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Playing with Matches: Matchmaking as Authorship in the Nineteenth-Century Marriage Plot

Colleen Cusick

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PLAYING WITH MATCHES: MATCHMAKING AS AUTHORSHIP IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY MARRIAGE PLOT

by

COLLEEN CUSICK

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Playing with Matches:
Matchmaking as Authorship in the Nineteenth-Century Marriage Plot

by

Colleen Cusick

Advisor: Talia Schaffer

This dissertation examines the narrative treatment of matchmakers in British marriage plots across the nineteenth century. The matchmaker stands at the nexus of several simultaneous cultural negotiations underway in the period. In an era of increasing state control over marriage and the rising ideology of romantic marriage, the matchmaker represents the communal courtship practices of the past. As such, she offers both a threat to the emerging status quo and a reminder of the persistence of superseded cultural forms in the emerging modern marriage system. Simultaneously, she constitutes an image of female creativity and authority that speaks to concerns about the professionalization of novel-writing and the place of women writers within that profession. My argument joins recent critical attempts that challenge stable definitions of Victorian marriage; through my focus on the neglected figure of the matchmaker I reveal the essential resonances between these attempts to construct marital philosophies and the professional authorship of the marriage plots that espouse them. Victorian matchmakers shoulder outsized ideological freight in their often narratively marginalized positions, pointing to the competing doctrines of romantic fulfillment, personal liberty, domestic womanhood, and authorial prestige at play in the most prevalent genre of the Victorian era, the marriage plot.
Each of my chapters traces the interplay of gender and genre in narratives of matchmaking. The Introduction, while outlining the matchmaker’s historical background and marginalization in the nineteenth-century, presents a case study of Maria Edgeworth’s, *Belinda* (1801) that spells the central place British marriage occupies in defining national identity in an era of global dominance. Chapter One evaluates Jane Austen’s great novel of matchmaking, *Emma* (1816), as an act of careful social positioning, both of herself as author and of the matchmaker in the social world. In Chapter Two, I advance my reading of women’s writing through a study of texts by several early Victorian women writers of the 1840s and 1850s: Harriet Martineau’s *Deerbrook* (1839), Mrs. (Harriette Maria) Gordon Smythies’ *The Matchmaker* (1842), and the stories of Anna Maria (S.C) Hall, Ouida, and other anonymous writers for the periodical press. In each of these texts, matchmaking mothers comprise uneasy models for women’s literary work: they are both parallel figures for the ambitious authors themselves and questionable professionals in ideally anti-commercial realm of courtship. Chapters Three and Four study, in turn, two of the greatest male authors of the marriage plot, Anthony Trollope and Henry James. Trollope’s exploratory approach to matchmaking reflects his committed experiments with marriage plotting; his affectionate, yet ambivalent stance toward his female matchmakers echoes his conflicted relationship to his earliest literary model, his mother Frances Trollope. For James, the female matchmaker forms a through-line across his entire career, expressing his embattled engagement with the female literary forms within which he writes and against which he attempts to define himself as artist.
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My parents, John and Jennifer Cusick, gave me library cards and trips to London, turned a blind eye to the flashlight and book under my pillow, and still send me handwritten letters about Victorian novelists in the news. For a childhood of wonder and an adulthood of faith, I thank them both. (And also, again, for hours of free childcare).

Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my children, Simon and Hattie, who have grown alongside this work throughout their lives, sweetening it with their miraculous small selves, and to Daniel Endick, who makes all my impossible wishes, even this one, come true.
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CHAPTER I.
An Introduction to Literary Matchmaking

Matchmaking is the primary action of the nineteenth-century novel. The courtship plot’s dominance throughout the century and the rows of paired characters, male and female, that fill the pages of practically every author of the period attest to the Victorian novel’s success as a marital facilitator: it is the rare nineteenth-century novel that does not contain a story of courtship somewhere in its many plots. Even when not preoccupied with arranging marriages between eligible parties, the novel still conducts itself with a matchmaker’s habits and techniques. Nineteenth-century novels classify and codify the character types and social systems in the worlds they describe; so do matchmakers, determining likes in order to partner them or evaluating differences in order to bring complementary ones into alignment. Novels offer readers new images to consider, new information to process, and new visions to incorporate into their sense of imaginative possibilities; matchmakers also inform their beneficiaries of new possible futures, channeling unmoored desire into specific streams. Novels produce pages, people, and places; they reproduce all of the above, as well, revising earlier narratives, reworking prior plots, contributing to an ongoing cycle of generic adaptation and invention.

Matchmakers produce marriages; in doing so, one might call them specialists in reproduction. Finally, both novels and matchmakers contain the potential for coercive power over their subjects; both have the ability to restrict options to a set quantity and

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1 Moretti identifies the “novel of marriage” as the “definitive and classifying act par excellence” (7).
2 A selection of writers proposing variations on this narrative includes, along with Stone: Stephanie Coontz, Lenore Davidoff, John Gillis, Ruth Perry, Edward Shorter, and Randolph Trumbach.
3 Trumbach claims that by the end of the 18th century, aristocratic couples “stopped sending marriage favors [large bows that recipients could wear to honor the wedding] to their friends and relations and they sometimes even neglected to inform them of the
type, to moderate readers’ or marital prospects’ expectations, to compel others to read environments according to their terms. Evaluating, explaining, compelling, producing and reproducing: these are the tasks of the matchmaker, the author, and the novels that they work together to create.

Given the connections between the work of the nineteenth century novel and the matchmaker’s craft, the omnipresence of matchmakers in Victorian fiction should come as no surprise. Yet, setting aside several notable examples of matchmaking protagonists like Jane Austen’s Emma or Margaret Oliphant’s Lucilla Marjoribanks, matchmakers typically appear as secondary and even tertiary characters. They populate the margins of the central characters’ plots, scheming, planning, hoping, facilitating, helping, and hindering the drift of the primary narratives. They are often women—mothers, sisters, aunts, neighbors, and friends—but not exclusively so; male matchmakers—uncles, employers, cousins, and guardians—appear with enough frequency to at least make a claim for the character’s dual gendered identity. They are sometimes assistants in the marriage plot, steering well-suited partners toward each other’s orbits; they are equally often hindrances, either actively plotting in favor of matches that the narrative condemns or threatening a novel’s desired outcome through the very fact of their involvement in the plot. They are, in essence, a supremely flexible narrative tool, adaptable to a variety of narrative purposes, and a useful paradigm through which to consider the narrative actions of a wide swathe of fictional Victorians. What does Heathcliff’s revenge amount to, in the end, if not a particularly vindictive exercise in matchmaking? And how helpful is it to consider Miss Havisham’s neurosis through the dark mirror of matchmaking intended to break, rather than bless, Pip and Estella’s hearts? Matchmakers, so-termed and otherwise,
perform valuable narrative work of structure and plotting. They also continually, even in their most peripheral guises, become loci for a constellation of textual uncertainties around femininity and creativity, genre and artistry, and authorship and economics.

In using the term narrative “tool” I have in mind Caroline Levine’s recent work on the study of forms in both social and artistic capacities. Levine advocates an attention to the affordances—“a term used to describe the potential uses of actions latent in materials and designs” (Levine 6)—of forms in both social structures and literary genres. Levine does not equate form with genre, as literary studies often does: “Genre, then,” she explains, “can be defined as customary constellations of elements into historically recognizable groupings of artistic objects, bringing together forms with themes, styles, and situations of reception, while forms are organizations or arrangements that afford repetition and portability across materials and contexts” (13-14). The marriage plot is a genre that held its greatest sway in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, that appeared in specific venues, was written by a group of authors and produced by certain publishers, that was intended for certain audiences. Matchmaking exists as a form, as an organizing mechanism for courtship and a facilitator for another form, marriage, in both literature and society. Before there were marriage plots there were matchmaking plotters, arranging marriages under different social parameters, and the transferal of the triangular matchmaking form from early modern village life to courtship plot novels to contemporary reality television speaks to its “portability” as an “abstract organizing principle” (Levine 7). Reading social and literary matchmaking side-by-side according to Levine’s practice—“as two distinct forms, each striving to impose its own order…. Instead of assuming that social forms are the grounds or causes of literary forms” (16)—
brings into focus a disjunction in the affordances of each form at the same historical moment. For while the literary matchmaker possesses profound aesthetic usefulness for novelists throughout the nineteenth century, the utility of social matchmakers decreases as new authorities assume the role of adjudicators of marriages. Even as the social affordances of formalized marriage brokering lose cultural currency, the artistic possibilities of triangulated courtship grow richer and more diverse.

I. Matchmaking: The Historical Context

To understand the matchmaker’s chiasmic trajectory in these two distinct but related realms, it is helpful first to trace the development of courtship and marriage ritual prior to the Victorian period. Since Lawrence Stone’s publication of *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England* in the 1970s, many historians, sociologists, and literary critics have proposed a historical narrative in which marriage shifted from a matter of clan benefit to one of individual choice, from a ritualized form to a legalized one, and from an economic ideal to a spiritual and emotional one². In the early modern period, particularly in village life, marriage was a community matter and courtship was explicitly facilitated by local authority figures (including parents and other adult kinfolk, priests and ministers, and elder neighbors) and required the support of peer groups and social networks to advance through several distinct ritualized stages. Prospective spouses generally initiated a courtship in a public setting, affirming their interest in one another before their peers at a hiring fair, village dance, or other community-wide gathering. The subsequent stages of courtship were then conducted on the couple’s behalf by “emissaries who were friends of

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² A selection of writers proposing variations on this narrative includes, along with Stone: Stephanie Coontz, Lenore Davidoff, John Gillis, Ruth Perry, Edward Shorter, and Randolph Trumbach.
the principles rather than in the persons of the principles themselves” (Perry 204).

According to John Gillis, “Matchmakers sometimes had to enter into complicated transactions with the relatives of the couple in order to get their approval” (48), and these matchmakers were not predominantly women—they could be “siblings, close friends, well-known matchmakers, who often included the parish priest” (Gillis 48). In aristocratic circles, professional marriage brokers could play the role of matchmaking emissary for a fee. After a formal betrothal period, the couple married in a celebration that “established the couple’s relationship to the wider world through a series of highly ritualized and dramatic events that began with the fetching of the bride from her home and ended with the formal inauguration of a new household” (Gillis 51). At every phase of courtship, social and religious representatives oversaw and granted approval to the progress of the new marital relationship in a “social drama” and “collective process aimed at making things right economically, socially, and psychologically, as well as legally” (Gillis 17).

Beginning in the eighteenth century, marriage ritual became both increasingly regulated and increasingly private. The movement to restrict private and secret marriages and elopements culminated in Lord Hardwicke’s Act of 1753, which mandated an Anglican marriage ceremony for valid marriage (with exceptions allowed only for Jewish and Quaker marriages), required banns reading or license purchasing prior to marriage, and required parental approval for prospective brides or grooms under the age of twenty-one. As Joan Perkins observes, “Hardwicke’s Act established two important principles in English law: first, marriage had to be a public and registered contract; secondly, the right to determine what constituted a valid marriage was assumed by the State” (22).
Alongside the increase in State authority over marriages came a corresponding flight toward privacy and intimacy in marriage ceremonies. Rather than a public spectacle staged before an interested community, middle-class and aristocratic weddings were held in private homes before select guests; the ability to purchase a wedding license even obviated the need to publicize an engagement in church through banns reading. The restriction of marital adjudicators initially led to a precipitous upswing in common-law marriage and recorded illegitimacy among the working class and poor, who were barred by cost from the private ceremonies that required licenses and were sometimes unwilling to marry in an Anglican rite. But as subsequent nineteenth-century regulations in marriage law allowed for dissenting and civil ceremonies, marriages that were private and State-sanctioned became the standard aspired to, even if not always achieved, across the classes. Further legal reforms of child-custody, divorce, and property rights in marriage solidified the role of the State, rather than the church or local authorities, to adjudicate contentious matters in family life, even as these reforms also offered protection and some closer approximation of equality to women in abusive marriages.

3 Trumbach claims that by the end of the 18th century, aristocratic couples “stopped sending marriage favors [large bows that recipients could wear to honor the wedding] to their friends and relations and they sometimes even neglected to inform them of the marriage” (34).
4 “The incidence of prenuptial pregnancy rose rapidly from the 1750s onward; and so too did illegitimacy, which accelerated at a rate unprecedented in the known history of the British population. While a certain part of the increase can be attributed to seduction and abandonment, recent studies suggest that a very large part of the rise was the result of the simultaneous increase in the numbers of common-law unions, whose offspring were recorded as bastards” (Gillis 110).
5 This was particularly the case for Irish street traders, according to Gillis, who would marry before a Catholic priest and forego repeating their vows in an Anglican church. Aside from issues of religious practice and authority, refraining from contracting an English marriage would allow the wives and children of any men sent to the workhouse to remain in London (Gillis 205).
Ultimately, the reduction of local oversight and public participation in marriage and shift to national licensing and privacy corresponded to a series of reforms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that aimed “[p]aradoxically”, in Davidoff, Doolittle, Fink, and Holden’s terms, to increase the state’s involvement “into family concerns, through civil registration of birth, death and marriage, through an increasing range of health professionals, through financial support such as child allowances and old age pensions, through compulsory education and the truant officer” (18).

Paradoxical because, as many researchers contend, this period of increasing State involvement was also the period in which the ideal of affectionate and romantic marriage rose to prominence. While in the early modern period and before acceptable reasons for marriage could include such considerations as increasing family prosperity through marriage settlements, acquiring land, confirming ties of kinship or neighborliness, acquiring a domestic partner to share household labor, raising children, and securing care for sick or elderly relatives, “[b]y the end of the 1700s personal choice of partners had replaced arranged marriage as a social ideal, and individuals were encouraged to marry for love…. Where once a marriage had been seen as a fundamental unit of work and politics, it was now viewed as a place of refuge from work, politics, and community obligations” (Coontz 145-146). Trumbach suggests that the rise in affectionate marriage as an ideal can be observed in the decline in professional matchmaking, which “aristocratic society, with the aid of the courts, had outlawed by 1720” (101)6, as well as

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6 “The courts used the most effectual means at their command by deciding that bonds made to pay the matchmaker were not enforceable at law, and they consistently upset such bonds from the late seventeenth century onwards. In a case before the Lords in 1695 it was decided that a bond of £1000 to pay £500 that Thomas Thynne had taken out to have his marriage to Lady Ogle arranged was to be set aside on the ground that
in the decreasing proportion of aristocratic men marrying wives with great financial settlements, which fell from one third of aristocratic marriages in the seventeenth century to one fourth in the eighteenth (Trumbach 109). Parents and guardians, while not superannuated in the manner of the professional matchmaker, also accepted “by the 1770s that love made marriages and that their business was to discourage precipitate decision and to remind their wards or children not to forget entirely considerations of birth, wealth, and character” (Trumbach 109). Despite different marital expectations across the classes, the cultural value of affectionate marriage prevailed as the ideal in literature, letters, and government rulings.

Of course, couples have always married for a complex variety of interrelated reasons in their own lives: the eighteenth-century did not invent familial love, nor did it abolish pragmatic marriages. Other historians have long challenged Stone’s methods of historiography and many of his and Trumbach’s conclusions. Recently, scholars of the nineteenth century have investigated the ways in which Victorian marriage, in both life and literature, departs from conventional historical wisdom either by adhering in certain respects to earlier models for family relationships or by exploring counterpoints to the

‘marriages ought to be provided and promoted by the mediation of friends and relations and not of hirelings.’ In another case in 1701 Lord Warrington asked two of his relations to promote his marriage to one of the heiresses of a London merchant as a means of extricating his estate from its encumbrances. They, in turn, went to a pair of brokers, and Warrington took out a bond to pay the brokers a thousand guineas. The match occurred. But one of Warrington’s relatives kept the money for himself; Warrington therefore went to law to recover the money, was successful, and in the process got out of paying the brokers when the bond was squashed” (Trumbach 101-102).

7 Claudia Nelson, among others, makes this point (Nelson 27).
8 Challengers include Lenore Davidoff, John Gillis, Claudia Nelson, Joan Perkin, and Ruth Perry.
romantic ideal in its narratives. The century-long movement for marriage law reform, while affirming the private nature of the marriage bond, also represented a rebuttal to the romantic ideal with its emphasis on the contractual (and thus dissoluble) aspects of marriage rather than the spiritual or religious (and indissoluble) elements. The decline in marriage brokering and the cultural move away from ritualized community involvement in courtship suggests a radical break with the marital models of the past, and the change in courtship conventions during the period seems to reflect the apparent value placed on affection and free choice. Yet, as recent analyses would suggest, social norms continued to regulate acceptable marriage partners along class lines as much as during the period of more explicitly mediated courtship ritual. “Even at the height of romantic love…,” Trumbach explains of the eighteenth century, “it was not acceptable for an aristocratic woman to marry outside of landed society, even though her husband might be an officer or a lawyer, a clergyman or a politician” (98). In the nineteenth century, Perkin

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9 Helena Michie’s *Victorian Honeymoons* places the wedding tour as part of a complicated disentangling of married partners from their families of origin; Mary Jean Corbett’s *Family Likeness* argues the continuing importance of kinship through cousin marriage in the Victorian novel; Elsie Michie’s *The Vulgar Question of Money* contests the economic disinterestedness of nineteenth-century fictional love matches; and Kelly Hager’s *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* and Maia McAleavey’s *The Bigamy Plot* trace challenge’s to the preeminence of the romantic ideal and the courtship plot in literature through their analyses of the “failed marriage plot” and the bigamy plot. Hager and Talia Schaffer review re-examinations of the historical narrative of marriage in the editors’ introduction to a recent special issue of *Victorians Review* on marriage.

10 “Parliament passed laws of the sort described above [i.e., The Married Women’s Property Act (1848), the Custody of Infants Act (1839), etc.] only reluctantly, and for each law enacted, many more radical and sweeping measures failed. But that these Acts made their way through Parliament at all, and that they excited considerable pamphleteering and editorializing pro and con, signaled two things. First, the Victorian family was not the stable repository of absolute virtue that the literature of sentiment claimed it was. Second, the discrepancies between the ideal vision of the family and the family as it might exist in real life were giving rise to discussion so heated as to reveal deep cultural anxieties” (Nelson 9).
argues for a continuation of this status quo, as “[m]ost upper-class women married men of whom their families approved and who were considered ‘suitable’, for the very simple reason that they met few others, being shielded from contact with undesirables” (Perkin 60). A “highly formalized,” detailed, and “constantly changing” system of etiquette and chaperonage developed in nineteenth-century society in order to “mark the knowledgeable [social] insider from the outsider” (Davidoff Circles 45), and one of the “prime purposes of such formality was to oversee suitable marriages within the group” (Davidoff, Doolittle, Fink, and Holden 115).

Intended to sort potential marital partners into their correct milieus while maintaining an impression of freedom and unworldliness in marriage decision, these etiquette standards allowed young women to circulate within a carefully circumscribed acquaintance selected to guarantee the social and financial acceptability of all parties. The specific details differed between different social groups, but in both the middle and upper classes young people interacted at a series of social gatherings with access and borders monitored by married women. “Mothers with marriageable daughters largely determined the field of selection,” Perkin explains, “and contrived suitable meetings between the buyers and the sellers in the marriage market” (64). No longer a formally compensated profession, matchmaking had become by the nineteenth century a necessary yet covert form of social control popularly attributed to women. As Jennifer Phegley notes, the freedom given to young English women to converse with and attempt to entice marital partners opens them to accusations of sexual impropriety, but Samuel Beeton’s popular society journal the Queen “attributes the manipulative courtship behavior to the mothers of the debutantes” (40). Responsible for overseeing the marriage market’s covert
regulations, Victorian mothers also shoulder the burden of its double standard. Even as the ideal of romantic free choice in marriage condemned the maneuvering (to use a period term) of the women invested in monitoring courtship ritual, the marriage system depended on their social labor to encourage matches that consolidated familial wealth and furthered social advancement.\(^\text{11}\).

**II. Matchmaking: The Global Context**

Romantic and companionate marriage was thus from the beginning beset by confusion and contradiction over economics and female autonomy in the disposal of bodies (through sexual relations), property (through marriage law and settlements), and souls (through personal affections). At the same time, the idea of romantic marriage constituted one of the central nodes around which English nationalists distinguished the glories of their own society in contrast to the failings of others in a Continental and global context. The French frequently feel the brunt of this jingoistic comparison, as the convent-education system and the seclusion required of French young women formed a convenient target for comparison with England’s freer intercourse between the sexes prior to marriage.\(^\text{12}\). The continuing practice of marriage brokering in Europe also sparks criticism and ridicule, as Jennifer Phegley discerns in readings of the British popular press: in the mid-1860s *Bentley’s Miscellany* offers a take-down of a fictional French marriage broker while the *London Review* sarcastically reports on an actual German marriage brokering company (92-93). “By linking alternative courtship methods to

\(^{11}\) In addition to Perkin, Davidoff, Elizabeth Langland, and Jennifer Phegley also discuss the cultural labor of upper- and middle-class women’s oversight of courtship and social life.

\(^{12}\) Coontz explains, “In England, the celebration of the love match reached a fever pitch as early as the 1760s and 1770s, while the French were still commenting on the novelty of ‘marriage by fascination’ in the mid-1800s” (147).
foreign sources,” she argues, “these accounts attempt to preserve British superiority in such personal matters as courtship and marriage” (Phegley 93). Free choice and romantic motivations for both men and women characterize English marriage in the eyes of many writers, while the vestiges of the early modern marital landscape—marriages arranged and facilitated by matchmakers and for primarily economic reasons—typify marriages in a host of regions abroad for these same writers. The responses of English travel writers to foreign matchmaking incorporate a more various perspective on the institution than one finds in English-set texts of the period, even as these responses ultimately reinforce the superiority of English courtship rituals and the society they support.

The descriptions of matchmaking systems that abound in travel literature of the period often link marriage brokering to the exotic and the retrograde. The matchmaking practices of Russia and Asia, for instance, are presented as curious spectacles for an interested English audience in the manner of a Fabergé object or chinoiserie. The author of “A Show of Brides in St. Petersburg” for The Lady’s Newspaper in 1852 contrasts English naturalness and foreign artificiality in describing an apparently traditional Russian betrothal ceremony. Once a year, in early summer in the Summer Garden in St. Petersburg, long rows of middle-class would-be brides stand in their finest clothes and jewels to be inspected by “bachelors, disposed to marry” (206). The entire courtship is conducted solely through an intermediary, with discussions of “family, dowry, housewifely qualities” (206) and the potential groom’s professional qualifications, but without any conversation between the future husband and wife. The marriages produced in this fashion are often satisfying, the writer notes with surprise, but this owes to the fact that “A rich Russian of the middle class requires nothing from his wife but that she
should be handsome, dress with taste, appear elegantly attired the first thing in the morning, and sit all day long upon the sofa, doing nothing, or, at most, reading a novel, or netting a purse” (206). While the comparison between the model Russian wife and her English counterpart is implied rather than overtly stated, the contrast is plain. A man who wants nothing more from his wife than decorative adornment could do very well to pick her out of a line-up, the sketch suggests, but for a middle-class Englishman who requires a wife with as creative and active industriousness within the home as he demonstrates outside it, such a system could never do.

Chinese matchmaking systems also captivate writers who delight in the exoticism of the Far East while rejecting what they perceive as the culture’s rigid authoritarian bent. For instance, the sketch “Celestial Love Letters,” which was published in *The Lady’s Newspaper* in 1853, dwells on the effeminizing effects of fatherly matchmaking through a selection of fictionalized “billet-doux written to one another by the papas” (416) of a prospective bride and bridegroom. Suffused with casual anti-Chinese racism and written in an elevated diction intended to evoke a formal, ancient, and distant culture, the fictional letters both highlight the fathers’ frightening control over their children’s relationships, as befits a foreign “despotic” culture, and mock their subordinate effeminacy, as when one father prostrates himself before the other, writing, “I for a long time have desired your dragon powers” (416). A review of Sir John Browning’s *The Kingdom and People of Siam* (which appeared in *The Englishwoman’s Review and Drawing Room Journal* in 1857) echoes elements from “Celestial Love Letters.” The reviewer indiscriminately mingles facts about Siamese and Chinese landscapes, people, and customs, as though all the various individual Asian nations were an indeterminate
mass of the Orient—perhaps in an attempt to interest readers who might be expected to have some awareness of China and the consumable goods produced there that suffuse daily middle-class Victorian life, but little knowledge of Siam. The author focuses particular attention on the nonsensical formality insisted upon by the “large body of professional matchmakers” who manage a marital economy with “more of preliminary negotiations, ceremonials at different stages of the negotiations, written correspondence, visitings, protocols, and conventions, than in any other part of the world” (“Review of The Kingdom and People of Siam” 2). The implicit contrast inherent in this description, however, between Chinese artifice and English nature, suggests that the English system, in which the courting couple themselves presumably initiate the moves of courtship and unite without such rigorous negotiation or mediation, allows for more genuine feeling and a more authentic marriage and family life (obscuring, of course, the artifice of class-based chaperonage, engagement customs, and legal dictates that also control the “natural” in English courtship and marriage).

