidently felt guilty that he could not love Minny in return. He gave her a kind of immortality by turning her into Milly Theale and writing one of his greatest novels about her. That would suggest a covert autobiographical nuance in what he says about Trollope’s “English girls” as like cousins.

Second, antithetical reason: perhaps Trollope had to go on writing endless variations on the scene in which the English girl responds correctly to a marriage proposal, with a solidly justified yes or no, because of some faint nagging uncertainty about the whole complex of assumptions I have tried to identify. Readers who love Trollope may have the same motivations. We would not want, or need, to read variations of the same story over and over if we had no doubts about its plausibility. Could it be that these girls only think they are right when they are actually wrong? Or could it be that decisions such as saying yes or no are not based on some preexisting grounds, but create their own grounds out of thin air or out of the language in which they are uttered, as the United States Declaration of Independence creates the people in the name of which it speaks [see Derrida and Arndt]? Henry James’s novels dramatize the consequences for human life of this other possibility. It involves a concept of decision more difficult to accept, more dismaying. For James, such decisions as saying yes to a marriage proposal are always a leap in the dark and almost always disastrous. It is necessary to decide in order to be plunged into experience and thereby to learn what you needed to know in order to have made a good decision in the first place. But by then it is too late, since you have almost always decided wrong. James’s characters, for example Isabel Archer or Catherine Sloper, almost always stick to bad decisions even when they know they were wrong. Only in that way, by a kind of lifting oneself by one’s bootstraps, that is, by being faithful to a bad decision, can they maintain consistency through time for their selfhoods and avoid confronting the distressing possibility that the temporal continuity of the self is an illusion, or the product of a series of ungrounded speech acts reaffirming earlier commitments. James is uncomfortably poised between Victorian assumptions and modernist or postmodernist ones. The latter sometimes assume decision may be groundless or may be grounded in something wholly other to public morality. If that is so, the self remakes itself anew with each new decision.

He Knew He Was Right is one of Trollope’s greatest novels. Its distinction lies in the way it puts in question the basic presuppositions of all his work. It is Trollope’s anti-Trollopean novel. In He Knew He Was Right, Trollope dared to imagine someone, a man rather than a woman, who “knew he was right,” but was actually dead wrong. Louis Trevelyan is driven slowly mad because he mistakenly believes his wife, Emily, is betraying him with a certain Colonel Osborne. She, however, like so many Trollope women, is as innocent and as pure as the driven snow—well, almost! Emily Trevelyan’s independence, her stubborn resistance to being ordered around (a trait she shares with most of Trollope’s good women, such as those I have discussed), contributes to the destruction of her marriage and of her happiness. He Knew He Was Right is one of the few Trollope novels with
an apparently unhappy ending. It may be, however, that the ambiguous last murmuring kiss Trevelyan gives his wife’s hand just before he dies brings him back, so she thinks, into the human community by an admission that he is wrong. The movement of his lips and “the sound of the tongue within” exonerate Emily from her husband’s unjust accusation. Perhaps. She may be wrong, however, in her reading of the signs. Trollope’s narrator never tells the reader definitely one way or the other. “He declared to me at last,” Emily tells her sister, “that he trusted me,” “almost believing that real words had come from his lips to that effect” [928–29]. The meaning of the ending is, for once in Trollope’s work, truly undecidable.

In *He Knew He Was Right* Trollope imagined what the world would be like if all the assumptions that underlie the presentations of courtship and marriage in his other novels and even in the subplots of this one, were ideological fantasies. This would mean that the woman might have a conventional right to choose whether or not to marry, but that no ontological justification for her decision one way or the other could be found. For my part, I think Trollope was right to put his certainties in question. Even so, I immensely enjoy going out of this world and entering his imaginary one, a world in which those certainties are unshakably certain. One function of literature is to show things as they are—well, mostly are. Henry James excelled at that. Another function is to show things as some people may sometimes wish they were, and as they mostly aren’t. Anthony Trollope excelled at that.

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