The exoticism of China and Russia allow writers to indulge their fascination with the matchmaking customs allegedly in vogue there while still upholding the English marriage system—the utter foreignness of those locales and the always implied superiority of morals and manners in England disallow any such cultural cross-pollination. Similarly, observers of matchmaking projects closer in distance, cultural heritage, and language to England can engage with the appeal of a matchmaking system if they do so under the cover of colonialist patronage. Though Irish subjects of British colonialism and laboring immigrants to Australia pose the threat of contamination by proximity to the British culture they exist as part of and counterpart to, the poverty and
religious alienation of the Irish and the hardships and gender-imbalanced culture of the Australian colony preserve the essential distinction between the English center and colonial periphery and mitigate this threat. William Carleton can reminisce fondly about “Mary Murray, Irish Matchmaker” in his *Tales and Stories of the Irish Peasantry* of 1854 without discomfiting the middle-class English audience to whom he pitches his book. The exuberant, light-hearted, yet destitute Irish needed the skill of the matchmaker to “induce[e] young folks to enter into early and improvident marriages” (Carleton 45), skill that, despite its rustic charm, harms the populace more than helps by encouraging the growth of a population that can’t be supported by the riches of the country (for reasons Carleton does not care to analyze). England may lack the romance of antiquated Ireland, but Carleton suggests that the “proper education and knowledge” shared by its citizens ironically both obviates the need for a matchmaker and reduces the likely ill consequences of any setting up shop. Writing of immigration to Australia, Godfrey Charles Mundy takes the even more radical stand of recommending professional matchmaking as the best solution to the growing colony’s woes. “I shall be thought joking, perhaps,” he explains, “when I say that an accredited matchmaker—some staid and influential lady, who would convoy detachments of female immigrants to the rural districts, and interest herself as to their proper establishment in life—would be one of the most useful government offices in the colony” (Mundy 97). Mundy bemoans the rough masculinity of *Our Antipodes*, as he titles his 1852 book, which attracts uneducated single laborers rather than established and sedate families. As the colony appears incapable of attracting the right sort of women—Mundy laments the influx of Irish orphan girls to the men-filled settlements, “[f]orty thousand pounds’ worth of [which]
commodity was imported into New South Wales up to 1850” (94)—only a respectable middle-class mother can properly marshal the wayward sexual impulses of these vitally important laborers. The reformer and activist Mrs. Chisholm receives particularly high praise for her unfortunately defunct “Family Colonization Loan Society”, which aimed after “the careful selection of persons, male and female, suited to colonial requirements, and the association of them in family groups, before they quit England” (Mundy 106).

While focused on the oddity of the marriage brokering traditions, writers describing foreign customs take pains to explain why such a system so unacceptable in England functions well in or is even required by the marriage customs of another country. Thanks to poverty, poor education, benighted social structures, or warped marital values, the inhabitants of China, Russia, Ireland, and the Australian colonies require the assistance of an objective professional to arrange appropriate marriages. By contrast with these depictions, a portrait of ideal middle-class English\(^\text{13}\) courtship and marriage emerges in which a wife’s usefulness to the family takes precedence over her qualities of attraction, in which marital choices are made independently of worldly or financial concerns or questions of aristocratic lineage, and in which the self-sufficiency and independence of the future family and the free-choice of the prospective bride and groom to select each other matter centrally. The idea that modern English society was to be prized for the freedom of women to marry where they chose and the individual ownership as a result of industrial progress “emerged,” as Elsie Michie makes clear in her studies of Victorian anthropology, “out of the charting of the evolution from a society organized by

\(^{13}\) I use the term “England” instead of “Great Britain” in the context of this travel writing to differentiate between parts of the British Isles like Ireland, Wales, and Scotland that carry different social, historical, and cultural meanings in Victorian literature (as the earlier discussion of Ireland suggests).
a tribal structure in which both property and women were held in common to a modern one based around the family, the ownership of private property, and a marital system in which free choice figured” (*Vulgar Question of Money* 9). Regardless of class or location, English couples in travel literature stand as forces of national free will, signifiers of England’s preeminent position as the most civilized, industrious, independent, family-minded people in the world—the antithesis of the exotic, outdated, artificial, and infantile unions brought about through foreign matchmaking.

**III. Belinda: A Case Study**

To observe the multiple modalities of nineteenth-century matchmaking operating simultaneously in a single fictional text, I turn to Maria Edgeworth’s novel of 1801, *Belinda*, which records the female matchmaker’s marginal, yet definitional, position in the shift from the companionate to the romantic marital ideal. Edgeworth writes at the end of the long progress of the matchmaker’s superannuation, and in her novel she registers several of the complaints against matchmaking already discussed: its outmoded view of marriage as based on alliance rather than affection; its denial of the sacred and the private in personal feelings; its affiliation with the foreign and un-English. Selina Stanhope, a status-hungry widow who arranges lucrative matches for her nieces, represents conventional depictions of matchmaking women at the century’s beginning. Known as “the matchmaker general” (Edgeworth 333), she is baldly mercenary, “accomplished in that branch of knowledge, which is called the art of rising in the world,” and proud of her record of success “having established half a dozen nieces most happily; that is to say upon having married them to men of fortune far superior to their own” (7). In her letters of advice to the heroine of the novel (the sole remaining
unmarried niece, Belinda Portman), Mrs. Stanhope insists tirelessly on financial motivations as the fittest base for marriage decisions.  

14 She dismisses Belinda’s desire for a husband she can love as “childish or romantic difficulties” (Edgeworth 201). She seeks to manipulate, and bamboozle the eligible men of London into selecting her niece as a wife, and she tries to compel Belinda to follow her advice through judicious loans of cash, reminders of the girl’s indebtedness, dire warnings of the “miserable” existence of a penniless spinster “who finds herself at five or six and thirty a burden to her friends” (Edgeworth 9), recriminations, and calculated silences and refusals to communicate with her ward. The novel’s characters reinforce the commercial quality of Mrs. Stanhope’s stratagems when they compare her presentation of her niece to the marketing of goods for sale: at Bath, a male character notes, Belinda “was hawked about every where, and the aunt was puffing her with might and main…. Belinda Portman and her accomplishments, I’ll swear, were as well advertised, as Packwood’s razor strops” (25).  

15 Edgeworth structures Belinda as an exercise in the comparative study of relationships. As Belinda moves through a series of aristocratic homes and environments in London and the countryside, she encounters different families and different philosophies of marriage that inform her own decision, at novel’s end, in favor of the

14 The one bit of non-courtship related advice Mrs. Stanhope gives her niece is even more explicitly pecuniary: “always, when you are obliged to send bank notes by post, cut them in two, and self half by one post and half by another. This is what is done by all prudent people” (Edgeworth 198).

15 Numerous critics of Belinda note this striking reference to branded merchandise in the marriage plot. Michals asserts that “Packwood’s pioneering, extremely successful ads present the same version of the marketplace as do Edgeworth’s best-selling novels” (12-13); McCann notes that as “the niece of the matchmaking Mrs. Stanhope, [Belinda] is read by the public in which she circulates as an object to be hawked on the marriage market—literally a commodity” (185); while Campbell comments upon the “remarkable number of luxury commodities” that Belinda incorporates “into its complex, crowded, and yet ultimately unified plot” (279).
ideal of prudential romantic marriage. She evaluates aristocratic, companionate, Romantic (Rousseauian), and commercial marriages before ascribing preeminence to the English love match. Representing the commercial match, Mrs. Stanhope receives the least attention and is dismissed soonest. She never appears as an active character in the novel, instead sharing her wisdom and working her manipulations from the margins and peripheries: through epistolary correspondence with various characters and through exchanges of gossip. Her patronage constitutes Belinda’s primary burden in the story, as characters throughout the novel ascribe impure motives to Belinda by virtue of her association with her aunt: the appellations most often used to label Belinda reference her familial relationship with her aunt Stanhope. Her patronage also provides Belinda her inciting event at the novel’s beginning, when Belinda determines to reject her aunt’s value-system and discover her own upon overhearing the pejorative conversation of gentlemen about her aunt’s matchmaking and her assumed guilt by association with it.

This initial act of philosophical judgment determines Belinda’s subsequent responses to the various relationships she observes. Her aristocratically dysfunctional hosts Lord and Lady Delacour offer her a glimpse of fashionable marriage, full of excitement, passion, intrigues, struggles for power and dominance, and dissatisfaction with the state of their union. Their lack of prudence and wisdom in their marital relations echoes the reports she receives from Mrs. Stanhope about her sister and cousins’ mercenary marriages, all of which end in separation, bankruptcy, or unhappiness. Her second hosts, Lady Anne and Mr. Percival, provide an example of the 18th-century model

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16 Belinda is identified as “the niece of Mrs. Stanhope,” “Mrs. Stanhope’s niece,” “a niece of the matchmaker,” and other similar phrases periodically throughout the text. For more examples, see Edgeworth (15, 25, 73, 108, 111, 118, 205, 211).
of companionate domesticity; the Percivals have “a large and cheerful family” full of “affectionate confidence,” “unconstrained gayety,” and “a union of interests, occupations, taste, and affection” (Edgeworth 215). Each member thrives independently through his or her association with the others and the Percival marriage demonstrates the joy in shared intellectual pursuits between husbands and wives. Drawn though Belinda is to the domestic model the Percivals present, Edgeworth does not promote the companionate match as her favored form of marriage. Inspired by the Percivals’ example of prudence and respect leading to love, Belinda very nearly marries the improvident ward of the Percivals, the affectionate but impulsive Mr. Vincent, whose cause Lady Anne and her husband champion through the novel’s second volume—this misjudgment lowers their claim to philosophical perfection.17 The final marital prototype Belinda considers is the Romantic solitude and isolation of the potential lovers Clarence Hervey and Virginia St. Pierre. With Clarence early established as Belinda’s preferred husband, Edgeworth stacks the deck against his philosophical plan to educate himself a perfect wife in total seclusion. Indeed, Edgeworth reveals the pretty self-sufficiency of Virginia and her neurotic grandmother’s cottage-based bee-keeping and rose-gardening, which at first strikes Hervey as a pastoral idyll, to be a breeding-ground for female ignorance, patriarchal domination, and unequal, dissatisfying relations between men and women 18.

17 Theresa Michals also makes this point, that ‘despite their very sincere protestations of economic disinterest,” the Percivals “only narrowly avoid succeeding where the Stanhopes and Delacours failed and marrying Belinda to their spendthrift ward” (5).

18 Edgeworth suggests the wrongs Virginia will suffer through her introduction to the text: a Delacour servant finds her by following “a printed handbill” for the girl’s lost bird, which the servant first mistakes for “some of those advertisements for lozenges or razor-straps” (326). The shared association with commodity goods marks both Belinda’s and Virginia’s arrival in the world of the novel, but only the well-educated Belinda has the good principles and strength of character to throw off these associations and assign her
Having secluded Virginia away from interaction with nearly the whole world, Hervey realizes he has developed for himself a wife with no independent thought, no intellectual curiosity, and no ability to partner with him in his career as a Member of Parliament.

“Nothing could be more absurd than my scheme for educating a woman in solitude, to make her fit for society” (472) he finally admits. Belinda’s union with Hervey, by contrast to all the other marriage and pseudo-marriages she examines, combines the best of the models she observes while avoiding the worst in all. They unite the prudence and domestic companionship of the Percivals, the passion of the Delacours, the innocence and unworldliness of the Rousseauian ideal, while also enjoying the support of society. Her marriage with Hervey points to the perfect union of romantic sentiment, social approval, and good moral principle that undergirds the eighteenth-century marital ideal and against which the matchmaker provides such a useful foil.

In arriving at her final marital choice, Belinda listens to the advice of older women, primarily Lady Delacour and Lady Anne. While each has a favorite suitor to champion—Lady Delacour, representing love, makes Clarence Hervey’s case even when he appears engaged to Virginia; Lady Anne, standing for reason, trumpets the virtues of Mr. Vincent, her husband’s ward—neither takes the active hand of a conventional matchmaker like Mrs. Stanhope in convincing Belinda to follow their way of thinking. They try to assuage Belinda’s doubts about their chosen suitor or to cultivate her affection for one man over the other, but neither attempts to create a liking in Belinda’s heart without first seeing evidence that one already exists. Lady Delacour plays detective in the novel’s third volume, rooting out the truth of Hervey’s “engagement” and finding own value on the marriage market. Virginia, deliberately kept ignorant, must submit to the valuation of others.
the evidence that will free him from his foolish commitment to Virginia, but she is
always honest and forthcoming to Belinda about her desires and willing to sacrifice them
when Belinda asks her to. Lady Anne, although delighted when Belinda accepts Mr.
Vincent’s proposal, also maintains the wisdom of a reversible engagement between the
two young people, supporting Belinda’s resolution to allow either party to break the
engagement at any time without loss of honor or respect.¹⁹ Edgeworth’s ultimate moral
(as Lady Delacour terms it in the novel’s concluding couplet) depends on Belinda’s free
choice and philosophical independence as she weighs her marital options. Feminine free
choice in marriage was a cornerstone in arguments of British superiority in courtship
customs at the time, particularly by comparison with the French seclusion of young
women into convents. By permitting Belinda to operate free from overbearing advice, her
only matchmaker an easily dismissed and ignored aunt outside the frame of the narration,
Edgeworth establishes her belief in the centrality of feminine free choice to British
marriage.²⁰

The proper British marriage is thus a prudently romantic one, in which passion,
respect, and rationality are combined. The proper British couple exists within society—
and enjoys its sanction—but does not live aligned toward its pleasures or approval. The

¹⁹ In supporting Belinda’s no-fault dissolution clause to her and Vincent’s engagement,
Lady Anne solidifies her claim to embody the eighteenth companionate marital ideal. The
multi-part betrothal process of the early modern period, in which each stage of the
courtship and engagement carried increasing permanence and worked together to signify
a valid marriage, is replaced here by a provisional engagement that confers binding status
on the marriage ceremony alone, a move out of step even with the increasingly private
engagements of the early nineteenth century, which could still yield breach of promise
cases if impetuously or dishonorably dissolved.
²⁰ Virginia’s plotline also affirms this moral. Raised in ignorance, she engages herself to
Clarence Hervey out of a sense of her total dependence on him. Despite this, both Hervey
and her father attempt to persuade her that “she might be entirely left to her own
decision” and “act entirely from the dictates of her own mind” (Edgeworth 407).
home is enough. This equation works in reverse, as well—not only is the proper British marriage a romantic one, but all of the novel’s proper marriages are British. Throughout *Belinda*, Edgeworth ties her critique of inadequate marital models to a critique of foreign culture and custom. Hervey embarks on his scheme of wife training after a sojourn in pre-Revolution France. Readings in French philosophy (Rousseau in particular) and the negative example of “Parisian belles”—who appear to him “full of vanity, affectation, and artifice, whose tastes were perverted, and whose feelings were depraved” (Edgeworth 362)—function equally to pervert Hervey’s judgment and inspire his unsustainably (and, most importantly, un-English) experiment with training his own future wife in ignorance and social seclusion. Further, both Clarence and Belinda’s abandoned marital prospects share a creole West Indian heritage (and fortunes derived from the Caribbean plantation system).21 As such, they share certain traits that invalidate their fitness for the prudent romance of the Edgeworthian ideal: both indolent22, both inadequately educated, both more sensible than rational, both more decorative than substantive, Vincent and Virginia’s creole identities invalidate their courtship projects as much as his impetuosity and gambling or her social ignorance do. Only through British custom are women educated wisely enough to evaluate their marriage prospects with Belinda’s philosophy, confidence, and open-heartedness.

21 Susan Greenfield and Andrew McCann are among the many critics to comment on the significance of the West Indian connection to the novel’s concluding evaluation of “national ambition and national identity” (Greenfield 109).

22 Hervey complains that Virginia is “ignorant and indolent” (379); Mr. Vincent praises the “softness, grace, delicacy—” of West Indian women of the planter class and acknowledges their “indolence” as “a slight, and, in my judgment, an amiable defect” (233). Preoccupied with music, gambling, socializing, and his dog and servant, Mr. Vincent also embodies Caribbean indolence.
In service of Belinda’s defense of romantic marriage, Edgeworth distinguishes feminine authority, female matchmaking, and women’s authorship from one another. While Mrs. Stanhope writes copious epistolary texts, she fails to decisively influence the course of Belinda’s (or Belinda’s) progress through the landscape of early nineteenth-century British marriage. Possible figures of the author in this novel, then, are not matchmakers, who draft unions out of their imaginations and then imprint that vision on the world. Instead, the representatives of female authority in Belinda occupy consciously non-writerly spaces and eschew a novelizing imagination in favor of other intellectual models. Belinda represents the force of feminine tutelage through her reformation of the Delacour household, via the second volume’s striking comedy of remarriage.23 “And we may thank miss [sic] Portman for this. For t’was she made everything go right,” (Edgeworth 179) exclaims Lady Delacour’s loyal servant Marriott when Belinda’s intervention heals Lady Delacour’s bodily illness and reconciles her to her long-alienated husband and neglected child. “She has saved my life,” Lady Delacour agrees. “She has made me life worth saving [sic]” (335). Belinda instructs the Delacours in forgiveness and the pleasures of domesticity, guiding them through encouragement and moral reminders, precepts, and examples. She eschews the mysteries and intrigues that constitute a novelist’s bread and butter, however: “you will put a stop to a number of

23 Stanley Cavell’s description of American cinematic comedies of remarriage of the 1930s and 1940s holds relevance for Belinda’s resolution of the Delacour marriage: “Comedies of remarriage typically contain not merely philosophical discussions of marriage and of romance, but metaphysical discussions of the concept that underlies both the classical problem of comedy and that of marriage, namely, the problem and the concept of identity—either in the form of what becomes of an individual, or of what has becomes of two individuals” (54-55). Further, “it is an essential feature of that genre, as I conceive it, to leave ambiguous the question whether the man or the woman is the active or the passive partner” (82).
charming mysteries by this prudence of yours,” a doctor teases her, “a romance called the Mysterious Boudoir, of nine volumes at least, might be written on the subject” (133).

Lady Delacour, another figure of female action and authority, represents by contrast feminine with and style. Drawing focus to Belinda throughout the novel, she places her friend in situations that reveal her sterling character. Her visual arrangements also conclude the text. After a self-aware discussion of novelistic conventions, Lady Delacour abandons a facetious effort to close the narrative in favor of organizing a closing tableau of budding young love and domestic reconciliation.24

From *Belinda*, we can gather that, at the start of the nineteenth century, the doctrine of romantic marriage defines itself in opposition to the matchmaker, who represents the foreign, un-English, and suspicious in marriage practices from around the globe. All this remains largely true in the subsequent century. Yet even as romantic marriage holds an unquestioned pride of place in the nineteenth-century popular imagination, the writers I examine in the rest of this dissertation locate in the matchmaker a far more potent resource for questioning the intersections of female authority, marriage custom, and conceptions of authorship in the nineteenth century than Edgeworth finds possible at the extreme end of the eighteenth. The four chapters that follow trace the matchmaker’s at times challenging association of conventional femininity with social and

24 Heather MacFayden and Katherine Sobba Green find in Lady Delacour’s tableau an example of female authorship in the text. “Edgeworth’s first portrait of a reformed fashionable reader thus suggests that a woman may possess both domestic and literary authority” (439), MacFayden claims, while Green argues that “the fact that Edgeworth chooses to have Lady Delacour arrange the scene serves as her acknowledgment that even in fiction the domestic tableau (‘being happy’) is achieved with difficulty” (151). While Lady Delacour does represent a female aesthetic authority in the text, her refusal to claim the mantle of matchmaker leads me to read her interventions as necessarily non-novelistic/non-narrative, which is further supported by her turn from story telling to visual display in the novel’s final paragraphs.
economic power. As a narrative tool, she points to the confluence of social and historical factors with possibilities for storytelling. As an exemplar of aesthetic agency, a force capable of making emotional vision manifest in biological consequences, she constitutes an inescapable model with which the authors I examine must grapple. While it’s possible to read a matchmaker into nearly every nineteenth-century novel, I focus my readings solely on authors that explicitly name characters within their pages as such, thus signaling the inextricable bind of novelistic creation with tropes of social femininity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the foremost practitioners of the novel of manners—Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope, and Henry James, along with the too-overlooked Harriet Martineau—find in the matchmaker the necessary double of their own artistic craft, mimicking her strategies of representation and presentation whether they morally align themselves with her goals and methods or not. Reading these authors in the context of other writers of their period reveals that their preoccupation with the matchmaker is representative of the gendered nature of nineteenth-century narrative itself.

I begin, as any examination of nineteenth-century matchmakers must, with Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1816). Reading *Emma* alongside the English cantos of Byron’s *Don Juan* (1823-1824) reveals the formal parallels between these two very different Romantic authors, specifically in the matchmaker’s usefulness for each as a figure of creation and a master of form. Both writers connect the author’s role as crafter of marriages and the goals of matchmaking characters. These texts also both subscribe to the belief in matchmaking as a particularly female enterprise. Excluded from the ideology of romantic marriage for different reasons, Austen and Byron identify the triangle as the social form
enabled by the matchmaker’s interventions and, through this identification, mount a challenge to exclusive conjugality.

The second chapter delineates the disturbing intermingling of literary authority and domestic tyranny that the figure of the matchmaking mother presented to women writers of the early-Victorian period. To begin, I examine an assortment of anonymous and under-read periodical writers who engage with the trope of the maternal matchmaker during the high-water mark of Victorian domestic ideology. Across multiple genres and venues, these authors establish a pattern through which matchmaking mothers, by absorbing the narrative’s scorn of mercenary marriage, permit their children to combine the benefits of both romance and wealth in their concluding unions. In their more substantive investment in the matchmaking mother, two popular women novelists of the day—the iconoclastic Harriet Martineau in Deerbrook (1839) and the conventional Harriette Maria Gordon Smythies in The Matchmaker (1841)—locate a powerful opportunity to depict their own cultural position at the intersection of the literary, domestic, and commercial realms. Complicated villainesses, the matchmaking mothers written by Smythies and especially Martineau complicate the periodical writers’ dismissal of maternal matchmaking as mercenary or malicious.

I then turn in separate chapters to the work of the two greatest male practitioners of the courtship plot: Anthony Trollope and Henry James. Trollope provides the fullest elaboration on the figure throughout his career, showing her centrality to his conception of himself as author and to the novel as artistic unit and moral tool. Matchmaking in Trollope’s work is a distinctly feminine exercise in a wider system of advocacy and partisanship. In Barchester Towers (1857) and The Vicar of Bullhampton (1870)
matchmaking demands of its women practitioners careful performance of particular social roles and offers in exchange the opportunity to shape their local communities for good or ill. Positioning the author and the matchmaker as dual (and at times dueling) figures of social intervention, Trollope’s narratives draw a line of continuity between the fallible matchmakers who populate the texts and the ostentatiously even-handed author who crafts their destinies.

James is both drawn to and repelled by the matchmaker throughout his career. In his earliest novels, including Watch and Ward (1871) and The American (1877), he positions male aesthetes and female matchmakers as competing forces. With the powerfully villainous manifestations of the role in The Portrait of a Lady (1881) and The Wings of the Dove (1902), both an acknowledgment and repudiation of his prior female exemplars in the novelistic arts, the matchmaker stands apart from the mature novelist James and the glorious and self-whole female heroines whose destinies drive the actions of his plot. But the narratively and psychologically compelling portraits of female matchmaking—particularly in the case of Kate Croy, who wars with Merton Densher and Milly Theale for narrative primacy—point to his commonality with his villainous matchmakers (and, by extension, his female progenitors): James too stakes his claim to value on the marital destiny and implicit suffering of a vulnerable woman.

Matchmaking characters perform essential functions in a variety of nineteenth-century texts: as villains or heroines, flawed or favorable, they are always figures of feminine agency, activity, and imagination, and thus a powerful locus for multiple anxieties about women’s social, economic, and literary authority to converge. By virtue of her dismissal from contemporary marriage ritual, the matchmaker becomes a more complicated participant in the marriage plot. As
matchmaking grows ever more affiliated with femininity, the matchmaker becomes an ever more potent symbol for artistry of all kinds, not only female creativity. Literary matchmakers blur the distinctions between those within and exterior to a marriage, between the social and conjugal, between the physical and the emotional, and between the historical and the aesthetic. Through reading a century’s worth of narratives about British marital manipulators, we can rethink the category of authorship in the nineteenth century and the relation of those authors, male and female, to the central generic patterns that organize romance and realism, women and men, and self and other in the Victorian era.
CHAPTER II.
The Rule of Three: Austen, Byron, and Romantic Matchmaking

This chapter will explore the propulsive centrality of the matchmaker to two of the most important artists of the late-Romantic era: Jane Austen and Lord Byron. During the years in which they wrote, the ideology of the love match worked to render suspect any form of marital interference by third parties. Instead, a courtship system was codifying in the upper and middle classes that replaced the direct coordination of the matchmaker with a more diffuse yet regulated system of social gatherings for prospective marital partners of the same class. This private, class-based socialization provided opportunities for courtship that ensured class standards and community approval while still supporting a vision of marriage divorced from mercenary ambition or concerns. Austen and Byron take this system as fit targets for satire in their most ambitious works, her *Emma* (1816) and his comic epic *Don Juan* (1819-1824). Despite their differences, both writers confront similar questions circulating in the period about the nature of marriage and its connection to singleness and society, to authorship and narrative, and to finality and impermanence. They do so by selecting the same character-type, the matchmaker, as the most apt figure through which to examine their authorial identities. Writing narratives of coupling in the era of romantic marriage—an ideology from which each of them was excluded at the time of their authorship, for very different reasons—they discover in the superannuated matchmaker the prime movers of their plots. While matchmaking women were roundly chastised in eighteenth-century fiction, as we observed in Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* in the previous chapter, Austen and Byron draw these characters to the center of their narratives, deriving energy from the women’s most
troubling qualities: their unleashed imaginative capacity, their self-righteous boldness, their interference in the private relations of their associates. Each draws explicit parallels between an author’s role as crafter of unions and the goals of their matchmaking characters: the mastery of form is a crucial component of this parallel. The would-be matchmaker Emma and author Austen both work with the endlessly reproducible and subtly variable courtship plot. Byron in turn links the conflicted matchmaking poetess Lady Adeline’s efforts to match Juan with his own playful manipulation of the endlessly unspooling final couplets of his ottava rima rhyme scheme. Ultimately, both writers find the traditional (and frequently denigrated) female role of the matchmaker a useful figure for their artistic efforts for similar reasons.

As the introduction to this dissertation outlined, scholars across several disciplines, including history, literary studies, and sociology, have theorized a progression from the community-based model of marriage ritual that predominated through the early modern period to a private, affective model that came to form the standard in modernity. Part of this shift involved the cultural disavowal of marriage practices like official marital intermediaries, formal multi-part betrothals, and public ceremonies (which signaled the investment of kinship groups in marriage decisions) in favor of “informal” meetings (at socially sanctioned gatherings for the purpose of courtship), the language of romantic love and free choice, and private wedding ceremonies. Concurrently, even as the rhetoric used to imagine British marriage increasingly emphasized passion, affection, individual feeling, and romantic freedom, the state wrested from the church and local communities the power to authorize marital functions.

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25 For readings of this shift, see: Stone, Trumbach, Coontz, Davidoff, Gillis.
unions through laws that mandated licenses and official registration of marriages with the government. Ruth Perry articulates the contours of this shift in Novel Relations, her study of the relative importance of family groups and conjugal relations in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature. “Marriage—both the ceremony and the institution—had been a more public affair in the seventeenth century,” she explains, “celebrated by the larger community and not just by the principals and their families” (Perry 201).

Courtships across classes, according to Perry, “often proceeded through emissaries who were friends of the principals rather than in the person of the principals themselves.” (204). Further, as Randolph Trumbach has described, formal matchmakers-for-hire helped arrange marriages in wealthy and aristocratic circles into the eighteenth-century, when they fell out of favor (102). Love was not primary in this group decision-making. While affection between husband and wife was valued, other concerns predominated in forming marriages: finances, land ownership and inheritance, family business or occupations, and domestic care requirements for children or the elderly or ill. “By the time a couple decided to marry,” as Perry notes, “the pros and cons of the match including the financial terms had been thoroughly discussed by their friends, family, and neighbors” (204).

By the Regency period, when both Austen and Byron experimented with the matchmaker, there had emerged a decidedly different cultural vision of courtship and marriage that would shortly become hegemonic in the Victorian era. In a newly mobile, economically capitalist society, the intimate domestic circle assumed the centrality once accorded to kinship groups imbricated in the geographic and historical existence of local
Celebrations—including marriage ceremonies—shifted from community-wide entertainments to “what Peter Stearns calls domestic occasions, smaller gatherings in private homes, centered on such family celebrations as birthdays, christenings, and anniversaries” (Coontz 167) and to which attendees required personal invitations. The passage of Lord Hardwicke’s Act, in 1754, further eroded community participation in marriage rites by codifying in law a host of changes to a the existing, sometimes contradictory matrix of marriage rites based out of long-standing tradition, Anglican theology, and common law: authorizing state control of the contentious sector of “private marriage” officiants, confirming parental consent regulations for prospective spouses under the age of 21, mandating residency and religious requirements for marriage, and permitting the direct purchase of marriage licenses in order to circumvent some of these restrictions. Consequently, licenses, which granted private ceremonies legal approval, grew in popularity, despite their costliness, and the ritual of the honeymoon trip, which emphasized the emerging conjugal dyad over the community out of which it arose, gained increasing favor. Romantic affection came to be prized as not only the most important basis for marriage decisions, but indeed the only valid motivation. To be sure, real-life couples continued to marry for a variety of reasons, financial expediency among them, and not always in pursuit of passion. In literature, though, love conquered all:

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26 Claudia Nelson cites sociologist Robin Fox in order to illustrate the effect of the Industrial Revolution on courtship practices: prior to the invention of rapid transportation, like railroads, the radius of the locality in which to find potential romantic partners was typically five miles, or the distance a suitor could travel on foot twice a day. “Consequently,” she explains, “England was full of villages in which generations of intermarriage had resulted in a community tied together by a complex network of blood relationships” (134).

27 For further reading on marriage licensing see Gillis (140, 192). On the subject of honeymoons, see Gillis (138) and Helena Michie’s *Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal*.
courtship novelists presented marriages made without it as at best flawed and at worst immoral.

Read in this context, Emma’s (and Emma’s) infamous realization of the perils of matchmaking makes perfect historical sense. By involving herself in what should be a private matter of personal affections, Emma drags an earlier, outmoded form of marriage facilitation into an age that it doesn’t suit. She sports with personal affections, newly crowned the highest priority in the arrangement of marriages. When she described her involvement in Harriet’s affairs as “adventuring too far” (Austen 108), she recalls the now-maligned mercenary quality of early-modern matchmaking—the notion of Harriet’s married life as a venture or commercial prospect—while simultaneously divorcing it from the traditional rootedness of community and culture that it formerly signified. In a Romantic context, to matchmake is to adventure, to explore, roam, or wander, substituting the uncharted wilds of inadequate perception for the clear avenues of individual choice and personal inclination. Before, marriage was too consequential to the communities that cradled a pair of spouses to allow capricious fancy to dictate its direction; now, an unpleasant, ill-matched partnership is too grave a matter to the principals involved to let others sport with matching. Naturally, Emma feels foolish and ashamed when she remembers this new truth. Out-of-step with current literary trends, she merits her chastisement from a novel that is, after all, part of the period’s literary culture.

Several factors complicate the straightforwardness of this apparent moral, however. To begin, the exclusionary significance of the domestic nuclear family has been overstated in some depictions of the era’s social and literary history. Coontz notes that “the percentage of households containing parents or unmarried siblings increased during
the nineteenth century” (Coontz 183), suggesting the continued centrality of more extended family networks throughout the period. Perry also suggests that, “As late as 1796, then, marriage was not simply a matter of personal attraction between a man and his chosen bride, as so many anachronistic historical descriptions reconstruct it to be” (191). Crucially for readings of Austen and Byron, historians note that “the politics of marriage had shifted from issues internal to the family and community to questions of class” (Gillis 150) by the late eighteenth century.28 Katharine Sobba Green and Erica Harth describe the process by which this cultural rewriting enacts itself in their readings of the periodical debates and Parliamentary record surrounding the passage of the Hardwicke Act. Green brings forward the rhetorical focus on the intersections of marriage and money through the use of terms like “matchmaking,” “maneuvering,” and “marriage market” (274) by both proponents and advocates of the bill. With greater thoroughness, Harth outlines the process by which “considerations of love and marriage were embedded in those of money and property” (133) for mid-eighteenth century legislators. For the men involved in drafting the Hardwicke Act, both love and money “are anarchic principles that can threaten the status quo” (135). Along with eighteenth-century changes to traditional methods of assigning social value and determining the generational consolidation of wealth, therefore, “it became urgent to promote marriage as the moralists wished to do, and to promote the right kind of marriage, as the legislators in Parliament joined the moralists in wishing to do. The ideology of a virtuous love that would preserve both the social and the sexual order arose in the ranks of landowning and

28 Perry confirms this understanding of the relation of class, wealth, and courtship in the era of romantic marriage: “the ideology of romantic love tended not to disrupt the system but rather to mystify the role of social status and class in mate selection,” she explains (285). Lenore Davidoff also offers this interpretation in The Best Circles.
monied men” (154). The legislative reforms of the Hardwicke Act, enacted for financial reasons, ultimately produce a marital environment conducive to the ideal of romantic marriage and free choice: with new confidence in legal paternal oversight of children’s marriages, the well-to-do shift the social life of communities from general, class-promiscuous gatherings (and formally arranged marriages) to socially exclusive, class-based assemblies that provide young men and women the ostensible freedom to find partners of their own choosing.

Within this context, Austen and Byron present multifaceted portraits of matchmaking that acknowledge the class-based courtship practices that order middle- and upper-class social life and at the same time bring to the fore the matchmaker and the author’s shared ability to complicate or confirm those practices. Austen’s narrative drives inexorably toward marriage as its terminus in a vision of social order restored, and yet both the text and the heroine at its center resist marital closure for as long as possible through a series of ill-advised, abortive, impossible, or imagined alternate unions.29 Byron’s poem famously digresses from any suggestion of finality, both in the extra-marital, truncated unions that comprise Juan’s amorous adventures and in the meandering, conversational style through which his poet narrates them.30 Yet Byron, too, despite his strenuous and pointed objections to closure throughout Don Juan, grants more to the pleasures of finality than at first appears. Paul Elledge identifies Byron as the poet of valediction due to the frequency of his poems of farewell address (46), while the very

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29 On the subject of Emma’s abortive or alternate possibilities to marital closure, see Nancy Armstrong, DA Miller, and Tony Tanner.
30 Some of the many critics who have discussed Byron’s resistance to closure in Don Juan include: Paul Elledge, L.M. Findlay, Caroline Franklin, Zachary Leader, Jerome McGann, Jane Stabler, and Susan Wolfson.
ottava rima stanza form Byron chooses for his epic attests to the appeal of finality and closure. Crowing over “The regularity of my design” (i. 51)—a jesting reference to his digressive, nonlinear narrative style, but also a celebration of his adherence to form—Byron concludes each of his roughly two-thousand stanzas with a rhyming couplet, as profound a statement of the pleasures of a concluding dyad as any offered by a marital pair.

I. Lady Adeline: The Poetry of Matchmaking and the Romance of Adultery

Nothing so difficult as a beginning
In poesy, unless perhaps the end.
(Don Juan iv. 1-2)

Turning first to Byron’s Don Juan establishes some parameters for understanding the place of the matchmaker in the Romantic era as these two most technically adept formalists and felicitous satirists conceived of it. Byron’s approach to the matchmaking woman demonstrates the potency of this figure as the eighteenth-century faded and a new host of concerns—literary, social, and marital—came to prominence. Lady Adeline and female creativity more generally provide Byron with the ideal lens through which to examine literary creation and posterity, always of concern for the Romantics and none more so than Byron. At the same time, the close coupling of authorship and traditionally feminine matchmaking practices may come as a surprise in the self-consciously masculine poetry of someone like Byron. The famed Byronic hero of poems like The Corsair (1814) or The Giaour (1813) set the model for literary manliness in the period (and indeed, in many periods to follow). Further, Byron publicized his distaste for “intellectual” women in poems like 1821’s “The Blues”, which contained such choice lines as, “So instead of ‘beaux arts,’ we may say ‘la belle passion’ / For learning, which
lately they’ve taken the lead in / The world, and set all the fine gentlemen reading” (l. 4-6). The union of art and passion in the line points to the double foci of Byron’s critique of women intellectuals: their degrading influence both on domestic and romantic relationships and on poetic taste and standards. This reading is further supported by his letter to John Murray in 1819 declaring his disinclination to write more “Ladies’ books” like his Eastern Tales. Wolfson observes that “Byron’s favorite means of abusing a political opponent is to degender him” (“Condition 595). Finally, Jerome McGann’s identification of the Greek bard as a male poet-double for Byron has also obscured his close parallels with Lady Adeline and her matchmaking sisterhood,

Despite this resistance to female literary culture, in Don Juan Byron constructs an alternate female figure—a writing women who is also a clear double of the poet. Several critics have correlated Byron’s poetic method in Don Juan with feminine modes and models, though these associations fall short of the doubling I read in his stance toward Lady Adeline. Stabler finds that the poem “embraces a feminine prerogative of change” (154) as it progresses in its meandering, digressive, seemingly spontaneous way. Leader refers to Byron’s comic poems, like Don Juan, as “‘women-dominated poems,’ in

31 Byron’s separation from Annabella Millbanke can also be read in his reference to the dismal wives Bluestockings make: “I can’t say I know any happy alliance / Which has lately sprung up from a wedlock with science” (l. 72-73)
32 Letter to John Murray 6 April 1819 (qtd in Leader 90).
33 McGann notes that the bard who delivers “The Isles of Greece” in Canto III is a composite of Byron’s habitual poetic punching bag, Southey, and Byron himself. Like Byron, the bard has traveled “among Arabs, Turks and Franks” (III 665) and voices his creator’s cherished ideals about Greek independence, nationalism, and history.
34 Stabler further notes similar recurrent images across Byron’s work that he uses to figure both himself as poet and a recurrent image in Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage and several cantos of Don Juan in which a solitary bark tossed by waves represents Harold’s hope in the midst of despair, the narrator’s iconoclastic rejection of conventionality, and the inchoate longings of the female heart (165-166).
stylistic as well as narrative or plot terms” and calls attention to commonalities between “changeable Adeline” and “the comic narrator of Don Juan” (120). Wolfson finds evidence for “a kind of psychic cross-dressing for his narrator” (“Condition” 591) to pair with Juan’s literal cross-dressing in his harem episode35. The association of Lady Adeline with Byron is even stronger than they argue, however, and like Byron, Adeline is also a poet. Further, in the English cantos, Byron asserts the creative and imaginative potential of traditional womanhood in the figure of the matchmaker and links his own meandering, expansive poetic project with theirs through their mutual investment in the continuance of “lines.” The recasting of the caustic Byronic male narrator as a matchmaking dowager in the English cantos allows Byron to both employ and critique elements of the traditional marriage-plot, bringing genre into conflict with generation. Reading Don Juan from this perspective reveals Byron’s reliance on traditional female social roles to explore the tensions between restraint and license, compulsion and closure, and loss and love that compel his poetic project forward.

At the conclusion of Canto XIV, Byron explicitly compares his narrative strategies in Don Juan to conventional womanly wiles. He asserts his intention to purposefully conceal the result of Juan and Adeline’s growing friendship from his readers, as such suspense is “The surest way for ladies and for books / To bait their tender or their tenter hooks” (xiv. 775-776). Byron’s tone of ironic distance undercuts the simplicity of the association of poetry or artistry with women even as he avows it. Nevertheless, in the following canto he continues to stress the artistry of womanly

35 Wolfson also draws attention to the comments of Byron’s intimates Lady Blessington and Teresa Guiccioli on the similarities between Byron’s character and his description of Lady Adeline’s (Borderlines 179).
manipulation. Women “fill the canvass up” (xv. 125), he declares, using their imagination to create ideal visions of men they scarcely know. Just a few stanzas later, in discussion of his own digressive, conversational poetics, the narrator echoes this ekphrastic metaphor: “The difficulty lies in colouring / (Keeping the due proportions still in sight)” (xv. 197-198). Both the scheming, imaginative women who populate the Amundeville estate and Byron’s narrator assume the role of painters. If the narrator worries more about “due proportions” than the extravagantly imaginative women do, they are nonetheless both different kinds of the same thing. As the Canto continues, the links between women and artistry compound. The eligible Aurora Raby “look’d more on books than faces” (xv. 673). Even women’s traditional, oft-maligned fascination with matchmaking finds a counterpart in Byron’s poetics. Matchmaking women “Arrang[e their relatives] like books on the same shelf” (xv. 243), the narrator breezily remarks, concluding:

But never yet (except of course a miss
Unwed, or mistress never to be wed,
Or wed already, who object to this)
Was there chaste dame who had not in her head
Some drama of the marriage unities,
Observed as strictly both at board and bed,
As those of Aristotle, though sometimes
They turn out melodrames or pantomimes (xv. 249-256).

Like dramatic poets, like writers in general, matchmaking ladies observe the rules of genre in their creative enterprises. And like Byron, who mixes epic adventure, picaresque tale, Oriental travelogue, and English comedy of manners in his Don Juan, sometimes the story veers in an unexpected direction and the genre makes a surprising shift.

In treating of Lady Adeline, the correlations between the poet’s methods and his creations become more starkly clear. Like Byron, Adeline possesses a careless poetic genius, a talent for impromptu composition, and the ability to dazzle her guests with her
impressive performance. Adeline is distinguished as a poet by the narrator—indeed, Byron distinguishes her more than does her own husband, Lord Henry Amundeville, who refers to her as “half a poetess” (xvi. 306). Like the Greek poet, Adeline receives a separate lyric of her own, numbered differently from the rest of the poem, and in ballad form rather than Byron’s ottava rima. She sings and accompanies herself, an exhibition which, bringing together “The voice, the words, the harper’s skill, at once / Could hardly be united by a dunce” (xvi 311-312). Further, the poet-speaker’s description of Adeline’s mode of poetic presentation recalls Byron’s own in Don Juan:

Fair Adeline, though in a careless way,
As if she rated such accomplishment
As the mere pastime of an idle day,
Pursued an instant for her own content,
Would now and then as ’twere without display,
Yet with display in fact, at times relent
To such performances with haughty smile,
To show she could, if it were worth her while. (xvi. 377-384)

With a similarly nonplussed acceptance of his own genius, Byron’s narrator describes his own compositional method as “never straining hard to versify, / I rattle on exactly as I’d talk / With any body in a ride or walk” (xv. 150-152). Both Byron and Adeline’s “performances” appear as spontaneous eruptions of uncalculated brilliance. Nonetheless, just as Byron notes the “display” concealed behind Adeline’s “haughty smile” and seeming lack of premeditation, Byron’s own performance of careless verse often conceals the labor and application that produced it.\(^{36}\)

\(^{36}\) Franklin comments on the extensive revisions Byron made to Canto I, requiring him to copy the manuscript himself (129). Leader observes that Byron’s revisions tend to foster the poetic speaker’s calculated appearance of spontaneity and haphazardness: “seeming solutions are problematized, single tones, moods, and styles are consistently complicated, undercut, overturned” (98).
Adeline shares Byron’s poetic taste along with his poetic talent and seemingly light attitude toward it. Like Byron, Lady Adeline is “weak enough to deem Pope a great poet, / And what was worse, was not ashamed to show it” (xvi. 423-424). Despite her alignment with Byron on so many poetical registers, however, the narrator still notes that “She also had a twilight tinge of ‘Blue’” (xvi. 417), though “from that sublimer azure hue, / So much the present dye, she was remote” (xvi. 421-422). Like the Greek poet, Lady Adeline represents the fusion of Byron’s poetic identity with that of his rivals: in the first instance, Southey, in the second, the Bluestockings. The fusion is more striking in Lady Adeline’s case, however, as Byron refrains from the kind of vicious excoriation of the rival that he can’t resist in connection to Southey. Lady Adeline, a gifted woman poet involved in Bluestocking culture, can be both a talented writer and an elegant woman, both an imitator of Byron and one of his heroines. Because she keeps herself free of the irrational excesses of “the sublimer azure hue,” Lady Adeline represents the possibility of a literary femininity that coexists with male artistry and a female model for Byron’s poetic style.

Susan Wolfson has drawn a comparison between Byron’s pleasure in “rhyme-matching” and the women’s pleasure in matchmaking (*Borderlines* 177). An even stronger and more compelling association exists between the two, however, one that can shape our understanding of Byron’s approach to genre and narrative in general. The poetic speaker speculates that women scheme to make matches because the loss of “some only son” (xv. 257) or “some gay Sir John” (xv. 259) “perhaps might end / A line, and leave posterity undone, / Unless a marriage was applied to mend / The prospect and their morals” (xv. 260-263). Byron shows his own disinclination to “end a line” time and again
in *Don Juan*—cantos lead unexpectedly to more cantos, word play to more word play, culminating in this famously digressive, expansive, unfinished, and eternally open-ended poem. The impulse to match-make—to analyze, interpret and to join—stems from the desire for continuance, futurity, and persistence. This desire is very much like the quest for posterity that motivates so many Romantic poets, along with the compulsion to continue the tale that drives *Don Juan* (the poem and the character) ever forward. Byron, like the women he sometimes mocks, sometimes admires, “favour[s], *malgré* Malthus, generation” (xv. 290). The narrator of *Don Juan* not only matches rhymes and extends lines. He also forms romantic pairings, telling stories of romantic and sexual union between men and women throughout the cantos. However, unlike the matchmaking dowagers he resembles—the “Professors of that genial art, and patrons / Of all the modest part of propagation” (xv. 291-292)—Byron’s matches never achieve the aimed for closure of marriage. He never brings Juan into stasis with a single partner. Instead, he constructs a series of truncated relationships, each abruptly ending before the task of biological generation occurs. If matchmaking in this text is the art of arranging heterosexual couples into formations that produce future generations, Byron’s narrator—and Byron the author—can be declared failures at the task.

Like the poetic speaker, Lady Adeline seeks to match Juan and cannot succeed. Adeline not only “seriously advise[s] him to get married” (xv. 232), she also “determine[s] Juan’s wedding / In her own mind” (xv. 313-314) and works through her list of available women for the right match. Again, as in the poet’s romantic pairings, each of the women Adeline surveys lacks some essential quality she feels Juan requires; she even dismisses the paragon Aurora Raby as “such a baby” (xv. 391). Aurora seems,
from a certain perspective, the perfect match for Juan. Both are Catholics, both young. Crucially, both are the last of their lineages. A union between the two would uniquely fulfill the matchmaker’s project of propagation—an extension of two “lines” otherwise doomed to eradication. Adeline’s reluctance to match Juan with this eminently appropriate wife clearly owes in large part to her unacknowledged sexual attraction to him and her repressed dissatisfaction with her proper but cold marriage. More interestingly, her failure as a matchmaker also corresponds to the general association of death and breeding (both in the sense of noble lineages and in the sense of childbirth) that recurs throughout the poem and points to Byron’s deeper concerns with questions of closure and completion. Lady Adeline’s poem relates the legend of the Black Friar, the displaced figure of celibacy that haunts the Amundeville’s Norman Abbey. In Lady Adeline’s telling, the Friar “flits” (xvi. 341) and “comes” (xvi. 343) to both the marriage- and death-beds of the Abbey’s holders, but reserves his most dramatic appearances for the birth of Amundeville children: “When an heir is born, he is heard to mourn” (xvi. 344). Adeline concludes her poem with a prayer for the Friar’s soul, a gesture both superstitious and sympathetic, as well as surprising given his avowed interest in the discontinuation of her family line.

For Byron, as for Adeline, death inextricably appears linked to propagation and procreation throughout the poem. The poem stresses the non-reproductive aspect of Haidée and Juan’s romantic idyll. The most momentary separations appear to them as painful as the experience of “the child from the knee / And breast maternal wean’d at once forever” (iv. 77-78). Further, Byron dwells on the “second principle of life” (iv. 554) Haidée nurtured at her death, the potential child that “went down to the grave
unborn” (iv. 557). Upon bringing the action of his narrative to Norman Abbey, the
narrator reveals that on the Abbey’s grounds, “oaks, as olden as their pedigree, / Told of
their sires, a tomb in every tree” (xiii. 399-400), presenting the Amundeville lineage as a
series of deaths rather than of sequential births. Strikingly, Byron insists upon the
synchronicity of breeding and death even in relation to his poetic project. “My muse hath
bred, and still perforce may breed, more foes” (xv. 477), he notes, giving a sinister cast to
his poetic productivity. Finally, in the first twenty-five stanzas of Canto XIV he alludes to
Saturn eating his own children (xiv. 6), children devouring their parents (xiv. 10),
women’s suffering in child-birth (xiv. 183), and the tragedy of women’s sole earthly
mission, to “form good housekeepers to breed a nation” (xiv. 192).

As Adeline works both for and against Juan’s prospective marriages, she also
interferes in his extra-marital dalliances. When she observes Juan’s suspicious closeness
with the Duchess Fitz-Fulke—at the height of Juan’s search for a marriage partner—
Adeline relates the legend of the Friar, a legend Juan has already revealed disturbs him
greatly. The poet coyly refrains from specifying Adeline’s purpose in invoking the ghost:
“’Twere difficult to say what was the object / Of Adeline, in bringing this same lay / To
bear on what appeared to her the subject / Of Juan’s nervous feelings on that day” (xvi.
449-452). Yet her role as match-breaker in this instance reveals the extent to which she
and Friar share a mission in preventing propagation. As an anti-marriage, anti-
reproductive force, Adeline offers the image of the matchmaker as adulterer, cleaving
married unions rather than forging new ones.37 Distanced from her aristocratic husband,

37 In this, Byron harkens back to earlier, 18th-century representations of inappropriately amorant matchmakers, like Congreve’s Lady Wishfort, whose desire for their own
as frigid and potentially explosive as a bottle of frozen champagne (in Byron’s striking image for her character), distinguished by her “mobility” (xvi. 820) and tendency to be “strongly acted on by what is nearest” (xvi. 824), Lady Adeline’s interest in Juan bespeaks her volatile attraction to him. Her matchmaking is a blind for her extramarital attraction rather than a confirmation of satisfaction with romantic marriage; though unfinished, the English Cantos strongly imply Adeline’s eventual downfall as another in Juan’s train of amorous partners. Caught between custom and passion, duty and desire, the Byronic matchmaker is the destabilizing element in a trio of lovers or would-be lovers, threatening to pull the male participant to align with her rather than propping up his contact with the other woman. No longer an avatar of community values, she represents the dangerous power of an iconoclastic artist.

Byron’s seeming anxiety over procreation and aristocratic lineage may stem from elements of his biography. While his personal distress over his failure to continue his hereditary line and his loss or potential loss of his existing children could certainly have influenced his attitude toward child-bearing in Don Juan, the correlation of death and breeding could equally as well reflect Byron’s relationship to the literary culture of his time, particularly to the increasing prevalence of the marriage-plot. Franklin notes that Byron’s library contained numerous female-authored marriage-plot novels by writers such as Fanny Burney, Amelia Opie, Hannah More, and Maria Edgeworth (Byron’s interludes impedes their judgment over their wards’ courtships. It also presages James’s adulterous matchmakers Mme. Merle and Kate Croy, as we will see in Chapter Five.

As Franklin notes, “The failure of his marriage before a male heir had been born, and the sale of Newstead, saw the fall of his ‘house’ in all senses of the word” (Byron 133). Further, in 1819 Byron feared a court case over the copyright to Don Juan would cost him the legal guardianship of his daughter Ada (Franklin, Byron 140), and in 1822 his young illegitimate daughter Allegra died in Italy.
Perhaps Byron’s allusion to the marriage-plot novel through the figure of the matchmaker serves to consciously refute the lessons of fulfillment, finality, and closure offered by those women-authored texts. Yet while Jane Austen, the greatest of marriage-plot novelists, does not appear in Byron’s library catalogue, Wolfson and Stabler have identified possible debts to her work in Don Juan. Further, in Don Juan and Emma (the single novel for which Austen and Byron shared a publisher), Lady Adeline and Emma Woodhouse, the aspiring matchmakers, manipulate the characters around them, attempting to produce lasting heterosexual unions. They each embed themselves in the triangular relationship of matchmaking to disastrous results, stymied by the irrationality of human emotions, including their own.

II. Emma Woodhouse: From Incendiary Imaginations to Stable Triangles

Matrimony, as the origin of change, was always disagreeable. (Emma 7)

Emma Woodhouse, in many ways, resembles the matchmaking narrator of Don Juan more than she resembles the morally and sexually conflicted Adeline. Byron’s narrator declares on the subject of marriage, “I don’t choose to say much on this head, / I’m a plain man and in a single station” (I 173-174). He intends to expose the workings of heterosexual relationships—and dictate the course of Juan’s romantic career—while remaining above and inured from the messy dealings of emotional life himself. Similarly, Emma declares “I am not only not going to be married at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all” (Austen 78). Indeed, Emma provides as sturdy a refutation of the need to marry as any found in Don Juan, a remarkable feat for a novel

39 Wolfson believes that Julia’s farewell letter “fronts a critique of female social fate, credited with swaths of Austen and...Stael” (1818) and Stabler connects the feminized position of Byron’s narrator in certain stanzas to the digressive walking parties that feature prominently in Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion (Stabler 152).
organized around a marriage plot. “If I were to marry, I must expect to repent it” (78), Emma asserts, suggestive of Byron’s multiple claims in Don Juan to the effect that “Love may exist with marriage, and should ever, / And marriage also may exist without” (XII117-118). If Austen subtly undermines the notion of inevitable progress in the marriage plot, Byron—despite his strenuous and pointed objections to closure throughout Don Juan—grants more to the pleasures of finality than he declares.

More profoundly invested in the marriage plot than Byron, however, Austen derives different significance from the matchmaker’s likeness to the author of courtship plots and of unions, marital or otherwise. Like Byron, Austen experiments with the intersections of narrative, genre, and gender in her manipulation of the matchmaker figure. As a woman writer of the lesser gentry, however, she brings a series of concerns to bear on the question of the matchmaker’s powers and culpabilities that Byron doesn’t consider. She examines the female matchmaker—and thus, the woman author—as an embodied woman embedded in community; she tests the powers and limits of that role. Like Byron and Lady Adeline, Austen and Emma share certain essential practices: techniques of narration (particularly free indirect discourse), habits of reading and observation, and strategies for interpretation and intervention. Through her deep awareness of the complications inherent to Emma’s role as simultaneous observer and participant in the woman-dominated realm of class-based etiquette, Austen also offers a

40 Copeland describes Austen’s complicated class position as such: “Austen’s social station as the unmarried daughter of a moderately well-beneficed clergyman living in the country puts her right in the center of a social group with particularly sensitive relations to consumption. David Spring calls it the ‘pseudo-gentry,’ a group living in the country—clergymen, upper professionals, officers in the army and navy, retired rentiers, great merchants—with social or kinship connections to the landed classes, and, most significantly, with strong aspirations to the style of life enjoyed by the latter, including, let it be noted, aspirations to a considerable share of their power” (Copeland 11).
portrait of matchmaking that is as much a recuperation of the practice as an ironic condemnation. Again like Byron, she seizes on the trio (rather than the duo) as the significant social formation the matchmaker enables; but from her necessarily different perspective on women’s social places and roles, Austen locates as much promise in triangulated relationships as she does peril.

The idea of Emma as a kind of novelist or matchmaking as a form of literary activity is not revolutionary, of course. Some of the most prominent readers of *Emma* have called attention to the links between these two activities. Nancy Armstrong insists in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, “Matchmaking is for Austen simply another word for fiction-making” (143). Tony Tanner claims in *Jane Austen* that “Emma is a bad ‘novelist’ who is the central subject of a great novel” (Tanner 203) while D.A. Miller describes Emma as having “an essentially novelistic power or invention…. a mind that works rather by means of novelistic scenes than by conceptual formulations: not in the assertive mode of established facts and fixed principles, but in the dramatizing mode of fiction” (15). More recently, Jillian Heydt-Stevenson follows this course when she links Emma’s matchmaking to Austen’s physical act of writing “and thus to the idea of Emma herself as a novelist, creating courtships (like Austen does) in Highbury’s miniature world” (179).

Sarah Raff extends the metaphor farther than most in *Jane Austen’s Erotic Advice*, when she contends that Austen’s literary matchmaking simulates her familial matchmaking. Raff compellingly draws a line between a courtship of Fanny Austen Knight, that Austen encouraged her niece to squelch, to her subsequent creation in her final three novels of “the fantasy that, to replace the suitor who got away, Austen’s narrator can supply Fanny—and by extension, any reader—with a new lover, one who appears in the shape
either of Austen’s own loving spirit or of a third party conjured into being by Austen’s authorial voice” (Raff 4).

These comparisons bring to the fore the ways in which Emma mimics Austen’s labor to create new entities—marriages, novels—and attempts to publically exhibit her private social ideals through this creative activity. They emphasize the literary aspects of matchmaking: its imaginative potential; the authorial power it allows Emma to assume. I approach this comparison from a different direction, however, in my examination of the shared specifics of Emma’s matchmaking methods and Austen’s novelcraft. I intend to focus equally on the ways in which Austen’s literary work echoes, recapitulates, and reimagines the social work of matchmakers. To put this in another way, by directing attention to matchmaking as a practice of its own rather than a reflection of or attempt at a kind of literary craft, I want to clarify why matchmaking in particular provides such a useful frame for conceptualizing the work of the novelist or poet, and the possibilities this antiquated social role, this somewhat suspect female figure, grants to the authors who converse with her. Rather than understanding matchmaking as a flawed form of authorship, I read both Austen’s authorship and matchmaking as female-specific roles with the potential for similar kinds of imaginative missteps, cultural limitations, and positive engagement with society. While William Deresiewicz reads Austen’s progress from *Emma* to *Persuasion* as repudiation of her and Emma’s matchmaking—“From a maker of marriages, she becomes an investigator into ‘the delicate anatomy of the human heart’” (1)—I refuse to conflate matchmaking, whether Emma’s social or Austen’s literary, with a simplistic evaluation of social connections in contrast to the deeper understanding of human nature available through Romantic authorship. For Austen,
matchmaking—like authorship—works best when it follows the ideal of “something between the do nothing and the do all” (11) that Emma tries to achieve.

Austen relates her form of authorship and Emma’s matchmaking practice across several registers: the initiation and production of narrative; the technique that underlies specific rhetorical strategies; the reading of social and literary texts; and the interpretation of these texts that leads to action. In these comparisons Emma consistently falls short of the mark Austen establishes as authorial matchmaker; still, the paired practice of Austen and Emma affirms the value of matchmaking itself, despite Emma’s misuse of the role, for both literary authorship and social intervention. Taking each register in turn, I begin first with Austen’s affiliation of her authorial persona and Emma’s as producers of narrative. A mode of creative labor that brings new entities into being— and relies on the strategies of narrative to do so—Emma’s matchmaking resembles Austen’s authorship in multiple ways. *Emma*, as a novel, has a physical presence as bound pages printed in a particular and individual way that would not have existed without Austen’s labor. It further has a variety of intellectual and textual progeny: afterlives in the Austen family circle’s conversations (during which Austen revealed Jane Fairfax’s early death), in readers’ imaginations, in future adaptations, continuations, and as inspiration for later texts, providing the ground of generic narrative expectation on which later novelists construct their edifices. Emma the matchmaker aims to create marital unions with similarly wide-ranging consequences. Taking her one successful match, the Weston marriage, as a model for her practice demonstrates the productive results after which she strives. The Weston union brings substantive, positive change to the former governess Miss Taylor’s daily life and also results in the birth of one child by the novel’s close.
Beyond this, it restructures the geographical and social parameters of the Highbury community (primarily but not exclusively from Emma’s vantage point). The Weston home at Randalls becomes another destination for walks and visits, another element in the social nexus that forms village life.

Austen further indicates the shared valances of literary authorship and creative matchmaking through Emma’s affiliation with literary productivity in and around her matchmaking schemes. As Tanner notes, “Emma has a wider range of discourse than anyone else in the novel. She can out-talk, over-talk, everyone, and that includes Mr. Knightley, because she has a kind of energy of articulation, an instinct for just playing with the words” (181). Emma is a witty dialogist with deserving partners like Frank Churchill and Knightley and a commanding monologist with the attentive Harriet (and, one suspects, the former Miss Taylor). Beyond her affinity for and facility with conversation, Emma’s matchmaking enacts itself in specifically literary ways. In matchmaking, she plays with the generic expectations of competing forms of novelistic writing. While Harriet’s obscure origins suggest romances of noble parentage lost or concealed (and the brilliant match that will restore the princess to her rightful place), Jane Fairfax’s reticence calls to Emma’s mind more scandalous modes of literature. “an ingenious, animating suspicion…with regard to Jane Fairfax, this charming Mr. Dixon, and the not going to Ireland” (Austen 125). Having abandoned the traditional romance, Emma now dabbles in a plot of misplaced affections and adultery (threatened if not
committed) in an 18\textsuperscript{th}-century style—epistolary, no doubt, perhaps in echo of Austen’s own early \textit{Lady Susan}.\footnote{In one of her accustomed episodes of guilty feeling following her uncharitable reflections on Jane Fairfax, Emma shortly afterward shifts narrative genre again and “look[s] around in walking home, and lament[s] that Highbury afforded no young man worthy of giving her independence; nobody that she could wish to scheme about for her” (Austen 132). As with Harriet, Emma’s schemes both follow the form of the courtship plot novels she’s no doubt read and evince the value of the women Emma elevates to the position of courtship-plot heroine.}

Most pertinently, Emma’s efforts to match Harriet and Elton coalesce in an attempt at literary creation. Elton’s charade and Emma’s misreading of it in large part determine Harriet’s course in the disastrous courtship plot Emma initiates. His courtship of Emma only takes this literary form, however, because of the larger efforts at authorship at which both Emma and Harriet play: the riddle book they compile together in imitation of Harriet’s fellow pupils and teachers at Mrs. Goddard’s school. “Emma assisted with her invention, memory, and taste,” Austen informs us, “and as Harriet wrote a very pretty hand, it was likely to be an arrangement of the first order, in form as well as quantity” (56). Austen provides this glimpse at early nineteenth-century female literary culture—the albums of compilations, quotations, and excerpts that the era’s women produced in both handmade and professionally published iterations—with a kind of gentle scorn typical to examinations of female-predominant artistic forms. In suggesting that “quantity” constitutes as central an element of success as “form,” Austen indicates the mindless futility of this task of compilation and copying. Yet Emma’s investment in the project attests to her “invention, memory, and taste,” all fundamental skills in a literary enterprise, while Harriet’s lesser contribution of a “pretty hand” nevertheless points to the significance of visual aesthetics to their work. The riddle book and its
relation to a specifically feminine form of literary production signifies a variety of meanings within and around the novel: the polyglot tastes of particular women bound and preserved within a book cover, the importance of shared literary experience to middle-class feminine culture, the continuum between the handmade and the professionally sanctioned for artists and artisans⁴², and the role of artistic creation in the physical spaces—drawing room, bedroom, library—of the middle-class home⁴³. Its centrality to Emma’s more ambitious attempts at authorship—her efforts to “‘write’, or rather ‘rewrite’, Harriet’s life” (Tanner 183)—ultimately makes plain Austen’s investment in the literary valences of matchmaking.

If instances of literary endeavor at times provide the setting and opportunity for Emma to author her courtship plots through matchmaking, the methods of literary mechanics—and more specifically of Austen’s literary practice—determine the form Emma’s matchmaking assumes. As Tanner notes, “of all the ‘voices’ in the book, it is Emma’s which / seems to come nearest to the narrative voice itself—not in knowledge, but in tone and style” (202-203). The fact that, as Pinch has claimed, *Emma* is the novel that displays Austen’s most “varied” and “sophisticated” technique (xvi) indicates Emma’s creative ambition and talent, if also her ultimate inadequacy. Emma’s

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⁴² In *Loving Literature*, Deidre Shauna Lynch touches on women’s collaborative album making practices in Austen’s day, noting that the scrapbooks reveal these women’s “ability to reformulate print culture’s accustomed ordering of the relations of the mass produced and the individuated” (139): expert scissor work on silhouettes cut out of printed pages denotes the accomplished woman’s dexterity at the expense of the original author’s prose, for example, while assembling material related to various aspects of a writer like Byron’s career speaks to a personal investment in literature.

⁴³ Edward Austen-Leigh’s description of his aunt’s working practice establishes her space for composition as firmly in the family home: “no separate study to retire to” which meant that “most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room” (96), her writing on a slip of paper that she could easily conceal, and frequent interruptions by family and visitors that made concealment necessary.
approximation of several of these techniques draws an obvious parallel between the labor of the matchmaker and the novelist’s craft, even as her ultimate misappropriation of them underscores her failings as both matchmaker and “imaginist.” Other readers of *Emma* have commented on the ways in which Emma strives after Austen’s creative mastery. Pinch, among others, has connected “Austen’s way of getting into the thoughts and feelings of her characters” to Emma’s aspirations of a similar “kind of omniscience” (xix). Miller also notes the complex symbiosis between Austen’s free-indirect narration and Emma’s detached and ironic perspective on her friends and neighbors. However, no one has delineated the ways in which Emma’s attempts at Austenian style perfectly align with her attempts at matchmaking. More specifically, I want to emphasize the ways Emma’s efforts to craft a marriage plot through matchmaking require her to adopt three of Austen’s most identifiable literary techniques: the skillful narration of action through summary, regular use of Johnsonian constructions, and free indirect discourse. Emma’s ultimate failings as a matchmaker stem in part from her misunderstanding and misapplication of these authorial methods, but her imperfections as both novelist and matchmaker reinforce the reliance of each role to the other in Austen’s more perfectly happy union of the two.

The first of these techniques, the evocative relation of summarized action, arises out of both Austen’s and Emma’s ability to turn the events of ordinary life into compelling narrative sequences. Emma is a driver of the narrative that bears her name and whose incidents revolve around her actions. She is a narrative tool Austen deploys to great effect. And like Austen the author, Emma also relies upon narrative to create emotional effects in her audience, the individuals she wants to unite as a married couple.
Witness her attempt to encourage Harriet’s growing interest in Mr. Elton at the expense of the openly declared suitor Robert Martin. Elton has taken Harriet’s portrait to London to have it framed, and while neither we the readers nor Emma and Harriet ever directly witness his journey, Emma conjures up an enticing description of his time away:

At this moment, perhaps Mr. Elton is shewing your picture to his mother and sisters, telling how much more beautiful is the original, and after being asked for it five or six times, allowing them to hear your name, your own dear name…. No, my dear little modest Harriet, depend upon it, the picture will not be in Bond-street till just before he mounts his horse tomorrow. It is his companion all this evening, his solace, his delight. It opens his designs to his family, it introduces you among them, it diffuses through the party those pleasantest feelings of our nature, eager curiosity and warm prepossession. How cheerful, how animated, how suspicious, how busy their imaginations all are! (Austen 45)

This little tale is devoid of much in the way of incident—a portrait displayed, an appointment delayed until the last moment, a series of conversations between family members—but Emma’s skill in knitting each of those small developments to a wealth of intense and rapidly fluctuating emotions grants the scene its power for her and for Harriet. The narrative relation of imagined emotion calls forth an answering actual emotional response. The narrative Emma creates is also, crucially, a mirror more than a window: the “cheer,” “business,” “animation,” and “suspicion” she relates belong much more to her and Harriet than to the Elton readers come to know through Austen’s
narrative. Emma, careless in observation and myopically selfish even in her good deeds, unwittingly depicts herself in each of her matchmaking-directed narratives.

In addition to employing narrative as a tool for influencing emotion and subsequent action in her neighbors (using imaginative speculation to fuel the action of real life), Emma also approximates Austen’s famed Johnsonian constructions, full of emphatic parallelism, chiasmic structure, and authoritative posturing. “A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls;” Emma insists. “[B]ut a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else” (Austen 69). It’s impossible for anyone with even a cursory familiarity with Austen’s work to read these lines and not recall perhaps the most famous opening in 19th-century literature. As Austen relates with algebraic precision, a single man’s possession of a good fortune immediately spells his need for a wife; in Emma’s similarly expressed calculation, single womanhood plus or minus wealth yields her appropriate social position. Even the phrasing of Emma’s dialogue echoes Austen’s celebrated diction: “single man” to “single woman,” “good fortune” to “narrow income,” “must be in want” to “may be as sensible.” However, a crucial difference between the two “authors” lies in the relative position of each speaker toward the sentiments she espouses—Emma relates what she views as a natural and uncomplicated truth of human nature. Poverty makes elderly celibacy ridiculous while wealth redeems it, and this is just as it ought to be from her (young, rich) viewpoint. The elegant cadences and emphatic phrasing of Austen’s narrator seduce the reader to a point of view she appears to endorse, yet her use of the term “universal” to describe the arrival of a wealthy bachelor in a small country neighborhood betokens her ironic distance from
the “truth” she relates: in a clever moment of ventriloquism, Austen presents the totalizing perspective of a homogeneous community in a manner both affirming (the women of Meryton are correct—Darcy and Bingley will in fact be “claimed” by two of the women of the community) and negating (there was nothing simple or foreordained about the conclusion of these courtships and the wider community certainly had no right to an expectation of success for the Bennet girls).

Another Johnsonian moment reinforces this distinction between the ways in which Austen and Emma use the technique. “I do not know whether it ought to be so,” Emma reflects, “but certainly silly things do cease to be silly if they are done by sensible people in an impudent way. Wickedness is always wickedness, but folly is not always folly—It depends on the character of those who handle it” (Austen 166). This recalls Austen’s own pronouncements, notably her initial description of Emma herself, which similarly comments upon virtues and flaws both minor and grave. After describing Emma’s advantages in a memorable moment of literary portraiture—“handsome, clever, and rich…with very little to distress or vex her” (Austen 5)—Austen, indicates Emma’s primary disadvantages. “The real evils indeed of Emma’s situation,” she explains, “were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (Austen 5). The forcefulness and condemnation promised by the mention of “real evils” gives way to something less fixed, more contingent: the suggestion that “rather too much” of a good thing can be a real evil, but only as a position of relative abundance on a continuum from absence to plenitude. Austen’s hesitance in detailing Emma’s flaws, her insistence on modulating and equivocating in her description, throws Emma’s own decisiveness into greater relief, her insistence that wickedness is always this
and folly is rarely that. Ultimately, however, Emma’s confident posturing masks her espousal of a flexible morality at odds with her seeming decisiveness, while Austen’s more moderate phrasing indicates her sense of moral proportion, her refusal to shade the differences between wickedness and folly in a way that obscures the gradient from one to the other. Emma’s “real evils” are closer to folly than to wickedness, which explains the gentleness of Austen’s tone. And yet, by describing them as evils, Austen insists upon the relation of folly to wickedness, a relation she asserts more emphatically then Emma’s moral relativism allows, for all the latter’s more strident tone.

Austen’s deft handling of narrative tone and complex positioning of authorial voice to opinions expressed stems from her mastery of the final literary technique at which she excels and Emma falters: the use of free indirect discourse. Though Austen did not discover this complicated dynamic of narration and characterization, most critics acknowledge her as the technique’s foremost practitioner and free indirect discourse as a central element of both her style and her moral vision. Emma, in particular, attracts notice as the novel in which she demonstrated her fullest mastery of the mode and elevated this literary strategy to a central organizing principle of her art. In Austen’s handling, free indirect style marks both the moment at which she and Emma align most perfectly, sharing control of the narrative voice, and the moment at which they diverge most significantly, as Austen generally uses these moments to subtly suggest Emma’s

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44 According to Pinch, “Austen makes voices stick in the mind through her use of free indirect discourse, which makes a character’s voice seem indelible, capable of soaking into other beings. But she also uses the same technique for representing thought. Her cultivation of this mode of representing her heroines’ minds has made her novels crucial to the history of the English novel, markers of a moment when the novel as a literary genre perfected its inward turn, and begins to claim human psychology as its territory” (vxii-vxiii).
delusions, misapprehensions, and ethical lapses. Like Austen, Emma relies on free indirect discourse in her own fiction-making, her attempts to read the residents of Highbury and organize their marital destinies. Pinch notes that Emma “aspres to exactly the kind of omniscience the narrator has” (xix), priding herself on her ability to read the concealed desires and motives of all around her. This aspiration encourages her to aim at Austen’s facility with free indirect discourse in her matchmaking stratagems and plots. The novel opens with an extended moment of ventriloquism from Emma, her reportage of the established wisdom of Highbury offered as proof of her matchmaking skill and of the necessity of her mission:

“Everybody said that Mr. Weston would never marry again, Oh dear, no! Mr. Weston, who had been a widower for so long, and who seemed so perfectly comfortable without a wife, so constantly occupied either in his business in town or among his friends here, always acceptable wherever her went, always cheerful—Mr. Weston need not spend a single evening in the year alone if he did not like it. Oh no! Mr. Weston would certainly never marry again.” (Austen 10-11)

Emma both grants the local gossips the authority to narrate Weston’s qualifications for marital matching and reveals their foolish ignorance through the contrast of her superior knowledge with the temporary unity of their narrative voices. And while one may

45 Miller presents a useful summary of the dynamic between the narrator and Emma suggested through free indirect discourse: “When free indirect style mimics Emma’s thoughts and feelings, it simultaneously inflects them into keener observations of its own; for our benefit, if never for hers, it identifies, ridicules, corrects all the secret vanities and self-deceptions of which Emma, pleased as Punch, remains comically unconscious. And this is generally what being a character in Austen means: to be slapped silly by a narration whose constant battering, however satisfying—or terrifying—to readers, its recipient is kept from even noticing” (Miller, Secret of Style 71).
imagine that in person (or on stage), this dialogue would proceed as impersonation, differentiated from Emma’s typical speech by vocal inflection, gesture, and facial expressions, on the page it appears identically to one of Austen’s moments of free indirect ventriloquism: no quotation or punctuation separates it from the ongoing stream of Emma’s narration of her history as a matchmaker.

The final mode through which Austen correlates literary and social matchmaking in *Emma* is by comparing the practices of reading/observation and interpretation/action. Austen’s powers of keen observation and insightful description of the ordinary people and places of her time have garnered ample commentary since Sir Walter Scott’s initial much-studied 1815 review of Emma in the *Quarterly Review*.46 From her introduction in the novel’s first chapter, Emma calls attention to the role of reading (as observation and interpretation) in her conception of matchmaking. As Nancy Armstrong notes, this joined process of reading and writing, interpretation and creation, observation and regulation, describes both the craft of Austen the narrator and the actions of her heroine (Armstrong 136). No one in the novel labors more at this task than Emma, who watches, witnesses, reflects, assumes, judges, evaluates, and scrutinizes her fellow Highbury residents in her efforts to orchestrate their social interactions. In doing so, she reveals matchmaking to be, like Austen’s art, a process of joined reading and writing, of interlinked interpretation and creation. From her introduction in the novel’s first chapter, Emma calls attention to the role of reading (as observation and interpretation) in her conception of matchmaking.

46 Scott’s initial much-studied 1815 review of Emma in the *Quarterly Review*. Scott praises Austen for her mastery of “the art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, instead of the splendid scenes of an imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him” (Scott 215).
Mourning the loss of her friend and long-time governess Miss Taylor to her family circle, Emma consoles herself with the reflection, “I made the match, you know, four years ago; and to have it take place, and be proved in the right, when so many people said that Mr. Weston would never marry again, may comfort me for anything” (10). The Weston match serves as social manifestation of her superiority as a reader—other witnesses drew inadequate conclusions; only Emma interpreted her evidence accurately. This initial self-portrait of Emma the Matchmaker, in fact, equates the act of matchmaking entirely with the act of reading, as though properly naming Weston as marriageable had the incantatory power to call his marriage into fact. While Emma’s subsequent matchmaking schemes require her more direct involvement in manipulating her prospects’ feelings and interactions, reading retains no less vital a place in her practice of her art. “Mr. Knightley could not have observed him as she had done,” she reassures herself when a difference of opinion over Mr. Elton’s romantic temperament threatens to disrupt her complacency, “neither with the interest, nor (she must be allowed to tell herself, in spite of Mr. Knightley’s pretensions) with the skill of such an observer on such a question as herself” (Austen 54).

Intelligence, observation, interpretation, and judgment: these signify to Emma her status as a superior reader. They also mark her approach her analysis of Elton’s charade, the apotheosis of her reading career, which lays bare the conflation of the social and the literary that both Emma and Austen have relied upon as metaphor throughout the novel.47 Harriet can only tremble with the profundity of the moment as she stares at the portentous

47 Emma describes the charade as “a sort of prologue to the play, a motto to the chapter; and will soon be followed by matter-of-fact prose” (Austen 60), figuring Harriet and Elton’s (apparent) courtship as dramatic, fictional, and factual writing.
slip of paper on the table before them. But Emma “cast her eye over it, pondered, caught the meaning, read it through again to be quite certain, and quite mistress of the lines, and then passing it to Harriet, sat happily smiling” (Austen 58). Like a precocious student delighted with her ease at standardized tests, Emma untangles the glib charade’s riddle nearly instantaneously and then marvels at her classmate’s dullness. This very facility with riddles makes possible her more serious errors in judgment, her misreading of the charade’s intended recipient and purpose. She can decipher “Court-Ship” out of a series of enigmatic couplets, but she cannot read Elton’s intended courtship of her rather than of Harriet, despite his “deep consciousness” (57) as he stares into her eyes. Her powers of puzzle solving fail when the terms are human capital and desires rather than wordplay and rhymes. Concluding her exegesis of the charade, Emma offers this summation to the agitated Harriet: “I thought I could not be so deceived; but now, it is clear; the state of his mind is as clear and decided, as my wishes on the subject have been ever since I knew you” (Austen 59). The pitfalls of Emma’s matchmaking career arise fundamentally out of her failings as a reader. Emboldened by the thrill of reading a desired future into being in the Weston courtship, Emma approaches the matchmaker’s necessary tasks of observation and interpretation with careless over confidence. Time and again, she

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48 This dynamic repeats Emma’s equally problematic misinterpretation of Robert Martin’s letter of proposal to Harriet: sincere, straightforward, and candid, the letter requires none of the mental acrobatics she lavishes on Elton’s riddle and thus cannot elicit performances of interpretive genius from her. In this instance, she contorts the letter itself—attributing it to a sister, lowering her estimation of its skillfulness from “very good” (40) and “so good” (40-41) to “tolerable” (44)—in order to minimize the threat of this additional evidence of Martin’s worth to her preordained opinion of him.

49 Again, this is not simply metaphorical: “Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old” (29), Knightley laments. “But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding” (30).
“take[s] up the wrong idea” (22), “too eager and too busy in her previous conceptions and views to hear…impartially, or see…with clear vision” (Austen 88).

Emma’s trouble arises from the fact that matchmaking does not end with reading and Emma’s blunders are not only errors in perception. Both matchmaking and authorship are two-step processes, dynamics of interpretation and execution. Like the writer Austen, the skilled matchmaker must carefully and accurately note the particulars of the social environment that surrounds her, must interpret hidden emotion based on legible signs, must evaluate the desirability and likelihood of various potential pairings, and must then labor to embody her social theories in a living marital union. Austen captures this movement from reading to writing as reveals the creative joy available to Emma through matchmaking:

Such an adventure as this,—a fine young man and a lovely young woman thrown together in such a way, could hardly fail of suggesting certain ideas to the coldest heart and the steadiest brain. So Emma thought, at least. Could a linguist, could a grammarian, could even a mathematician have seen what she did, have witnessed their appearance together, and heard their history of it, without feeling that circumstances had been at work to make them peculiarly interesting to each other?—How much more must an imaginist, like herself be on fire with speculation and foresight!—especially with such a ground-work of anticipation as her mind had already made. (Austen 263)

The bare facts of a situation—Harriet’s fright on meeting with a group of gypsies; Frank’s offer of assistance when he witnesses her distress—produce “certain ideas” about
likely future emotional consequences. In describing herself as an “imaginist” and drawing a line between the fevered conclusions of her racing mind and the steady and cold calculations of mathematics, linguistics, and grammar, Emma raises her reading of social situations to the level of an art. Numbers, language systems, and speculation about social interactions are all imaginative ways of engaging with and making predictable an often bewilderingly complex world. Unlike these other arts, however (including Austen’s literary practice), Emma’s doctrine of “imaginism” relies on nothing beyond the confines of her own mind. While she appears to follow Austen in uniting meticulous observation of a specific social world with an understanding of narrative convention and genre, the conclusion of the “imaginism” passage makes clear that Emma looks outside herself only to confirm the “ground-work of anticipation” her mind has already produced in isolation.

Clearly, Austen draws distinctions between her “copying from nature” (Scott 215) and Emma’s wishful imaginative interventions. In my view, however, she does this not to invalidate the matchmaker’s interfusion of observation, imagination, and intervention, as other readings of Emma suggest. Emma’s foibles—her immaturity, over-confidence, and hastiness in judgment—contribute to her poor praxis as Highbury’s authorial matchmaker. Austen equally directs our attention to the centrality of Emma’s gendered social identity to her success and failure in matchmaking. It is by this point a truism that Emma’s goals as a matchmaker are inextricable from her station as a gentlewoman in a small town: the power this position grants her licenses her forays into social control even as her matchmaking attempts provide a necessary outlet for the creative impulses her gendered status constrains. As Tanner asks, “what on earth—or, rather, what in Hartfield and Highbury—is going to ‘animate’ Emma with her constantly brimming high spirits, if
not the scenarios, indeed the fantasies, of her own brain?” (188). Further, as Susan Greenfield among others notes, Emma’s forays into matchmaking stem from her concerns about the possible erosion of her social supremacy in a fluctuating socio-economic landscape: “In the changing world of Highbury,” she asserts, “where middle-class moneymaking and ideals are becoming increasingly powerful, Emma’s own genteel values and status are under attack. Much of the novel revolves around Emma’s anxiety about commanding upper-class authority in a society that no longer automatically sanctions it” (147). Emma’s choice of matchmaking for her occupation, then, while certainly owing in part to her pride, vanity, and boredom, arises equally as much from her position as a woman in a gendered society with the expectations and limitations that role necessitates.

As in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth society more generally, matchmaking in Emma is a feminized activity; again and again, characters describe the oversight of courtship as a woman’s concern. Mrs. Churchill arbitrates Frank’s marital options and the Martin ladies facilitate Harriet’s absorption into their family unit. Even Mrs. Weston harbors schemes concerning not only her dear Emma’s conjugal future, but also the unsuspecting Jane Fairfax’s: “I have made a match between Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax,” she crows to Emma. “See the consequences of keeping you company!” (Austen 176). Emma dismisses her former governess as an inadequate rival: “My dear Mrs. Weston, do not take to match-making. You do it very ill” (176). She also preserves the necessary equation of femininity and marriage brokering. Her pride in her gendered

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50 For more on female (specifically maternal) oversight of courtship across this period, please see Davidoff, Langland, Perkin, and Phegley.
knowledge and her belief that social environments and courtship customs are female-authored and uniquely open to female interpretation emerge when she privileges her position as “a better judge of such a point of female right and refinement than [Knightley] could be,” despite her “habitual respect for his judgment in general,” (Austen 52). Indeed, Austen demonstrates the necessary correlation of Emma’s conception of her womanhood with her matchmaking mission when her initial imaginative discursion on Harriet’s fate enhances the performance of her more usual female duties as her father’s hostess:

She was so busy in admiring those soft blue eyes, in talking and listening, and forming all these schemes in the in-betweens, that the evening flew away at a very unusual rate; and the supper-table, which always closed such parties, and for which she had been used to sit and watch the due time, was all set out and ready, and moved forwards to the fire, before she was aware. With an alacrity beyond the common impulse of a spirit which yet was never indifferent to the credit of doing every thing well and attentively, with the real good will of a mind delighted with its own ideas, did she then do all the honours of the meal, and help and recommend the minced chicken and scalloped oysters with an urgency which she knew would be acceptable to the early hours and civil scruples of their guests. (Austen 20).

In conjoining her creative matchmaking with her feminine entertaining, Emma manages to elevate both her and her guest’s experience of the meal; though never derelict in her commitment to social expectations, when inspired by her private imaginative excursions Emma becomes more diligently attuned to her guest’s tastes and habits, different through they are from her own.
Emma makes matches in the same manner in which she dishes out scalloped oysters: to her own glory rather than for the benefit of those served. Austen’s pointed description here of Emma’s myopic self-focus, “the real good will of a mind delighted with its own ideas,” differs in vital and illuminating ways from the most significant moment of Austen’s own authorial self-representation in the novel, her opening dedication to the Prince Regent. In full, the dedication reads: “To His Royal Highness THE PRINCE REGENT, this work is, by His Royal Highness’s Permission Most Respectfully dedicated, by His Royal Highness’s Dutiful and Obedient Humble Servant, THE AUTHOR” (3). Careful to avoid Emma’s style of aggrandizing self-presentation, Austen describes authorship in the dedication as a form of servitude, summarizing the qualities of THE AUTHOR entirely through terms of submission: “dutiful,” “humble,” “respectful,” and “obedient.” This humble dedication contains barbs, however, as is clear to those familiar with Austen’s famous distaste for the Regent’s dissolute reputation and displeasure at being coerced into celebrating him. In response to aristocratic male prerogative, Austen unsheathes the sharp weapon of her irony: the careful turns of phrase that bestow appropriate respect on Austen’s monarch and simultaneously express her dissatisfaction through exactly worded refusals and elisions. Seen in this light, the dedication’s emphasis of duty and servitude over pleasure or gratitude amounts to the woman author’s refutation of the authority that delimits the circumstances of her authorship and her assertion of the prior claims of her imagination over the social expectations that encumber her role.\footnote{In this reading of the dedication, I differ from Miller who, in \textit{Jane Austen and the Secret of Style}, argues that the Austen-voice’s erasure of the “constituents of person—not just body, but psyche, history, social position” produces “a narrative authority and a
expression and embodied feminine circumscription, Austen’s dedication forms a party with Emma’s testing of the possibilities afforded by women’s involvement in social intercourse. The novel’s language of courtship and Emma’s attempts to assert her power both of and through this language point to the necessarily compromised participation of women like Emma in even the social realm over which they hold ostensible control.

The significant women characters in *Emma* can be sorted into two rough categories: well-to-do married women like Mrs. Weston and Mrs. Elton, who have an assured place in society thanks to their husbands’ resources and the respect granted matrons; and unmarried and precariously placed women like Harriet, Jane Fairfax, and Miss Bates, who lack powerful male relatives and must rely on their community’s generosity for social or financial support. Emma, unmarried but socially preeminent, oscillates between these two groups. As she argues in speeches to Harriet, her wealth and managerial position in her father’s home grant her the social distinction appropriate to a married lady and the security that preserves her from fears of spinsterhood. But as Mrs. Elton’s arrival in Highbury demonstrates, all of Emma’s wealth, consequence, and pride must give way before the enchanting spectacle of a new bride. Despite the suggested threats to Emma’s place in the social order, she fits most comfortably with Highbury’s matrons, the arbiters who host, plan, and organize the events that structure village society and who with a nod or a cut attempt to raise up aspirants to gentility or cast out those deemed unworthy. As a final stroke, Emma’s matchmaking cements her alignment with

beauty of expression both without equal” (1) only by means of a persona “free of all accents that might identify it with a socially accredited broker of power/knowledge in the world under narration” (32). As I understand it, this very disembodied presentation in the dedication arises out of and bolsters Austen’s specifically female identity in a circle of masculine literary authorities.
Mrs. Weston and Augusta Elton: all three women engage in similar tasks of social speculation and manipulation, whether pairing potential marital partners (as Mrs. Weston does with Jane and Mr. Knightley or Emma and Frank) or championing the cause of social inferiors (as Mrs. Elton does with Jane Fairfax)\(^5^2\).

Austen exposes all of this feminine social power and manipulative control as so much fiction, however, specifically through matchmaking. As Pinch notes, *Emma* “places women in an environment in which their tools for finding, knowing, proving, and verifying are limited” (xx), and nowhere more so than in their interactions with men. The ability of women to exert control in the “feminized” social realm is decidedly compromised by their limited access to and knowledge of the regions of male sociality from which they are excluded, a point Austen drives home again and again, both explicitly and implicitly. In incidental matters, like Mrs. Elton’s exclusion from her husband’s male meetings and changes in schedule, to events of greater consequence, like Frank’s secret engagement to Jane, the women of Highbury organize their society under false expectations, according to faulty information, and under the burden of outright deception. Even the community’s most powerful women—even Emma and Mrs. Weston—lack the insight into male thinking and behavior necessary to understand and interpret their society. Knightley’s accurate assessment of Elton’s mercenary nature does

\(^{52}\) Armstrong draws a line between Emma’s matchmaking and the unstable social hierarchy that seems to require oversight: “Left with too much leisure time on her hands, Emma naturally inclines toward matchmaking. With the influx of the Eltons and the Churchills and the declines of the Bates, the power to regulate sexual relations, Austen suggests, is quite as complex as it is powerful, and it requires a far more subtle means of standardization than Richardson offered by means of his dialogue between male and female. In those instances when fiction is allowed to proceed unrestrained, words behave promiscuously, and the power Emma inherits as the woman of the house proves disruptive” (Armstrong 151).
not arise only or even primarily out of his greater wisdom and maturity. At bottom, Knightley derives his superior powers of interpretation from his access to male social realms, just as Emma’s blindness originates out of the strictures of polite gentility that mandate certain modes of address and behavior when men and women mingle. Knightley observes the “unreserved moments, when there are only men present” (55) and Elton can discontinue the social performance required by the code of proper conduct in gendered spheres; he knows firsthand how frequently fictitious are the shows of “gentlemanliness” society demands from men to women. Mr. John Knightley can compare the “rational and unaffected” Elton in male company to the “downright labour” of the facetiously agreeable Elton “when he has ladies to please” (89). Excluded from this arena of unreserve, Emma not only misinterprets the cues Elton offers of his romantic interest in her. More fundamentally, she cannot conceive of the system of deception in which he operates—a system in which he is far from the only operator.

The message of Elton’s charade underlies all three women’s efforts to influence their society and inspires their most egregious blunders: men may possess greater political, legal, and physical power, but in matters of courtship, “woman, lovely woman, reigns alone” (59). This ideology leads directly (both within and outside the text) to the notion of the woman as natural matchmaker, a role that, whether managed badly or well, acknowledges her power over the unions, affections, and interactions that constitute the institution of marriage. But almost nowhere does this text bear that message out: Elton relinquishes no power in his courtship of either Emma or Augusta Hawkins, using each to bolster his worldly status; Frank, in his courtship of Jane, also dictates when and how they meet and make their engagement public, hiding their romance out of worldly
prudence. In believing that courtship is a game or system that women can control, Emma, Mrs. Weston, and Mrs. Elton gain a false sense of security. Most importantly, they also become easy dupes for men, like Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill, who can secretly defy the expectations of honesty, sincerity, and monetary disinterestedness that allegedly govern social interaction while still retaining the assumption of trustworthiness this code bestows. When put on her guard to Elton’s possible deception, Emma still decides “that he had not been acting a part, or making a parade of insincere professions; and that Mr. Knightley certainly had not done him justice” (155)—her belief in woman’s superior judgment in matters of the heart guarantees the success of Elton’s masquerade. After the exposure of Frank’s and Jane’s engagement, Emma again marvels at the “system of hypocrisy and deceit, espionage, and treachery” that undergirded his behavior. “To come among us with professions of openness and simplicity; and such a league in secret to judge us all!” she exclaims. “Here we have been, the whole winter and spring, completely duped, fancying ourselves all on an equal footing of truth and honour” (314). Emma marvels at her easy trust and Frank’s unsuspected perfidy while ignoring what Austen’s narrative reveals: the symbiotic relation between her fervent belief in the

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53 Knightley—who never participates in the riddle book project and who eschews mystification of all kinds—comes closest to personifying the charade’s ideal: a powerful landowner, he experiences his first moments of vulnerability when he worries that his lectures may have alienated Emma’s affections and—in order to marry her—exchanges his Donwell Abbey, where he is undisputed master, for Hartwell, where Emma has long presided (with her father).

54 Sandra Macpherson identifies a similar dynamic at work in Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa, in which the seeming explicitness of contractual obligations in fact presents “rakes like Mr. B and Lovelace” the opportunity “to perpetuate matrimonial frauds, and to escape prosecution of censure for the harms such frauds inevitably produce” (102). Austen, of course, was a tremendous reader of Richardson.
matchmaker’s feminine control over relations between the genders and the perpetual revelation of male deception in that very realm.

Austen’s engagement with the gendered questions of class, romance, marriage, and mediation raised by the figure of the literary matchmaker complicate any easy attribution of Emma’s guilt to Austen’s ethics. Her recognition of the social fictions that delimit the free exercise of female social management vex attempts to derive a rejection of the early-modern matchmaker’s mercenary marital management from Emma’s interventions in her Highbury society (or from Austen’s literary interventions as a woman embedded in a similar social milieu). Austen affirms the propriety of community involvement and systems of patronage as often as she ironizes them in *Emma*, preserving the matchmaker’s potential as authorial double even as she critiques Emma’s manifestation of the role. When Emma insists that “more than a reasonable, becoming degree of prudence…did not belong to Mr. Elton” (Austen 54), she exposes Emma’s delusional assessment of Elton’s character, but she also reveals the shaded meaning of the term itself and the need to attend to its deployment to identify the reasonable, becoming prudential moment. From the novel’s initiatory foray into the questions of matrimonial prudence and marital interference—Knightley and Emma’s summary evaluation of the recently concluded Taylor-Weston match in the first chapter—Austen spotlights the values that supported traditional modes of matchmaking. “Every friend of Miss Taylor must be glad to have her so happily married,” Knightley pronounces, drawing on the definition of friendship as sponsorship, financial and otherwise. The happy condition of the match owes to “how very acceptable it must be at Miss Taylor’s time of life to be settled in a home of her own, and how important to her to be secure of a comfortable
provision” (Austen 10). Though the Westons appear admirably suited in temperament, habits, affection, and expectations, Austen, through Knightley, nonetheless underscores the necessity of including Miss Taylor’s monetary benefit in calculations of the match’s value. This casual marital accounting transpires in the context of the narrator’s meditations on Mr. Weston’s previous improvident marriage, a classic love-match undertaken without concern for equality of station, family support, or necessary resources. Social approval, gendered scripts, and family involvement cannot be as easily ignored as the narrative of the evolution from communal to individual marriage suggests, a point the secret, antisocial engagement of Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill also underscores. Purely private and entered into out of personal desire without regard to family or community expectations and norms, the engagement disrupts Highbury’s equilibrium because it compels Frank and Jane to ape yet evade social expectations.

While the Weston/Churchill alliances speak to the necessity of community standards, the participation of friends, and the approval of family in making marriages, the Elton union (and Emma’s developing awareness of what it reveals about his character) demonstrates the problems with an overeager prudence that veers into greed. Elton “knows the value of a good income as much as anybody,” Knightley explains. He “will act rationally,” is “well acquainted with his own claims” and “does not mean to throw himself away” (Austen 53). His marriage with Augusta Hawkins, whose most salient charms are her ten thousand pounds and eagerness to bestow them on any reasonably worthy suitor and whose conversation revolves entirely around displaying and identifying the signifiers of middle-class prosperity striving for gentility, confirms the unreasonableness of his prudence. Rather importantly, however, the Eltons do not appear
less appropriate partners for one another than the Westons: their tastes, values, and social desires seem perfectly in concert and neither betrays any discomfort with the other’s lapses in genteel behavior. Neither does Emma’s (and the novel’s) discomfort with their arrangement lie in its reversal of the gendered expectations raised by the Weston match, in its flouting the doctrine that the husband must bring wealth, the wife sophistication and taste in an appropriately elegant marriage.\(^5\) Emma applies similar standards of “reasonable prudence” both to men lower on the social scale than Elton, when she suggests that Robert Martin remain single until he “meet with a good sort of woman in the same rank as his own, with a little money” (24), and to men higher, as her shocked reaction to the idea of Knightley’s marrying Jane Fairfax suggests: “But the imprudence of such a match!” (176). Mrs. Weston’s rejoinder to Emma—“I am not speaking of its prudence; merely its probability”—points to a resolution to this conflict. *Emma* time and again demonstrates that the most prudent matches are also the most probable: two honest and pleasant young people comfortably situated but without wealth or impressive connections fit together, as do two rich and important local luminaries. In a society structured around class divisions and marriage ritual, probability and prudence cannot be separated; the love match cannot reign supreme.

Ultimately, that is not its cultural intention, however, which is why a novel like *Emma* can celebrate the eminently prudent matches of its conclusion as adequately

\(^5\) Langland comments on the complicated intersection of class maintenance and gendered power dynamics in representations of nineteenth-century families: “The fact that a working man may marry a lady but a working woman may not marry a gentleman points to the role of bourgeois women in establishing and representing gentility, a role whose emergence was facilitated by etiquette manuals, which gave priority to women in matters of calls and cuts, the means through which social groups were formed and maintained” (30).
romantic even as it condemns the well-suited Eltons for their excessive quest after social consequence. In exposing too crudely the economic machinery supporting the edifice of early nineteenth-century courtship, the Elton union strips the love match of its mystifying potential and earns them the narrative’s ultimate scorn, their banishment from the “perfect happiness of the union” that rewards Emma and Knightley’s “small band of true friends” (Austen 381) at the novel’s close. Despite this exile, the Eltons claim textual power at the novel’s close. Mrs. Elton’s notably jaundiced assessment of Emma’s wedding aesthetics—“Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful business!” (381)—provides readers their only descriptive access to the Woodhouse-Knightley wedding. That it comes from an outsider to the proceedings is necessary. The tartness of Augusta Elton’s sour feelings sets off by contrast the sweetness of the marriage that concludes the novel, but also provide the deflating moment of discord that Austen’s endings always incorporate, the sense that however perfectly happy a union, the Mrs. Eltons of Highbury will always insist on remaining in the picture. Tanner foregrounds this aspect of the ending when he argues that “the end is marked by so many dispersals and such a specific exclusive and excluding retreat that it [is] hard not to see the conclusion of the novel as being centrifugal as to society even while it is centripetal to individual pairings and families” (205). I agree that exclusion and retreat mark Emma’s final chapter, at least in part. But rather than read the Elton exile as a repudiation of prior efforts to build community out of Highbury’s disjointed sectors, I see the dialectic of this conclusion—acrimony pushing against elation, union and the cohesion of a “band” set against isolation and ostracism—as sketching in miniature the novel’s complicated rendition of social existence. From the first chapter, the text offers an uneasy negotiation
between competing ways of viewing the self: in isolation, in pairs, and in groups from trios to crowds. Navigating between these categories proves challenging for all the novel’s characters, and the fact of social and individual existence provokes most of the anxiety with which characters contend. In the end, however, the much maligned matchmaker offers a reprieve from the continual oscillation between the threats of isolation, of exclusive conjugality, and of the undifferentiated masses through the perfect geometry of the figure that opens and closes the text: the triangle.

Deanna Kreisel draws attention to the untransformative aspects of *Emma’s* conclusion: despite the emotional revolutions through which the narrative drags her and the closure offered by the concluding wedding of the marriage plot, little has changed in Emma’s life on the last page. She still lives at Hartfield in company with the same two men (her father, Mr. Woodhouse, and her now-husband, Mr. Knightley) with whom she conversed in the novel’s first chapter. Further, Kreisel points to Mr. Knightley’s early defense of the governess Miss Taylor’s marriage—“at any rate, it must be better to have only one to please than two” (Austen 8)—as another hint from Austen that the marriage-plot does not always improve the lot of women. At the conclusion of *Emma*, her single obligation to her father has grown into a double obligation to father and husband. Kreisel assumes that the novel accords the conjugal ideal the same preeminence Victorian culture would shortly claim for it, and thus identifies failure or dissatisfaction in this reduplication of the triangular Emma/Mr. Woodhouse/Mr. Knightley triangle. By reading this triangle in the context of other geometric social configurations, however, the recuperative possibilities of the trio—and, implicitly, of the matchmaker—become apparent. Singularity, coupledom, and the indiscriminate crowd threaten the essential
relationship of individual and community in different ways, but the perfection of the triangle holds all elements in balance.

The most obviously concerning modes of social behavior in the novel are isolation and excessive sociability, represented most aptly by the vulnerable spinster Miss Bates and the indiscriminately intimate Mr. Weston. Solitude is unpleasant, threatening, and all too likely for women without means, like Miss Bates and her niece Jane Fairfax. Hand-in-hand with loneliness, deprivation, and a lack of autonomy, the women fly to any opportunity for social interaction they receive, even from unpromising sources like Mrs. Elton. Though particularly associated with poor women, even Emma lacks the agency to choose her companions, change her geographic situation, or mitigate her too frequent loneliness. At the novel’s opening, she suffers from “intellectual solitude” and feels the lack of a companion for “conversation, rational or playful” (Austen 6). The prospect of long, solitary winter walks to Mrs. Weston’s house or evenings alone by the fire compel her to befriend Harriet Smith, whose primary recommendation is the ease with which Emma can summon her to Hartfield. Indeed, Tanner offers the view that “The real ‘evil’ or terror in Emma is the prospect of having no one to properly talk to, no real community, in fact” (203). As if to emphasize this connection between Emma’s “evil” aspects and her potential social seclusion, Austen typically isolates Emma at moments of remorse and heightened anxiety—after her Box Hill blunder, say, or while anticipating Knightley’s engagement to Harriet—which lends a mournful edge to her distaste for solitude. Additionally, scenes often begin with the auspicious arrival of visitors to Hartfield to drive away Emma’s loneliness, suggesting the un-narrated hours she passes without company that inspire her enthusiastic grasping of any chance for social discourse.
Illustrative of the constraints that delimit women’s engagement with their communities, isolation in Emma rarely brings insights or peace to its partakers, but rather exacerbates and prolongs periods of suffering and misperception.\(^{56}\) Only conversation and company have the power to alter hearts and minds. Too much of either conversation or company should be equally distrusted, however, as Mr. Weston’s unfortunately indiscriminate intimacy demonstrates. While his gregariousness and love of entertaining enliven the Highbury community (indeed, nearly all of the novel’s large social set pieces—the Christmas party, the ball at The Crown, and the Box Hill outing—owe to his arrangement), his “general friendship” (251) with “so many intimates and confidantes” (250) too often results in motley assortments that yield excitement but little pleasure for the participants. The anarchic effects of this wanton friendliness are furthered by his inability to retain confidences, in which carelessly dropped revelations have the potential to spread ill feelings. The Box Hill outing incorporates these two modes, the isolation of the female without agency and the excessive transparency of the crowd, into their most volatile combination as, after an afternoon of uncomfortable silences and awkward remarks in a party too large for true intimacy and pleasure, Emma’s cutting jest at Miss Bates’s expense reveals her long-standing disdain for the woman and exposes the dependent lady to collective ridicule.

Austen describes both solitude and an all-welcoming embrace of the community writ large as perilous for women in *Emma*, which suggests the alternative of the conjugal dyad, a way of being both within the social world and preserved from its influence that

\(^{56}\) Jane Fairfax’s determined seclusion following the Box Hill outing offers a prime example of the dangers of isolation, serving to deepen mysteries rather than resolve them, to promote division between potential allies like Emma and Jane (both victims of Frank’s moral lassitude), and to encourage Jane’s physical deterioration.
inspires the romantic/domestic ideal of the Victorian home. Conjugality for Austen is not a panacea for the misfortunes of solitude or the transgressions of society, however, as a glance at the two most similar married pairs will show. The Eltons, as I have mentioned, display a remarkable cohesiveness of thought and deed. Friends with each other’s friends and foes with each other’s foes, they work in concert to achieve their mutual goal of social elevation. They seem to genuinely admire one another’s talents and rarely disagree in public. All of this conjugal unity serves inauspicious ends as they persecute various members of the Highbury community with their campaign of humiliation and condescending patronage in a quest for dominance. Despite their remarkable marital harmony, the Eltons mold their marriage too enthusiastically to accommodate the people and places outside their vicarage door. Austen makes clearer the problems of conjugality by drawing attention to a more admirably domestic pair, John and Isabella Knightley, who participate in a spousal dynamic equally troublesome in a wider community. Austen introduces John and Isabella by emphasizing both their admirable devotion to the lure of the domestic circle and the consequences of their myopic focus on the family unit. While a “pretty, elegant little woman” and a “devoted wife, a doating mother” and an equally affectionate daughter and sister, Isabella “could never see a fault in any of them” (74). Knightley’s brother John, by contrast:

was not an ill-tempered man, not so often unreasonably cross as to deserve such a reproach; but his temper was not his great perfection; and, indeed, with such a worshipping wife, it was hardly possible that any natural defects in it should not be increased. The extreme sweetness of her temper must hurt his. (74)
While their familial devotion pleases both John and Isabella, Austen delimits the detrimental effects this insular focus on one another has on the pair as social beings. Their worst aspects of character flower in the isolated domestic hothouse of their marriage and are then inflicted on the circles of family and friends that surround them. “Emma did not find herself equal to give the pleased assent, which no doubt he was in the habit of receiving,” the narrator remarks with gentle mockery when Emma finds herself sequestered with her brother-in-law in an ill humor, “to emulate the ‘Very true, my love,’ which must have been usually administered by his traveling companion” (90). This calcification of typical domestic stances into ticks and habits dictates John and Isabella’s behavior outside the home. While a lesser transgression against social harmony than the Elton’s campaigns of cruelty, it is not by extension harmless. When John speaks more sharply to Mr. Woodhouse than Emma finds appropriate or sulks at the Westons’ Christmas party raising panic about an approaching storm, when Isabella ignores all concerns outside her children’s physical health, which she protects through outright fanaticism, both fail to engage with those outside the domestic circle—siblings, parents, friends, or neighbors—on terms that benefit the wider group.

Uniting the possibilities for close focus and attention of domesticity or solitude with the energy and opportunities for benevolence of the group, the trio ultimately provides *Emma* a model for both responsible citizenship and family life. Embedded within a trio, a conjugal pair retains their purity of focus on one another (limiting the distractive potential of the social whirl) but also resists absorption into solely domestic concerns (maintaining affiliation with a carefully selected society toward whom they feel obligated). Not only does *Emma*’s culminating marriage repeat the original
conversational group of the first chapter, it restores the prelapsarian living situation of the novel—the triangle of Emma/Miss Taylor/Mr. Woodhouse, whose dissolution through marriage initiates the novel’s narrative and whose absence both Emma and her father mourn until the novel’s end. Austen brings the reader’s attention to the necessity of a third for domestic happiness and the insufficiency of the pair throughout the novel’s opening chapter. “It was on the wedding-day of this beloved friend that Emma first sat in mournful thought of any continuance” (5), she explains, marriage providing not only Emma’s first conscience acknowledgment of sorrow, but also her first prolonged period of any sort of disagreeableness. “The wedding over and the bride-people gone, her father and herself were left to dine together, with no prospect of a third to cheer a long evening” (5-6). The final chapters reestablish the broken domestic group: what one marriage undoes, another restores, integrating the conjugal and social in balanced harmony. Austen again draws attention to the significance of the trio through reference to numbers, as when Emma reassures her father that “she was not going from Hartfield; she should be always there; she was introducing no change in their numbers or their comforts but for the better” (Austen 366). As the narrative has demonstrated, Emma requires a partner to share the burdens of accommodating her querulous parent—much of the solitude against which she chafes stems from her inability to leave her home without providing an attentive companion for her father. Mr. Woodhouse simply demands more than one woman—whether wife, daughter, or paid companion—can provide. Knightley’s frequent journeys to Hartfield and London and attentive involvement in Emma’s and his brother John’s affairs also denote the discomforts of solitude, even if it comes alongside considerable power and freedom. Providing occupation, reassurance, comfort,
companionship, and conversation to all three participants, the Woodhouse-Knightley ménage recaptures the happy unity of friendship and family, domesticity and sociability, of the novel’s pre-narrative.

Neither *Emma* nor Austen elevates domestic trios as always or necessarily superior to other arrangements; the message is not quite so simple nor so obviously telegraphed. Other groups of three have more destructive consequences (particularly groups of three young, marriageable people): Harriet, Emma, and Elton, say, or Frank, Jane, and Emma. Emma’s matchmaking, the most significant driver of incident in the narrative, continually fails because she inserts herself into dyadic relationships, concocting schemes that don’t concern her and attempting to influence events by manipulating emotions. Knightley goes so far as to deny the wisdom or seemliness of ever interfering in a man’s courtship. He responds to Emma’s boasts of making the Weston marriage with the dismissive, “You are more likely to have done harm to yourself, than good to them, by interference” (12). He outspokenly warns her to “leave [Elton] to chuse his own wife,” insisting that she “Depend upon it, a man of six or seven-and-twenty can take care of himself” (12). While the novel affirms Knightley’s

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57 Perry and Hudson have noted the tendency of 18th-century literature and Austen plots in particular to circle the family back upon itself at the novels’ conclusions. Perry claims, “The best ending was one in which the chosen, conjugal family turned out to be the same as the consanguineal family of origin after all” (371). Hudson argues, “Austen embodies her moral vision by presenting a reenergized and vindicated family circle at the end of each of her novels. And she portrays this family circle as an innovative social and moral power-base that closely resembles a fraternity or community of brothers and sisters” (Hudson 2). Knightley’s quasi-familial relation to Emma and Mr. Woodhouse (as brother- and son-in-law) compels these readings. But in focusing attention on the ways Emma and Knightley’s match resolves the initially severed relationship with Miss Taylor, I emphasize the power of the domestic trio outside the compounding element of siblinghood and consanguinity.
predictions of matchmaking failure, the text’s final reliance on the trio as optimally accommodating to both individuals and the wider group works against a condemnation of Emma’s matchmaking as matchmaking; it underscores the fact that Austen’s meditation on the matchmaking heroine does not uphold purely private conjugal domesticity in place of the external social involvement that matchmaking represents. Even Knightley concedes that in aiming for a match between Harriet and Elton, Emma chose better than he did in joining himself with Augusta. In the final reckoning, both Emma and Knightley realize their love for one another through the unwitting intercession of a third party, the jealousy inspired by the specters of Frank’s and Harriet’s successful courtship of Emma and Knightley. Love capable of developing into families joined productively with the community at large does not grow in isolation; conjugal love requires mediation.

This final celebration of the trio admits the necessity of a matchmaker, not as a despot, who overpowers and imposes, but as a guide who influences, inspires, and suggests. Even more significantly, Austen’s conclusion to Emma attests to the continuing centrality of the matchmaker’s traditional role as the figure in the community who makes the match legitimate. Harriet Smith, the site for so many debates about female value and identity, points to the persistence of this form of matchmaking in her relationship with Robert Martin. Initially validated by Knightley’s approval, the match is ultimately confirmed by John and Isabella Knightley’s patronage: the invitations issued, outings chaperoned, opportunities for meetings provided, and sanction of respectability conveyed by their support of the courting couple. They offer the clearest example of what Emma describes in the novel’s opening as a third way of matchmaking, “something between the do nothing and the do all” (11). Emma missteps in her effort to tread that middle road and
“do something”—just enough, not too much—to shape the marital futures of her fellow Highbury residents. In its recursion to trios, though, the novel itself continues to support the rightness of her initial assessment. As the necessary third who sanctions the conjugal union, the matchmaker must act carefully, but she still acts. She is still the author of a story, the constructor of a plot. Mr. Elton, representative of the legal and religious codes enshrined in the Hardwicke Act, may consecrate Harriet’s marriage, but only a matchmaker has the power to imagine it.
CHAPTER III.
Matchmaking Mammas and Domestic Angels: Women Writing Female Authority, 1830-1860.

Mothers are Nature’s matchmakers.  
(Smythies, The Matchmaker 1: 4)

I. The Matchmaker and Domestic Ideology

In 1844, the notable Irish novelist Anna Maria Hall published a story entitled “The Match-Maker” in *Hood’s Magazine and Comic Miscellany*. In her blistering description of Mrs. Stanhope, aged forty and “a childless widow, having neither relatives nor affectionate friends” (369), Hall not only reuses the name of her compatriot Maria Edgeworth’s mercenary marital arranger, she also replicates Belinda’s easy equation of female matchmaking with improper femininity, inadequate domesticity and the periphery of the family unit. Hall’s Mrs. Stanhope rules ruthlessly over her village’s economy of courtship by virtue of her freedom from maternal partiality. Other would-be matchmakers manage courtship “clumsily, in a way so devoid of management and tact” (370). Only the elegant Mrs. Stanhope possesses the requisite material ambition and objective distance to serve as the town “match-making empress—arranging meetings by accident, discovering the foibles of men and the follies of women, and playing on them as Horatio would have played on Hamlet—sometimes for a purpose, sometimes for mere amusement” (Hall 370). The beneficiary of a mercenary marriage herself, childless Mrs. Stanhope aims to populate her community with couples built in her image (subtle, skillful, calculating, wealthy). Eventually, of course, a woman whose ambitions propel her so far off course from the ideal of romantic marriage must misstep. A beautiful young orphan in the domineering matchmaker’s protection chooses work as a poorly paid companion over the marriage Mrs. Stanhope has arranged for her, and the shame of that failing initiates the
matchmaker’s downfall. Mrs. Stanhope ends the story old and alone, too decrepit to socialize and too poorly regarded by those whose unhappy marriages she initiated to retain any of her former power. In the wake of her collapse, Hall informs the reader, “Mothers, and those interested in the disposal of families, arrange their affairs much better in the match-making way than they used” (Hall 379).

Hall appears to establish an implicit contrast between Mrs. Stanhope and her disastrous ambition on the one hand and the village’s many nameless mothers on the other; between a selfish view of courtship as “setting gold against acres and acres against gold” (Hall 370) and a romantic view of marriage as the selection of a lovingly ideal spouse. Mothers, with their “quiet, domestic, undertoned” ambitions and a belief “in love and devotion (God bless them for it!” (369) manage courtship better than the widow without friends or relations, who can imagine a marriage only as the means to selfish advancement, not as an end in itself. In elevating her village’s mothers over a conniving and anti-maternal matchmaker, Hall follows the logic of the cult of domesticity, one of her era’s most powerful and pervasive cultural ideals. Cultural historians and literary scholars of the Victorian era have long noted the prevalence in the years 1830-1860 of an image of the home as place of refuge and peace in the troubled world, as a site of physical, emotional, and spiritual replenishment for the family members who dwelt there, and as a zone in which a mother’s gentle influence could be exercised. The works of John Ruskin, Coventry Patmore, and Sarah Stickney Ellis most prominently set forth the tenets of Victorian domesticity, but many more authors of both genders in various media promulgated a similar vision of the family hearth as a space uniquely sanctified in
Victorian life. Amanda Vickery has persuasively countered the contention, made by some historians, that the early Victorian period witnessed a striking and transformative division of sexual roles for men and women—the rigid “separate spheres” formulation that claims the Victorian period as an era in which women and men were distanced from one another as never before. John Tosh and Valerie Sanders have further complicated this view through their work on fathers in the domestic realm. Nevertheless, domesticity remains an important organizing principle of Victorian life, one in which both men and women collaborated to privilege the home by nature of its separation from the world of work, a principle that flowered most aromatically in the early days of Victoria’s reign.

As part of this passion for a particular kind of idealized domesticity, mothers—and especially middle-class mothers—assumed a great significance in the wider Victorian

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58 Among the many critics who have analyzed representations of Victorian domesticity and the relation of the public and private spheres, a small sampling includes: Nancy Armstrong, Monica Cohen, Lenore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, Elizabeth Langland, Michael McKeon, and Mary Poovey.

59 “The public/private dichotomy may, therefore, serve as a loose description of a very long-standing difference between the loves of women and men,” Vickery acknowledges. “What is extremely difficult to sustain, however, is the argument that sometime between 1650 and 1850 the public/private distinction was constituted or radically reconstituted in a way that transformed relations between the sexes” (411-412).

60 Tosh argues in A Man’s Place that “The Victorian ideal of domesticity was in all respects the creation of men as much as women. ‘Woman’s sphere’ was a convenient shorthand, not a call to exclusivity. Given that cultural power was concentrated in the hands of men, the domestic ideal reflected masculine as well as feminine sensibilities” (50). Sanders explores the emotional investment of men in their domestic role as fathers in The Tragi-Comedy of Victorian Fatherhood.

61 “While a consistent strand of domesticity is to be found in both aristocratic and bourgeois circles throughout the eighteenth century, it was only in the 1840s and 1850s that the ideal of home was raised to the level of a cultural norm. For the middle class above all it had become de rigueur to practise significant elements of that ideal, while those sections of the working class and the aristocracy which resisted it were often perceived to be at odds with the national character” (Tosh, “Masculinities” 30).
culture. Dara Rossman Regaignon attributes this “new focus on motherhood” in the 1840s to “myriad factors”:

[T]he Romantic cult of the child, new concern about maternal death rates during childbirth, and—perhaps most broadly—the re-organization of households, the various meanings of family, and the recalibration of many beliefs and practices surrounding both. ‘Maternal influence’ described the power of those without authority, legal standing, or guardianship over their children but whose influence was imagined to be all-powerful, determining the moral compass and habits of the adults to come” (33).

Other critics have variously linked the mother’s increased prominence in these decades to new structures of capitalism and new sources for social capital or to the influence of Evangelical Christianity over bourgeois and provincial society. While the mother’s importance as a self-sacrificing linchpin of domestic harmony had currency in certain social circles since the late-eighteenth century, popular literature in the ‘40s and ‘50s promulgated this maternal ideal to a wider cross-section of society. In Sarah Stickney Ellis’s influential treatises and in the work of novelists like Charles Dickens, domestic management becomes a mother’s theater for the exercise of beneficial feminine authority in the wider world. Child-rearing advice literature aimed at women filled the market in the 1840s, offering medical expertise to new mothers. As Margaret Beetham

62 Langland, Nobody’s Angels.
63 Davidoff and Hall, Family Fortunes.
64 See Ruth Perry, Novel Relations: “Motherhood was being defined as a self-effacing role by the late eighteenth-century; self and subjectivity may have been expected of a woman before marriage but were increasingly subordinated to the needs of husband and children after marriage” (338).
65 See Regaignon (32).
explains, during the print explosion of the 1830s and ‘40s, the only new publications specifically intended for women readers were “mothers magazines”: they addressed their readers “specifically as ‘mothers’ and the idea of motherhood was assumed both as grounds of identity and as an ideal to which the reader must constantly aspire” (54). The ubiquity of the idealized domestic woman in the popular press of the 1830s and 1840s was, according to Beetham, “the ground on which the social and political system was understood and regulated” (Beetham 36). Even the family journals (intended to appeal to a wide range of ages and both sexes) that arose in these decades and quickly overwhelmed Victorian publishing “assumed that [the mother’s] domestic management provided the scene of reading” (Beetham 46). Indeed, this motherly management was the necessary ingredient in the quest to bring the idealized literary portrait to fruition in the physical and emotional space of the home. “Female readers were assured that the accomplishment of this vision is to be managed by shrewd economy, attention to comfort and practical domestic administration” (100-101), as Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnson contend. In a variety of work from the ‘30s through the ‘50s, the mother is practical manager of the home and moral monitor of her husband and children, with a singular capacity to construct the emotional contours of the domestic landscape and inspire the social worthiness and intellectual achievements of her children.

However, a close reading of the popular literature of the this period reveals that the feminine sphere of domestic power - of the fiefdom of the parlor fireside that the wife and mother extends through loving influence to the nation and the world - is suddenly the source of anxiety when it includes the courtship and marrying off of the younger generation, the very situation in which one might expect the mother’s role as domestic
sage to be most necessary. Contemporary critics and authors treat these matchmaking mothers, fictional and actual, with suspicion and antagonism. An anonymous reviewer for *John Bull* suggested of Frances Trollope’s novels in 1852 that “a future historian of England might fairly conclude that in the first half of the nineteenth century all the mothers of England were hireling matchmakers” (“Review of *Uncle Walter*” 683); Trollope was just an easy target, one of many in the early decades of the Victorian period who offered the public enough portraits of this sort of behavior to turn “matchmaking mamma” into a pejorative catchphrase, instantly capable of conjuring a host of potent cultural images for readers. Throughout the first decades of Victoria’s reign, from about the years 1830-1860, the term recurs promiscuously across publications with different genres, audiences, and price points; the figure herself reappears even more frequently. To give just a suggestion of its reach, one can find references to “matchmaking mammas” in venues as varied as satirical sketches in the popular weekly *Punch*; fiction in women’s magazines both for rarefied audiences (like *The Ladies’ Cabinet*) and more middle-class readers (*The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*); reviews of travel literature (*The Englishwoman’s Review and Drawing Room Journal*) and news (*The Lady’s Newspaper*); and classic triple-decker novels, like Trollope’s. She exploded into public consciousness as a limit case of domesticity, a hybrid figure whose domestic role appeared strangely at odds with the acts of public interference that marrying off her children required.

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66 Willis, W.H.
67 “Aunt Rachel’s Story.”
68 “The Two Balls.”
69 “Review of *The Kingdom and People of Siam; with a Narrative of the Mission to that Country in 1855* by Sir John Browning.”
70 “A Show of Brides in St Petersburg.”
Indeed, the disruptive effects of the matchmaking mamma even arise in Hall’s little story, which at first glance seems to insist on the sharp distinction between matchmaking and the maternal role consistent with the ideals of the cult of domesticity. Mrs. Stanhope’s ruinous actions in the text appear of a piece with her womanhood, not in conflict with it, as “she had all her life a talent for what most women have a desire to promote—*match-making*” (Hall 369). Further, and perhaps most significantly, Mrs. Stanhope may herself be childless, but the desires of the Victorian family inspire her actions: “those who had sons and daughters to marry” (369) seek her support, mothers “sent refractory daughters, who would not marry aged or disagreeable, although rich men, to be ‘talked over; by Mrs. Stanhope,” and “fathers consulted her as to the best way of introducing ten thousand (mortgaged) acres, and a family title (in perspective), to a hundred thousand pounds worth of city connection” (Hall 370). The puppet of the community’s parents, Mrs. Stanhope acts out their baldly mercenary desires, shielding mothers and fathers of the accusations of greed that she can absorb without harm, being uncompensated for the results of her matrimonial management. In simultaneously bolstering and subverting the ideals of domesticity, Mrs. Stanhope is the paradigmatic matchmaking mother. The “matchmaking mamma” was negative image to the domestic ideal’s paragon of managerial prowess and spiritual facility, a monster of familial manipulation that distorted the family’s emotional life in order to preserve it. Matchmaking mothers perform the role of financial scapegoat in a surprising number of courtship tales of the early Victorian period, absorbing the potential suggestion of cupidity inherent in fictions that reward virtuous heroines with lucrative marriages (and the implications of greed that adhere to women writing love stories for profit). Yet by
sullying themselves with mercenary matchmaking, these mothers ultimately allow
disinterested romance to reign above all. In the chapter to follow, I will examine the
matchmaking mamma first in a series of periodical fictions written by both men and
women and then in the works of contemporary female novelists Harriet Martineau and
Harriette Maria Gordon Smythies. In each text under consideration, the matchmaking
mamma allows Victorian writers to grapple with anxieties about the intersections of
femininity, money, and power that the early Victorian domestic ideal produced. In
contrast to the pat dismissal of the figure in the periodical writing, however, the novels of
Martineau and Smythies locate in the matchmaking mamma a powerful, if ultimately
unreliable, figure for compromised female authorship itself. Reading these works in
tandem reveals both the narrative patterns writers used to separate the romantic love
match from the necessities of Victorian middle-class capitalism and the challenge to these
patterns mounted by the person of the professional female author.

II. The Matchmaking Mamma and the Periodical Press

The periodical press proved an ideal arena in which to explore the dual (and often
dueling) female archetypes of domestic mother and matchmaking mamma. Constituting,
according to Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnston, the ‘most significant
organ for disseminating knowledge, information, and social attitudes’ (Fraser, Green,
Johnston xi) in the Victorian period, periodicals were ideally capable of expressing ‘the
unevenness and reciprocities of evolving gender ideologies’ (2). A diverse array of
popular publications featured both hagiographies of maternal sainthood and stories
ridiculing mothers who husband-hunt, and the character appealed to both men and
women authors. Most periodical literature preoccupied with the subject of matchmaking
addresses it as a gendered activity—as, for better or worse, the natural province of women. Further, the vast majority of literary matchmakers are mothers with an eye toward familial advancement. The phrase “matchmaking mamma” conveys by shorthand a particular kind of mercenary approach to courtship and love and is often tossed off as a quick descriptor in stories and sketches about other subjects entirely. The satirical sketch “Paragons in Petticoats,” for example, which appeared in *Punch* late in 1857, caustically dissects the ads for domestic servants placed in periodicals by middle-class housewives, suggesting that such capable, educated, and (most importantly) inexpensive paragons as these hypothetical nursery maids and cooks ought really to be advertised for by bachelors looking for wives who can establish a comfortable home. If the connection between middle-class domestic management and commerce isn’t clear enough, the reference in the first line to the “matchmaking Mammas” continually baffled by “a standing army of those blighted beings yclept Bachelors” (223) establishes the context. Matchmaking mammas, whether they appear in *Punch* or *John Bull* or *The Ladies’ Cabinet*, in reviews of travel books or in romantic short-stories, always point to a suspect union of feeling and finance.

Three stories published in different periodicals during the 1840s and ’50s serve especially well to illustrate the dynamic of mothers, money and matchmaking operating in so much periodical literature of the 1840s and 1850s. The first, ‘The Natural History of Courtship…The Rationale of Matchmaking,’ contributed by W.H. Willis to *Punch* in 1842⁷¹, offers a brief, satirical taxonomy of types of matchmakers, most of whom are mothers. Sometimes the mother approaches her matchmaking endeavors with ‘the grand

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⁷¹ Marion Spielman identifies Willis as the sketch’s contributor.
excitement’ of ‘what hazard is to the gamester’ (‘Natural History’ 25). At other times, her affection for a female relative motivates her ‘management’ (25) of romantic affairs and careful reportage of potential husbands’ occupational positions and possible incomes. In all cases, however, financial gain factors largely into the matches the mothers promote.

The second and third stories both appeared in the women’s fashion magazine Le Follet, a very different publication from Punch and geared toward a very different audience. Perhaps because of this they illustrate even more precisely the narrative potential of the matchmaking mamma in tales of courtship. Sutherland Craven’s ‘Amy Fenton’s Wedding: A Village Love Story,’ published in 1849, centers around Mrs. Evelyn, a respectable farmer’s widow and “thrifty and calculating” housekeeper whose affections ‘manifest themselves chiefly in household comforts’ (Craven 70). Possessing ‘as thorough a matchmaking spirit as the most aristocratic of manoeuvring mamas,’ she pursues a financially beneficial match for her only son, Jasper, through ‘the science of well-arranged alliances’ (70). However, her desire to enhance the family’s status through her son’s marriage results in disappointment when she learns that the town-bred girl she selected for her son looks on their family with disdain. Chastened, Mrs. Evelyn finally supports the marriage of Jasper and his humble sweetheart, Amy, who receives a surprising inheritance on their wedding day. In 1853, E.S. Vernon’s “Lost and Won; or, Husband Hunting in the Country,” appears as almost a companion piece to “Amy Fenton’s Wedding,” describing one of those aristocratic (or at least wealthy) mamas against whom Mrs. Evelyn forms such a ridiculous comparison. Vernon’s matchmaking mamma Mrs. Osborne views her elder daughter Eleanor’s beauty and accomplishments “as the gilded nets which would infallibly entrap a wealthy prize in the matrimonial
lottery” (193). When the her husband brings the young heir to a title to visit the Osborne estate, Mrs. Osborne orchestrates scenes and situations intended to display Eleanor to best effect, but in reality only emphasizing the artificiality of her own arrangements. Only after Mr. Osborne lets slip that their guest, Mr. Fane, is a younger son does his wife cease managing Eleanor and Fane’s interactions—at which point, given a chance to behave naturally and unaffectedly, Eleanor of course wins his heart. And he, of course, turns out to possess a fortune even greater than the title Mrs. Osborne had wanted for him.

Both Mrs. Evelyn of “Amy Fenton’s Wedding” and Mrs. Osborne of “Lost and Won” mix money and matrimony and garner the disapproval of their respective narrators for doing so. Mrs. Osborne—rich and prominent—reveals herself an utter failure at romantic maneuvering. Mr. Fane, her future son-in-law, takes great pleasure in mocking her mercenary character to her face, talking “of settlements and provision for the younger children” rather than of love or affection, demonstrating “that he understood the keynote of the worthy lady’s sympathies” (195). Mrs. Evelyn must give up her grand dreams for her son and feel a hearty shame “of her selfish projects” (Craven 71). She must realize that the bride she picked out for Jasper is a snobbish town-bred girl who looks on their beloved farm with disdain and encourage him to pursue the patiently long-suffering Amy, taking her into their home as a daughter. To underscore the matchmaking mother’s cardinal sins, each of these meditations on maternal maneuvering promotes an alternate figure of domestic propriety against whom to contrast them. Generous Amy of “Amy Fenton’s Wedding” dispenses charity and affection in her local community even while suffering from a broken heart. Gentle, unaffected Eleanor Osborne rails against her mother’s manipulations in “Lost and One”—she describes herself with “silent indignation
and self-contempt” as “the living marionette of this maternal drama” (Vernon 194)—and attracts through her graceful simplicity and genuine interest in her future husband. Even in Hall’s “The Match-Maker,” Mrs. Stanhope confronts a superior foil in Elizabeth Lechmere, who refuses all attempts to profit from her beauty on the marriage market and leaves a comfortable home with her matchmaking aunt until she can make a happy marriage for love. By mocking and vilifying the matchmaker in each of these stories, the texts reject her strategic and instrumentalist view of marriage and reaffirm their investment in the ostentatious anti-materialism of romantic marriage.

By the 1840s, the social narrative of love-in-marriage and marriage-for-love had gained prominence in the cultural imagination. Historians and literary scholars (including Stephanie Coontz, John Gillis, Ruth Perry, Lawrence Stone, Randolph Trumbach, and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall) have described the process by which the ethos of romantic marriage dominated over the pragmatic and community-based models of marital arrangements that previously held sway. This was in contrast to conceptions of marriage in prior centuries, in which a host of factors other than romantic passion or companionable affection predominated in reckonings of a prudent match: factors like land acquisition and political favor, assistance with a family business or care for children, the elderly, and the ill, the strengthening of local ties between kin or communities, and the provision of an occupation for women. In the Victorian period, these motivations are, by and large, publically discounted even if they continue to influence individual marriage decisions. If marrying in poverty is also decried, it receives nothing like the scornful treatment so much literature reserves for the crime of marry ing for wealth without love. Indeed, as Wendy Jones has explained, fiction of the period “conventionally figures
marriage as the moral opposite of the marketplace” owing to “the status of marriage as a
Christian sacrament, as well as its identification with domestic ideology and therefore
with the literal and ideational space where business does not take place” (132). Thus, in
advocating mercenary marriages for material benefit, the matchmaking mamas of the
periodical press “violate[] the true and essential character of marriage itself, substituting
exchange-value—the most common transaction in the marriage market trades status for
wealth—for use-value, love of the inherent and untranslatable worth of another” (Jones
132).

This simple equation of matchmaking with commercial values and fiction (and its
admirable heroines) with the spiritual elevation of the love match is complicated,
however, both by the matchmaking mothers’ association with the supposedly morally
superior domestic space of the home and by the very love matches that so happily
conclude their tales. Both “Amy Fenton’s Wedding” and “Lost and Found” disavow their
matchmaking mamma’s methods but, importantly, affirm her motivating desires through
the marriages that take place in spite of her machinations. For while her future son-in-
law’s “slightly satirical smile” raises Mrs. Osborne’s ire, she takes comfort in the fact that
her daughter has landed the prominent and lucrative match she had angled after—she
feels “with complacent satisfaction that she had amply fulfilled her social duties as a
matchmaker and a mother” (Vernon 195). Even the more chastened Mrs. Evelyn’s
dreams for her son’s marriage and his financial future also reach fruition, when her new
daughter-in-law Amy receives a surprising inheritance on her wedding day. This speaks
to the primary locus of concern the matchmaking mother produces in these texts: not
solely with the act of matchmaking in and of itself, but with the gendered exercise of
social and financial power it implies. The occasional treatment of male matchmakers in at
tthis time by writers for the periodical press speaks to this point. Male gender norms—
particularly the necessary investment in commerce—might seem impossibly opposed to
conventional understandings of the matchmaker’s talent, her delicate readings of social
roles and signals and her manipulative ability to influence the emotional temperature of
her family. Yet texts that celebrate male matchmakers do so by virtue of their maleness.
Successful male matchmakers in these works represent the anti-materialistic union of
prudence and social understanding while female matchmakers stand for the inappropriate
elevation of individual ego, for a self-centered quest after money or power that
commodifies all kinds of intimate relationships, from husband and wife to parent and
child to the bond between friends.

Two stories published at either end of the period under observation in this chapter
speak to this disparity in the perspective on matchmaking granting to men and women
during this time. The anonymously authored “The Match-Maker,” which appeared in The
Ladies’ Cabinet in 1833, and “Couches and Cousinship; or, The General’s Match-
Making,” written by the best-selling Ouida and published in Bentley’s Miscellany in
1860, each treat consanguineal family structures and alliance-based marriage customs
sympathetically while also preserving the primacy of the love match in Victorian
courtship through their reliance on avuncular male matchmakers. Mr. Evelyn, the titular
character in The Ladies’ Cabinet’s “The Match-Maker,” is a godfather and a guardian to
the story’s narrator and “the chief personage of a small town in the north” (“The Match-
Maker” 19). He serves the community in a religious, material, legal, and familial
capacity, and his matchmaking is of a piece with his customary benevolent intercessions.
During the story he arranges two matches, the first between Lucy Hervey, “an orphan heiress of considerable fortune” and Edward Morris, a promising young scholar, and the second between Miss Reid, Lucy’s former governess, and Mr. Morris, the widowed curate of the town and Edward’s father. His matrimonial schemes differ from those of the matchmaking mammas in key respects. He has no direct emotional or financial stake in the outcome of the matches he arranges. His position in the community is secure, his wealth is established, and he receives no monetary benefit from any of the marriages; thus, he preserves the separation of commerce and courtship that the marriage-plot narratives of the 1830s-1850s require. Second, in matching these couples he forestalls a threatened disruption to the social order in the form of Lucy and Miss Reid’s stubbornly homosocial household. Lucy’s relationship with her former governess is almost like a marriage: the two are “quite as inseparable as goose and apple-sauce, or tongue and chicken” (“The Match-Maker” 19). More worrying, Miss Reid—“just what one fancies a man would be in petticoats” (20)—stubbornly clings to this female ménage despite Lucy’s desirability as a wife: now aged twenty-six, Lucy has declined numerous marriage proposals due to her reliance on her governess’s judgments. Mr. Evelyn ultimately triumphs by transforming Miss Reid from an ersatz-husband into a legal wife. A representative of a bygone model of marriage-by-community (the narration of the story is redolent with nostalgia and deliberately set at least a generation in the past), Mr. Evelyn mounts a defense of the centrality of the love match to the local community and the role of benevolent (male) observers in facilitating such a match.

Written in the 1860s, “Couches and Cousinship,” Ouida’s take on the matchmaking man, does not embrace a communally determined marital plot with the
fervency of the early-1830s “The Match-Maker.” Yet she does pay tribute to the generous impulses of the avuncular General whose plan to marry his wards, the cousins Fay and Sydenham, to one another and gift them with his recently purchased estate forms “the one delight of [his] life” (Ouida 27). While Fay and Sydie adore their doting, indulgent uncle, his delightful estate, and the spicy curries he has brought back to England with him from his years posted abroad in India, they cannot marry to please him. Eventually, the General admits the power of unstoppable, unpredictable true love to Fay’s bridegroom, the Cambridge fellow Keane:

I was a great fool, sir, and set about match-making when I might have known those things never grow where people want to plant ‘em, and I dare say you’ve managed much better. I give her over to you, Keane. If I didn’t, though, it wouldn’t much matter, for she’s a wily little puss, and would find her own way to you somehow. (Ouida 33)

By acceding to his niece’s will, the General acknowledges the futility of aristocratic alliance-brokering in an age devoted to true love—but, even more significantly, in an era when young women have the much vaunted British freedom to dispense of themselves in marriage according to their will, not their parents’ will. Indeed, “Coaches and Cousinship” implies that, given this state of independence, the marriage bond is the better means of restraining young women than the parental roof. In each of these stories, the avuncular male matchmaker unites family allegiance with romantic love. Avoiding those aspersions of greed, worldliness, and instrumentality in relationships that beset matchmaking mothers, the avuncular matchmaker connects his blameless matchmaking—motivated by generous familial affection or by pure joy in a match well-
made—to the blameless authorship of the writer of his tale, genre writers who enjoy the interlocking puzzle-piece of their courtship plots or proponents of domesticity who gift the reading public with their edifying visions.

In *The Vulgar Question of Money*, Elsie Michie’s study of the undesirable heiress in the Victorian novel, she argues that the narrative patterns of nineteenth century novels require a secondary figure who represents financial acquisitiveness and base commercialism in order to strip the central marriage plot of suggestions of mercenary motives and to preserve the image of marriage for love as pure and unsullied by monetary acquisitiveness or self-aggrandizement. “The marriage plot of the nineteenth-century is mythic, in this sense,” Michie explains. “It is an abstract pattern that allows novelists to explore at the level of structure, action, and characterization, the economic demands the story cannot address directly without becoming too crassly materialistic.” (6). The same is true of matchmaking mother. She is the avatar of the mixing of business and pleasure, marriage and money, courtship and commercial acumen. Her ill-judged meddling in the romantic affairs of her children points to the problems with considering marriage as a business decision—which then allows the courting to couple to marry for love and still receive money, to sustain the fantasy of the private love affair divorced from all worldly concerns while still maintaining a middle-class, commercial society that depends on those very concerns for its survival. Relying on the matchmaking mamma to construct their plots, often confirming her desire for her child’s material prospects but refuting her methods and aims, the approach periodical writers take to this figure reveals ambivalence toward the mother as a figure of power and creation—she both attracts and repels the authors who present her to the reading public.
II. Mrs. Gordon Smythies and the Proper Woman Writer

When written by men or appearing in male-focused venues like *Punch* or *The Morning Post*, matchmaking mammas are often an indicator of misogynistic anxiety about managerial women. In the hands of women authors, the implications are more complex. Tales of matchmaking mothers were part of a literary communion of women authors and women readers; as such, women who usurp and pervert the familial authority granted to domestic angels provide an outlet through which professional women writers of popular fiction can work through their consciousness of their own multiple identities; so often advocates of domestic vocations and the division of commercial and family life in their work, popular women authors nevertheless profitably combine the domestic and the commercial in their own writing. At the same time, in a male-dominated marketplace, professional women writers were targets of an uneasy mixture of benevolent patronization and frustrated invective from the male literary establishment. Victorian essayist W.R. Greg exemplifies this mindset in “False Morality of Lady Novelists,” published in 1859, in which he both canonizes the tender delicacy of young lady novelists and laments the pairing of their inexperience and undue position in the cultural realm. “The number of youthful novelists, and of young lady novelists, extant at this moment passes calculation, and was unparalleled at any former epoch,” he complains. “Indeed, the supply of the fiction market has mainly fallen into their hands” (86). The end result of this flood of professional writing women, according to Greg, is a literary climate in which men are “constantly gazing on inaccurate pictures, constantly sympathizing with artificial or reprehensible emotions, constantly admiring culpable conduct, constantly imbibing false morality” (Greg 89). Reality contradicts Greg. Contemporary sociologist Richard
Altick has determined that, contrary to the assertions of Greg and his compatriots, women authors consistently represented 20% of the population of novelists throughout the nineteenth century. These periodic laments of disproportionate female representation in the ranks of professional authors speaks not so much to a groundswell of novels published by and for women as to the discomfort of many Victorian commentators with a status quo in which women could earn a living, receive press and praise, and put themselves forward for public observation without relinquishing claims to gentility and respectability.

Valerie Sanders eloquently captures this paradox in her analysis of the public perception of two of the most prominent women authors of the 1830s, Harriet Martineau and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, known as L.E.L. While erudite monthlies like the Edinburgh Review and the Quarterly Review comprised the upper echelon of the era’s literary establishment, women journalists like the impressively prolific Martineau and poets like L.E.L. were “[e]xcluded from the inner circles of leading journals and commissioned in only small numbers to write articles” (Sanders “Wreaths” 43). When journals took the work of women writers as the subject for reviews, the “clubhouse of male satirists” (44) who dominated the literary marketplace found themselves uncertain how to address their feminine counterparts: “Were they to be made fun of on the same terms as men, or were they to be flattered?” (43). Analyzing the portrait and profile “Galleries” of prominent literary figures that Fraser’s Magazine, Dublin University, and other journals ran in the 1830s and 1840s, Sanders reveals that the most typical response by elite periodicals to women writers was to ignore them: only nine of the eighty-one

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72 Referenced in Connor (10).
sketches of literary figures that appeared in Fraser’s in the ‘30s and ‘40s were of women. The romantic and beautiful “poetess” L.E.L. received the most flattering portrait and effusive copy devoted to her image and reputation; she also suffered from scandalous gossip about her possible sexual liaisons with some of Fraser’s writers and editors. Martineau, on the other hand, was caricatured as “Long and lean,” “unfeminine,” “witchlike and spinsterish,” and “unattractive” (Sanders, “Wreaths” 48); the descriptive text that appeared alongside her image was equally satirical. With her so-called “masculine” intellect, her frank acknowledgment of Malthusianism, and her self-sufficient singleness, Martineau resisted a sexual economy that placed women’s domestic character above any other; the more conventionally feminine and appealing L.E.L. also suffered by the “upsetting and intrusive” (Sanders, “Wreaths” 44) response of the literary establishment to her work and her image. In both cases, professional women writers presented a public challenge to domestic ideology’s preferred posture toward women, a paradox that their male observers couldn’t happily resolve.

In her guise as author-figure, the matchmaking mother offered many women writers during the era of domestic ideology a useful medium through which to evaluate their interfusion of the domestic ideal and the professional realm and to record the anxieties produced by their unsettled place in a misogynistic literary market. As a figure of female authority and creativity and of maternal domesticity, matchmaking mammamas occupy a similarly ambivalent position in the courtship plot to the fraught spaces provided for writing women in the literary world of the early Victorian era. Appropriately intent on her domestic role and duties, the matchmaking mother also monetizes her intimate relationships, blurring the division between spiritualized home and the
commoditized market. Similarly, women writers, particularly novelists of domestic fiction and the courtship plot, received monetary compensation in exchange for their publically projected visions of private life\(^{73}\), placing them in a dual position *vis a vis* the domestic realm and the literary marketplace. It was impossible to know if they were fellow combatants in a literary melee, easily dismissible appendages in a well-established male marketplace, or wild women running roughshod over the publishing industry, substituting false feminine morality for sound good sense. Vickery proposes, “the stress on the proper female sphere in Victorian discourse signaled a growing concern that more women were seen to be active *outside* the home rather than proof that they were so confined” (400). The preponderance of problematic matchmaking mothers in the literature of domestic ideology points to the challenges both the maternal supervisor and the writing woman presented to the dominant male literary establishment.

The remainder of this chapter will closely examine two novels by two different women novelists of this period: the popular and prolific but now almost entirely forgotten Harriette Maria Gordon Smythies and the controversial, formally experimental multi-generic journalist and novelist, Harriet Martineau. While the short sketches and stories by authors like Anna Maria Hall, Ouida, and so many others demonstrate the prevalence of the matchmaker in periodical literature and the consistency of the pattern that structured her appearances in fiction from the 1820s to the 1860s, only the novel-length meditations on the matchmaker’s role in the courtship plot display her full vitality as a model through

\(^{73}\) While novelists resort to the vilified maternal matchmaker in order to shore their bone fides as conventionally domestic Victorian women, the proponents of domestic ideology were engaged in a similar slight of hand, according to Hilary Fraser, Stephanie Green, and Judith Johnson: Sarah Stickney Ellis, Isabella Beeton, “and the countless lesser-known writers for the domestic culture industry,” flaunting “the persona of the domestic angel in contradistinction to their actual identities as professional writer” (43-44).
which to evaluate the early Victorian woman writer’s career. Martineau wrote “almost every conceivable form of nonfiction: critical reviews, philosophical and moral essays, didactic fiction, parables, even poetry” (Peterson 244) and was already a literary celebrity when her first novel, *Deerbrook*, appeared in 1839. Smythies, on the other hand, was a relatively young and relatively new novelist in 1842, when she published *The Matchmaker*, only the fourth of her eventual twenty-two novels. While she would become “a figure of note both in literary and social circles” (Summers 359), Smythies’s reputation would never match that of the notorious and fearsomely intelligent Martineau; Smythies’s fiction also followed more conventional lines, offering silver fork courtship plots and aristocratic satire. Smythies married in 1842, the same year she published *The Matchmaker*; Martineau would remain single for life. Yet both women knew the compulsion to write for their livelihoods. Both women engaged with the press that published their works and criticized their personas. Both offered conflicted portraits of domesticity in their works and repudiations of its charms in their lives. In *The Matchmaker* and *Deerbrook*, matchmaking mothers appear as figures prime for ridicule and reformation—they are women who have overstepped the bounds of propriety and must be chastised or rebuked for it. They abuse the power granted to them by their roles in the domestic sphere, and rather than bringing morality into the marketplace they bring commerce into the family, where it must never be seen to dwell. Yet they also offer potent images of women’s imagination at work in the world, shaping family and society through the medium of their creative minds. Reading these two novels reveals a portrait

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74 Smythies would eventually remove herself and her five children from her clergyman husband’s home after years of supporting the family through her writing thanks to his intermittent employment and ruinous litigiousness. Please see Cotugno, Summers for more of the scant information available on Smythies’s life.
of the woman writer as conflicted, embattled, and vilified matchmaker plying her craft at
the center of a constellation of early Victorian concerns about women and authority.

Of the two novels, Smythies’s *The Matchmaker* more unambiguously embraces
the conventions of the matchmaking mamma as expounded upon in the periodicals of the
day, with its ambivalence about the participation of women in the literary marketplace.
Shortly before the novel’s publication, an anonymous notice in *John Bull* eagerly
anticipated its arrival on the literary and social scene. Describing it as “already spoken of
in certain coteries as affording an exceedingly amusing exposition of the principles, or as
some people are daring enough to assert, the want of them, by means of which clever
mamas procure for their daughters unexceptionable matches” (“Notice” 532). The “clever
mama” of the novel, the matchmaking Mrs. Lindsay, has successfully elevated her
family’s fortunes through successive generations of artfully managed marital alliances:
first she arranged marriages for herself and her petit-bourgeois siblings to people of
property; then she maneuvered her daughters into marriages with men of fashion. At the
start of the novel’s action, she has two daughters left to make matches for, the equally
status-hungry Augusta, who dreams of marrying a duke, and the loyal, steadfast,
unmaterialistic Ellen, who dreams of marrying her cousin Julian. During a season in
London, Mrs. Lindsay contrives, deceives, manipulates, gossips, complains, and coerces
in her attempts to win the most lucrative spouses possible for her daughters. Augusta falls
in with her mothers’ schemes, but Ellen prefers penury and exile with an impoverished
uncle over marriage to a man she can’t respect. At the novel’s conclusion, in expected
fashion, Ellen wins Julian’s heart and receives a fortune, while Mrs. Lindsay suffers the
humiliation and despair of seeing all her “well married” daughters, including Augusta, left impoverished, unhappy, and alone.

Smythies echoes the travel writers discussed in the introduction when she emphasizes the un-Englishness of *The Matchmaker*’s matchmaker, Mrs. Lindsay. “Oh! talk of the beauty-markets of the East,” is Smythies’s doleful lament:

> the system, under another name, is carried on wherever matchmaking mammas barter youth with its warm impulses, and beauty with its winning powers, for wealth and station. In England, the mother is the auctioneer, ready to knock down her own child to the highest bidder. What has the slave-market of the East to match with this? (Smythies 276-277).

The ‘slave markets” and “beauty markets of the East” stand for the vulgarity and despotism of the system of arranged marriage in China, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire, a state of affairs all right-thinking Britons should abjure. Though she links her matchmaking mother to the buying and selling of foreign brides, also implicitly suggests an inherent contrast between Eastern vassalage and the natural system of English courtship, unhindered by meddlesome interference, which allows for more genuine feeling and a more authentic marriage and family life. Mrs. Lindsay replicates this system on England’s shores by virtue of her maternity, however, as Smythies envelops her matchmaker in a circle of other mothers conducting a public auction for their daughters’ affections. Blaming the status-hungry mother for anything in England that smacks of the artificial obscures, of course, the edifice of class-based chaperonage, engagement customs, and legal dictates that control the “natural affections” of prospective brides and grooms. It also replicates the dynamic in so much writing about both matchmaking and
domesticity, in which the mother’s beneficent power within the home always contains the potential for equally potent harm. Smythies makes apparent the intersection between the nationalist critique of matchmaking, the tensions inherent in domestic ideology, and the anxiety over the vulnerability of the domestic unit to the pressures of the market.

These economic issues receive more extended treatment in Smythies’s work than in the periodical literature of the era. Writing one of the tales of high life that comprised much of the conventional fiction of the 1820s-1840s (and that Martineau, along with Hazlitt, Carlyle, Fraser’s William Maginn, and the Quarterly’s Henry Taylor, dismissed as artificial, insubstantial, and false), Smythies casts her would-be aristocratic matchmaker, Mrs. Lindsay, as a social climbing parvenue willing to barter her daughters’ marital happiness for the chance of a title in the family. Mrs. Lindsay is both the energetic center of the text, driving plot and manipulating characters, and its primary villain. Further, as the only example of a mother in the novel, Mrs. Lindsay offers a view of the conflicted Victorian understanding of domestic authority. She is an adroit domestic manager, replicating through a monstrous parody the domestic angel’s control over her home environment. Expert in the stereotypically feminine arts of suggestion, manipulation, and relational aggression, Mrs. Smythies is also associated throughout the novel with financial chicanery and foreign despotism. As she leverages her social

75 See (Sanders, *Reason* 3-4)
76 As such, she suggests the “looming consequence” (81) of the domestically capable mother in Karen Chase and Michael Levenson’s reading of Sarah Stickney Ellis. In *The Mothers of England*, Ellis avers that “all the statesmen of the rising generation, all the ministers of religion, all public and private gentlemen, as well as all men of business, mechanics and laborers of every description, will have received, as regards intellectual and moral character, their first bias, and often their strongest and their last from the training and the influence of a mother” (Ellis, *Mothers* 17-18). By Ellis’s logic, the mother’s powerful moral significance in the best of families mandates a proportionately terrible result in the worse.
relationships and traditional networks of family and kin to advance herself and her daughters through marriage, Mrs. Smythies presents a dark take on the repercussions of mingling female social acuity with financial speculation.

Mrs. Lindsay stakes her claim to appropriate Victorian wife- and motherhood by maintaining the outer trappings of domestic competence. She then leverages that status into her husband-hunting schemes, a perversion of domestic ideology’s dogma of exclusive emotional attachment and the wife and mother’s salvific affection. Mrs. Lindsay orchestrates the events of her family’s social life, capably manipulating social events - visits, balls, trips and outings - to stoke suitors’ jealousy and provoke marriage proposals. She observes and accurately interprets the emotional fluctuations of the members of her household, but only to serve her own acquisitive ends. She thriftily manages financial resources, but solely to swell her own purse, not out of a desire to exercise admirable restraint over a household budget. While The Women of England and The Mothers of England encourage mothers to make careful observation a hallmark of their maternal practice, Smythies suggests through Mrs. Lindsay’s spying that the power of the mother’s domestic role renders such interpretation of others’ thoughts a trespass. The tools of the domestic manager become weapons under her command, perfectly suited for her attack on love-in-marriage that the novel so strenuously decries. The costs of this matrimonial manipulation are dire, Smythies warns: one married Lindsay daughter languishes in India, neglected by her older husband, while the second daughter died young after months of abuse at her husband’s hands. Mrs. Lindsay’s continuing fervor for cultivating consequential matches speaks to her fundamental baseness; such grave losses “would have sickened the mother of matchmaking” in an ordinary family (Smythies 1: 7).
One of Mrs. Lindsay’s most signal failures is her total disavowal of the importance of love in marriage or family life. In its absence, she dwells only on the financial power certain calculated decisions can give a woman, and it is her emphasis on financial power over the emotional warmth of domesticity that constitutes the threat of her matchmaking. “I would rather marry a man I did not love than one who did not love me,” she tells her daughter Augusta, manipulating her into accepting the proposal of a wealthy but unappealing financier. “If you marry for worldly advantages, let them be advantages indeed” (Smythies 1: 255). In the economies of matchmaking, family life becomes irreparably monetized. “I’m like mamma,” Augusta cries to her sister Ellen. “I have an innate horror of poverty! I cannot love a poor man—how distressing!” (3: 42).

Mrs. Lindsay preys on this similarity between her daughter and herself. “With our poor income,” she warns, “offend Sir Peter, and you can have no other chance. There is no match in this place, and all seasons at London or elsewhere are over now. Will you, for the sake of a man who has certainly slighted you, degenerate into a… poor old maid? How beautiful Sir Peter’s park looks in the distance!” (3: 64). After Augusta and Riskwell’s depressing wedding, Mrs. Lindsay complacently reflects that “she is my lady, and has married her carriage” (3: 168), reducing the husband who provides that carriage, the man to whom her daughter is now irrevocably joined for life, to the inanimate symbols of his riches—his title and his equipage. In eliding her daughter’s husband in favor of his possessions, Mrs. Lindsay brings to the fore perhaps the most chilling aspect to a Victorian audience of her domestic tyranny: her total usurpation of masculine authority in her and her widowed brother-in-law’s homes. She crowls that with careful management, she can transform her daughters not just into wives, but “tyrants” (1: 274).
This power over a husband makes a recurring theme for Mrs. Lindsay, even when in her own marriage to the complacent, country-bound Reverend Gregory Lindsay. Rather than pondering the best ways to enhance her husband’s comfort at home and to ease the burdens of his professional toil, Mrs. Lindsay studies the easiest means by which she can silence any possible complaint of his against her behavior. “[I]t’s a good thing in life to be able to say to one’s husband, if he ever finds fault, or appears to think he might have done better,” she reflects, “‘Remember I didn’t marry you for want of better offers;’ that was a great quietus” (Smythies 1: 217-18). Far from the husband-focused mode of existence advocates by domestic pedagogues like Ellis, Mrs. Lindsay’s stratagems reveal that she has placed herself at the center of her family life and all her efforts in the domestic sphere aim toward gaining more power, consequence, or wealth for herself. While her mastery of the domestic woman’s managerial skill allows her to coerce Augusta into making a match with the unappealing Sir Riskwell, her perversion of the mother’s vital role into a vulgar hunt for a fortune guarantees ruin and repentance as the marriage’s outcome.

Smythies aligns Mrs. Lindsay’s brand of domestic power (and by extension, the matchmaker as a type) to the more unsavory realms of the Victorian economic ecosystem: ‘what gambler, what speculator is deterred by failure! Experience shows it only rouses him to further risks. Matchmaking is the worst kind of speculation, the worst species of gambling: the capital speculated away is happiness - the stake gambled for is the life of life’ (Smythies 1: 7). Substituting the language of gambling for neutral or positive financial terms like investment or income, Smythies connects matchmaking to riskier, more dangerous modes of finance, to fortunes based on the suspect and
unpredictable vagaries of the stock market rather than on professional industry, commercial production, or aristocratic land-ownership. Like the stock market, the marriage market and the matchmakers who busy themselves with it profit from speculative investment in the future instead of rigorous effort in the present. Not coincidentally, then, Mrs. Lindsay’s greatest matrimonial acquisition is Sir Peter Riskwell, an immensely wealthy but terribly gauche investor. In his aponymic name he contains the whole of his and Mrs. Lindsay’s marital philosophy: calculated risk for vast monetary reward rather than the certainty of spiritual wealth that comes only from a moral love. After Augusta declines his proposal of marriage, Riskwell evaluates her language like an investor studying a financial portfolio:

While refusing him as a husband, she offered her esteem and society as a friend; and Riskwell, after a calculation of chances, determined to take her at her word. It seemed to him a fair speculation—a wealthy man of forty, retained as a friend by a lady of three and twenty, to whom he had once proposed, was, he thought, very likely to meet with better luck a second time. (Smythies 1: 247)

Like Riskwell, whose suit of her daughter the matchmaker favors, Mrs. Lindsay also calculates carefully and speculates boldly, risking more modest prizes in the hopes of a huge triumph. Both risky investment and maternal matchmaking are explained as types of gambling in the novel. Roused by both success and failure to further risks, both Mrs. Lindsay and Riskwell end the novel amid the wreckage of their schemes: the matchmaking mother’s daughters have been made patently miserable by their marriages
and Sir Peter Riskwell is revealed to be “a ruined man. His speculations had long been failing; and now he was undone!” (Smythies 3: 293).

Both financial speculation and schemes of matchmaking rely on networks to maximize their efficacy. Investors in a capitalist economy stake their fortunes alongside numerous other unknown participants when they speculate on commercial enterprises, while rises and falls in value can be fueled by intangibles like public perception and rumor. As befits a female industry, matchmaking in the early Victorian domestic novel is also powered by the social currency of gossip. *The Matchmaker*’s Mrs. Lindsay relies on the chattering of London mothers hoping to match their daughters and sons for her information about her daughters’ suitors. She knows which men have need of a wealthy bride and might be compelled through judicious manipulation into proposing. She cleverly hoards damaging information about her Augusta’s true beloved, her cousin Julian, revealing discrediting facts just when she needs to influence her daughter to consider one of her other wooers. Once Augusta is married, Mrs. Lindsay depends solely on the representation of her daughter’s marriage in the gossip press for knowledge about her welfare, reveling in the fact that “She saw Lady Riskwell’s name in the papers, included in all fashionable ‘arrangements,’ ‘arrivals,’ and ‘departures’” (Smythies 3: 241) without considering Augusta’s deep unhappiness as the wife of a man she neither respects nor enjoys spending time with. Gossip allows Mrs. Lindsay to carefully monitor the fortunes of their London community and to execute her matchmaking schemes to best effect, but—much in the way that financial rumor can lower or raise the value of a stock beyond what the company it represents warrants—her exhaustive awareness of conventional romantic wisdom bears little relation to what Smythies presents as the
realities of her daughters’ hearts. In the economies of speculative investment and matchmaking, family life becomes irreparably monetized, as the Lindsays aptly demonstrate.

Not content to let her portrait of the matchmaking mother run amok stand on its own, Smythies heaps further condemnation on Mrs. Lindsay’s head through the means of her daughter, Ellen Lindsay. As the admirable foil so necessary to tales of matchmaking, Ellen demonstrates the alignment of proper domesticity with both romantic marriage and with English national identity. In contrast to her wealth- and husband-hunting mother and sister Augusta, Ellen understands the deeper duties of the middle-class domestic woman. She attaches her affections early to her cousin Julian and never wavers in her devotion to him, despite his pursuit of other women and despite her receipt of several proposals from wealthy, impressive men. Rather than hungering after prosperity and social consequence, Ellen longs for obscurity and poverty as the best medium through which to demonstrate her understanding of true womanly devotion. Describing her vision of a wife’s joined love and responsibility, she explains to Augusta:

You could almost wish the world would forsake, that you might be all the world to him. His poverty would draw forth your secret hoards of tenderness…. Oh! you would love, you would revere, you would adore him more as he bent his sad steps to some dark city-desk, to toil away life with the vulgar for daily bread, than you ever did when he was…the idol of women and the ‘best friend’ of all the men in the world. (1: 181)

Hoarding tenderness instead of coin and paying her husband with the currency of her womanly reverence and adoration, the wife in Ellen’s view operates a slanted version of
commercial economy. She transforms the vulgar monotony of bourgeois industry into an
dportunity for spiritual enrichment, an exchange in which her devotion more than
recompenses her husband for his sufferings.

While Augusta insists on the indispensability of prosperity to a happy home, Ellen
proves the higher value of the wife’s domestic talents and affections in creating such a
home, regardless of external circumstances. When their uncle and benefactor, Mr.
Lindsay, writes that he has lost the bulk of his fortune through unsuccessful investments,
Augusta and her mother move quickly to distance themselves from their formerly
generous relative and the string of resource-depleting dependents he carts with him
everywhere he goes. Ellen, on the other hand, “the best of housewives, made every
arrangements for the comfort of her uncle and his guests. Without any bustle or parade
every thing was done; and Ellen gave up her own little boudoir” to her uncle’s uncouth
guests (Smythies 3: 47). Later, Ellen accompanies her uncle in his poverty-stricken exile,
devoting her own savings and her domestic industry to his efforts to maintain a
comfortable home despite financial misfortune. Even in Switzerland, “though strange
faces met their view, and a foreign language fell upon their ears; yet Ellen, by the magic
of her woman’s nature, made it all seem like Home” (Smythies 3: 170). Her
demonstrations of domestic devotion and capable management finally earn Ellen her
cousin Julian’s love, when “the exquisite sweetness of Ellen’s voice, the charms of her
face, and the grace of her figure, struck him forcibly, for the first time, as he saw her
seated, like a duteous daughter, at his ruined father’s feet, or hovering about him like a
ministering angel” (Smythies 3: 141). Through Ellen’s performance of the role of dutiful
daughter, Julian finally recognizes her beauties and can imagine her as his equally
competent wife. As she is already ensconced in the family in her appropriate domestic situation, it’s a simple enough matter to solidify the arrangement through marriage.

Ellen’s domestic excellence is not merely a commendable personal quality; throughout the novel, Smythies affirms Ellen’s high-minded capableness as a specifically English trait. In her introduction into the text, Ellen is described as “a rare specimen of a purely English maiden—a mixture of the Psyche and the Madonna, a combination of soul and feeling, frank without boldness, gentle but not inanimate, intellectual without aiming at being so” (Smythies 1: 94). Freedom from both insincere affectation and vulgar candor mark Ellen’s English womanhood, which resembles a kind of purely natural cultivation, combining without any effort at all the fruits of religious forbearance and self-abnegation, intellectual sophistication, and civilized social poise into an instinctive response to the world. Ellen’s character stands metonymically for the cultured nature of England itself; her actions serve to support English industry at home and convey its civilization abroad.

Eschewing French gowns and coiffures, Ellen believes that “English ladies should encourage English industry” and instead patronizes “a young, obliging, hard-working girl, who supports her mother by her needle” (1: 75). Her body, clothed in the product of domestic (in both senses of the word) English labor becomes a sign of national solidarity and the innate superiority of her feelings. Later, when living in Switzerland, she embodies an even more rigorous patriotism, turning her uncle’s home in the Alps into something like a miniature colonial outpost: “English engravings covered the walls, English books filled the cases, and English ornaments and knick-knacks covered the tables” (Smythies 3: 170). Her home a storehouse for English literary and artistic culture, her body and demeanor traveling advertisements for English domestic culture, Ellen
demonstrates English superiority to the Swiss ladies who see “in Ellen a woman, young, modest, and domestic as themselves, who could be at once the best of housewives and the most intellectual of companions” and who as a result take “courage, and read, and reflected, and began seriously to fit themselves to embellish the homes in which they had hitherto merely plodded and drugged” (Smythies 3: 177).

This connection of Ellen’s domestic female body to the larger body of the state recalls another woman whose character as wife and mother became inextricably linked to both the rise of domestic ideology early in the century and to the prosperity of the nation: the Queen herself, the young wife and mother Victoria. Indeed, Smythies makes this association explicit midway through the text, when Ellen pauses on a visit to Madame Tussaud’s wax museum to ponder a lifelike facsimile of the Queen and her family:

She was looking with particular interest at our young Queen and her handsome and youthful consort; and as she gazed upon the fair but firm hand which holds the balance of nations and the destinies of a world in its gentle grasp, a wish, that was almost a prayer, rose from her very heart that her young sovereign’s fate might be happier than that of the crowned ones around her, that having nobly used her maiden right, to choose from the world the man she loved, she might know, even on the throne, the solace of sympathy, the protection of tenderness. What woman so exalted that she needs them not?—not even thou, Victoria! (Smythies, 2: 9)

Both empowered and threatened by the station that allows her to fulfill and subvert her feminine destiny, Victoria risks losing her womanly birthright of domestic contentment
due to her equally compelling birthright of noble inheritance. And yet the insistence that she has freely chosen the man she loves to be her consort brings Victoria’s domestic satisfaction into the center of her sovereignty, in much the same way that Ellen’s familial dutifullness and pro-English advocacy form two inextricable sides of her domestic nature. Victoria’s “firm” hand can exert power, but it is also “fair” and in need of tenderness, solace, and protection. Similarly, the domestic ideal combines the power of capable management and comforting observation with the total dependence of the home-centered outlook. The ideal of the mother, like Victoria, may exercise choice and judgment and power over her set sphere of influence, but her feminine nature always requires more strength as support than she alone can muster.

As Smythies elaborates Ellen’s excellence throughout the novel in tandem with Mrs. Lindsay’s abuses, she builds toward a final confrontation between the two women: mother and daughter, matchmaker and prospective bride, domestic charlatan and domestic paragon. Their respective textual positions are already clear by the time this final scene unfolds: the three “successful” matches Mrs. Lindsay has already coordinated for her daughters have ended in disaster; Ellen, on the other hand, by holding fast to her romantic convictions and principled self-sacrifice, has both won herself the affection of the man she long loved and has received the bounty of her uncle’s fortune. In this context, “Mrs. Lindsay looked from Ellen, in her blooming beauty; on her widowed

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Writing of the bedchamber crisis of 1839, in which Victoria’s roles as representative of the public body of the monarch and the private body of the domestic woman came into conflict, Karen Chase and Michael Levenson encapsulate the challenges posed by Victoria’s multifarious symbolic registers: “The problem of her sex and her age, or, more exactly, the problem of her sex aggravated by the problem of her age, meant that Victoria came to symbolize a mythology of private experience—its vulnerability, its innocence—even as she was held, and held herself, to the exacting standards of impersonality” (47).
daughter; on Lady Riskwell; and, in fancy, on the tomb of poor Lydia St Leger; and then her heart asked itself what had her matchmaking availed?” (Smythies 3: 293). Her schemes in the dust, Mrs. Lindsay listens to the lectures of her assembled family silently, finally incapable of clever verbal manipulation of events and emotions. Yet like the mothers in *Le Follet* and the *Ladies’ Cabinet* and *Hood’s Magazine*, Mrs. Lindsay functions as a blind, a necessary distraction that allows Smythies’ concluding slight-of-hand, the series of far-fetched plot constructions by which the noble, unmercenary, romantically pure Ellen Lindsay wins her adored cousin Julian Lindsay’s love and fortune without any suspicion of calculation or greed. So too, through Ellen’s ascension over her mother’s domestic monstrousness, Smythies asserts her claims in the masculine literary climate of the 1830s and ’40s, to the tender solicitude owed a literary lady rather than the scorn professional writing women like Martineau could receive.

*The Matchmaker* signals its disquiet with the professional writing woman through the association of matchmaking and female authority. The writing *men* that Smythies includes in her novel also signify troubling resonances between the matchmaking mother and the female writers. Smythies illustrates unethical literary behavior in her portrait of Fitzcribb, a hack-jobbing writer with a large family to feed, who evidences the deceptive collusion possible between the periodical press’s contributors and publishers. Motivated by an intersection of commercial and domestic desires—he too feels the need to preserve his family by prostituting his talents—Fitzcribb mirrors the energetically deceptive matchmaking mother Mrs. Lindsay and her troublesome transformation of freely exchanged affection into commodities auctioned in a marriage market. Fitzcribb’s deceptions prove powerfully manipulative, as he bamboozles London’s reading public.
into making a sensation out of a crackpot historian’s turgid work. Fitzcribb is also an acknowledgment of the realities of the early Victorian publishing market with which Smythies, too, engaged. Distanced by gender and situation from Smythies’s own biography, Fitzcribb absorbs the accusations of literary hackwork and deliberate manipulation of sentiment for profit that popular women novelists could face. Of a kind with Fitzcribb, Mrs. Lindsay also removes emotion from professional enterprise, rejecting marital affection in her quest for riches through her children’s alliances. For Smythies, the precarious position of the woman writer, requiring pre-emptive defense against attack, mandates the sacrifice of both suspect hack writer and reprehensible matchmaking mother.

While Smythies’s narrator opens the novel by declaring “Mothers are nature’s matchmakers” (Smythies 1: 4) in a tone of feminine knowingness, she concludes in the mode of fairy tale, with an elderly uncle, the male embodiment of patriarchal tradition, promising, “after all, the heart is the best Matchmaker!” (Smythies 3: 300). Mr. George Lindsay, the wealthy brother-in-law and uncle of matchmaking Mrs. Lindsay and her daughters, appears to be a generous, gentle, and ineffectual presence. While Mrs. Lindsay busily plots and schemes and amasses social information, sorting her daughters’ suitors according to a rubric that weighs their wealth, rank, and romantic interest, Mr. Lindsay remains sedentary, content to let the social world swirl about him without trying to influence it. Only in the final chapter does he reveal his hidden agency over the events of

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78 Fitzcribb’s mode of publicizing his clients’ work through the periodical press resembles nothing so much as the “Notice” of The Matchmaker that trumpeted Smythies’s work in John Bull, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Treading a careful line between advertisement and review, the notice of Smythies’s work resembles Fitzcribb’s deceitful paid advertisements closely enough to suggest something of a self-mocking portrait in Smythies’s rendition of the unethical male author.
the novel, transforming the piece of social satire overseen by grasping Mrs. Lindsay into a Romance or a fable, with the mystical logic of a fairy tale. Like a king disguised as a beggar to test the moral worth of his subjects, Mr. Lindsay poses as a ruined man and uncovers the true nature of each member of his family party: noble Ellen devotes herself to her doomed uncle’s comfort; his frivolous son Julian becomes a hard-working tutor to support his father and learns to love the steadfast Ellen; and Mrs. Lindsay and Augusta abandon their family members to capture the rich Sir Peter Riskwell.

In his accounting of his noble deceptions to his family, Mr. Lindsay even apes the language of legend, consciously adopting a third-person perspective on his personal history and describing his own actions through the distanced voice of an all-knowing bard:

Now mark! before he fixed on one of these fair girls, before he made his son independent, the father resolved to try them all, by that great touchstone, Adversity. He availed himself of some small and trifling failures, to pretend total Ruin! He went as a beggar with a beggar-son to the home of these two girls. The one forsook—but we will not dwell on that. The other, angel as she is, accompanied the old man into penurious exile; toiled for him, cheered, blessed, and would have followed him in beggary through the world. (Smythies 297)

As in a fairy-tale, the just rewards of wealth and love fall upon those who have pleased the king, who also preaches forgiveness to those who have erred. But he cannot resist a final twist of the knife to his rival, female matchmaker. “Ah, sister Lindsay,” he boasts,

79 A man who has, naturally, “speculated away his immense fortune” (Smythies 33).
“what match of yours can equal this of mine! Come, let us drink the healths of both brides and bridegrooms; and let it be remembered that, after all, the heart is the best Matchmaker!” (Smythies 300). Aligning the matchmaking mother with discounted feminine authority and outdated marriage models, Smythies cleanses her lucrative domestic-fiction-making from the unfeminine taint of the commercial. If matchmaking, as we saw in the context of *Emma* and *Don Juan*, figures authorship, then Smythies ends her novel with a rejection of that witty, knowing, female voice she assumes will appeal to “worshippers of the Real” “ye worshippers of the Real” and “sensible utilitarians who, travelling at the rate of thirty miles an hour, in the easy, softly-cushioned, first-rate seats of a railway carriage, glide at a similar pace through the pages of the last new novel, eager for a tale of “Life as it is”’ (1: 1-2). To preserves the artistic merit of her own literary matchmaking, she must abandon the speculating woman in favor of paternal authority, couched in the tones of oral tradition and fable.

IV. Harriet Martineau: Misguided Matchmakers and Rational Writers

Harriet Martineau’s *Deerbrook*, which appeared a few years before *The Matchmaker* in 1839, both participates in and complicates the scapegoating of the matchmaking mother. Unabashed in her embrace of the identity of professional woman⁸⁰, Martineau nevertheless upholds the core tenets of Victorian domesticity in her only domestic fiction and insists upon the importance of the domestic space and the role its various members play. Set in a provincial, middle-class town, *Deerbrook* depicts a world of brokers, manufacturers, lawyers, and doctors, of commercial husbands and domestic

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⁸⁰ According to Alexis Easley, Martineau embraced her solitary path as a serious woman writer without true precedent in English, one who “redefined and complicated conventionally feminine genres of writing, such as the domestic novel and travel narrative, to include discussion of women’s social, political, and economic roles” (36).
wives, of professional disputes that transform into town riots, and of spats between gossips that unfold unpredictably across a close-knit community. The marital prospects of a pair of newcomers, the Ibbotson sisters Hester and Margaret, drive the engine of the plot. Orphaned and financially imperiled, they must marry professionally stable men if they hope to remain in pretty, pastoral Deerbrook. Equally invested in the doctrine of the love match, however, they refuse to consider marriage with anything less than a combination of passion and respect. When their romantic lives become the subject of gossip and interference by a pair of feuding would-be matchmaking (and match-breaking) matrons, Hester is married to an unwilling spouse, the doctor Edward Hope, while Margaret is separated from her acknowledged lover Philip Enderby. Unwise unions, unfair separations, and relentless turmoil and trauma typify the sisters’ involvement in their community until they earn their eventual happy endings.

Like Sarah Stickney Ellis, who published *The Women of England* the same year as *Deerbrook*, Martineau was the daughter of a dissenting, middle-class family that prized education, even for their daughters. Perhaps not coincidentally, both Ellis and Martineau describe the home scene in similar terms of sanctification and noble purpose. A skilled manager, Ellis’s matron assures her family members’ and guests’ bodily comfort within a clean, orderly, and well-run space that she closely monitors for any unexpected need or threatened source of disorder. Similarly, by carefully observing the moods and desires of her husband and children—particularly sons—she creates a refuge of spiritual and emotional tranquility that replenishes the male psyche, bruised by close association with the commercial realm, and thus imbues national institutions with a greater share of generosity, compassion, and respectable achievement. In *The Mothers of*
England, Ellis avers that “all the statesmen of the rising generation, all the ministers of religion, all public and private gentlemen, as well as all men of business, mechanics and laborers of every description, will have received, as regards intellectual and moral character, their first bias, and often their strongest and their last from the training and the influence of a mother” (Ellis, *Mothers* 17-18). For Martineau, the home is “the cool retreat of the weary husband when he comes in to rest from his professional toils,” blessed with “security” and “freedom” from the harsh mercenary world by the presence of a comforting, conscientious wife (163). Without women, Martineau’s attorney hero Philip Enderby insists, men would “know nothing of morals…. But for this, almost all men would be without earnestness of heart—without a moral purpose—without generosity, while they are all the while talking of honour” (Martineau 324).

Like Smythies, however, Martineau points to the contiguities between domesticity and competition through the figure of the matchmaker. All of the mothers in *Deerbrook* engage in spiteful behavior at odds with Enderby’s idealization of their moral mission. Gossipy, jealous, and competitive, Mrs. Grey and Mrs. Rowland, the central representatives of motherhood in the text, are next-door neighbors whose husbands are business partners. Business and home are intimately entwined for each, and the relationship between the two constantly envious merchants’ wives typifies all of the selfish rivalry more commonly associated with the commercial realm. Each calls upon maternal feelings and domestic concerns as the primary motivation for all her actions, and each occupies herself with the tasks usually described as the mother’s provenance: educating children (or supervising their education), managing servants, nursing the elderly and sick, welcoming guests, overseeing evening entertainments around the family
hearth, orchestrating outings for the community, and monitoring the romanticentanglements of the younger generation. Alongside their execution of these duties, Mrs.
Grey and Mrs. Rowland wage a bitter, irrational feud that perverts the ideal of the
domestic mother’s sacrosanct distance from the soul-blasting competition of the
business realm. While their husbands coexist happily in work, brought together both by
their commercial concerns and their status as equally prominent members of the town of
Deerbrook, Mrs. Grey and Mrs. Rowland’s domestic duties form the pretext for a war of
attrition for respect and consequence in their village.

Their inveterate domestic competition determines their performance of maternity,
as Martineau amply demonstrates. “Do not run,” Mrs. Grey cautions her daughters in the
first chapter. “Walk quietly. You will heat yourselves, and I do not like Mrs. Rowland to
see you running” (Martineau 9). Mrs. Rowland, meanwhile, on the opposite end of the
lawn that separates the two family’s houses, loudly encourages her own daughter,
Matilda, to run across the grass. “I would not be so harsh as to prevent your playing
where you please before breakfast,” she crows. “My children shall never suffer such
restriction” (26). I used the word “performance” to suggest not only action but also
display, as the women direct each of these verbal demonstrations of mothering both at
their children and Hester and Margaret Ibbotson, neutral listeners. The Ibbotson sisters
realize on their arrival to Deerbrook that “the domestic dialogues of the Rowland family”
(27) are public spectacles, intended to be overheard and analyzed by the Grey family
across the lawn. Likewise, they observe that Mrs. Grey and her eldest daughter Sophia
structure their domestic space so they sit and work in rooms that “command the house of
Mrs. Rowland” rather than the “dull” drawing room which they complain “looked merely
into the garden” and offered views only of the children at play or at work in their schoolhouse (Martineau 8). Directed outward toward unconnected observers rather than inward toward the needs of their families, Mrs. Grey and Mrs. Rowland’s version of domestic motherhood turns the intimate sanctum of the family home into a spectacle for the benefit (or, more precisely, the detriment) of others. They devote more attention in their role as schoolroom monitors to ensuring that their children “have an exactly equal portion of the good things” (105) like pastries and fruits than to overseeing their lessons. Valued by their mothers for their roles in these games of public parenting, the Grey and Rowland children are loved for their utility rather than their innate qualities or characters.

Martineau implies that domestic competition is an inherent aspect of provincial village life, particularly in a town structured around commercial competition. Mrs. Grey and Mrs. Rowland can’t hope to provide a respite for their families from the commercial values of antagonism, domination, and winner-takes-all gamesmanship that typify the harsh early Victorian economic landscape; more troubling, their version of bourgeois provincial domesticity manifests all the shortcomings of their husbands’ commercial partnership in form a more injurious to their community. When Edward Hope, the doctor hero at the center of the text, is threatened by an angry mob of poorly informed laborers who suspect him of grave robbing, none of the village’s prominent community members support him, as he hopes. Both Mr. Grey and Mr. Rowland are “detained at home by the emotions of their families,” the “palpitations,” “tremors,” “sobs and tears” (Martineau 369) of perfectly safe women whose selfish anxiety over phantom threats prevents their husbands from extended real aid to another family facing actual peril. As a result, Hope’s
ground-floor surgery is destroyed, his garden ripped up, the windows of the Hope residence broken, and greater damage threatened before the mob recedes.81

With their publically aligned performance of domesticity, the Deerbrook mothers’ experimentation with matchmaking should come as no surprise; given their competitive acquisitiveness, their poor results should be equally expected. Both women claim a motherly interest in the marital destinies of their young relatives as their justification for meddling, relying on the assumption of irreproachable kindness that the domestic ideal ascribes to motherliness. But the same competition that drives their feud throughout the novel plays a part in this enterprise as well, as each considers victory over the other mother’s matchmaking ambitions satisfaction for her efforts. They are not equally blameless in the narrator’s relation: Mrs. Grey’s marital schemes are more ill-judged than ill-intentioned, the product of kindly if imprudent impulses, while Mrs. Rowland relies on her position of respect in the community to maliciously blight a blossoming courtship. Despite the different moral tenor of their actions, however, both women spread confusion, misunderstandings, and a great deal of suffering through their matchmaking, and the maternal emotion that inspires them both does nothing to mitigate the destruction they cause. Mrs. Grey’s matchmaking impulses arise out of and exist alongside her fulfillment of her maternal role, yet they have a pernicious influence on the lives she tries to mold. First, she determines that her distant relation, Hester Ibbotson, and the local

81 Reprehensible as Martineau’s narrator clearly finds the ladies Grey and Rowland, they are the novel’s norm rather than exception. While more thoughtful and morally superior to the other mothers, Hester Ibbotson Hope also views her domestic relations in terms of competition, vying for the not only the primary, but the exclusive place in her sister Margaret’s and husband Edward’s affections—and continually creating family discord as a result. Even her infant son becomes a rival when shortly after his birth she complains that Margaret “has not a thought to spare for any of us while she has the baby in her arms. The little fellow has cut us all out” (Martineau 498).
doctor, Edward Hope, should marry based on nothing but her own desires: “I love this
girl as a daughter” (Martineau 135), she says of the orphaned Hester, while Hope “was as
dear to her as if he had been her own son” (Martineau 134). She not only decides to make
a match between, these two attractive, respectable young people toward whom she bears
such maternal concern, however; she determines that by virtue of their joint connection to
her, they must be in love with one another: “She was more fond and proud of Hester
every day, and more impatient that she should be happy the more she watched her” (133).
Believing that her desires must find a direct correlative in reality, Mrs. Grey “[comes] to
the resolution at last of making the young people happy a little sooner than they could
have managed the affair themselves. She would help them to an understanding, but it
should be with all possible delicacy and regard to their feelings” (133). General affection
for Hester and Hope certainly motivates Mrs. Grey’s impulse, but the suggestion of the
woman’s pride and self-satisfaction in Martineau’s free indirect style is equally potent. In
bringing together Hester and Hope, Mrs. Grey revels in her ability to discern the secrets
of the human heart and manage the careful business of a proposal in a way that
showcases her feminine “delicacy.”

As could be expected, Mrs. Grey’s maternal observations fall far short of the
domestic ideal. “Few match-makers go to work so innocently and securely as Mrs. Grey,”
the narrator asserts, “for few can be so certain of the inclinations of the parties as she
believed herself” (Martineau 134). Yet her certainty is misplaced: Hope has loved
Margaret, not Hester, since meeting both sisters; Mrs. Grey has constructed a courtship
between Hester and Hope out of whole cloth. Hope disabuses her of her misconceptions
as soon as she reveals them to him, but at that point matters have progressed too far for a
reversal. Mrs. Grey already “[sees] the young people, with her mind’s eye, settled in the corner house which belonged to Mr. Rowland” (139), imaginatively replacing her despised village rival with a family unit entirely of her own making. She has already stoked Hester’s affection for Hope and prepared her to expect a proposal from him. Playing on Hope’s sense of duty to the innocent (motherless) girl, Mrs. Grey convinces him to offer marriage to Hester. She emerges from their conversation more pleased with her powers of judgment than ever, “delighted that she had spoken” and certain “that Hope would discover… that he had loved Hester all this time without having been conscious what the attraction had really been; and in a little while he would be thankful to her for having smoothed the way for him” (139). Meanwhile, the narrator baldly punctuates her continuing delusions. Hope’s proposal to Hester is, the narrator reveals, “the great mistake of his life” (139). Mrs. Grey blunders through the very benevolence of her affection for the couple and her belief in the innate social instinct of the ever-watchful mother. In its portrait of her, Deerbrook expands on the uneasiness over maternal power that Ellis’s vision of the all-knowing, all-capable, all-caring mother produces.

Mrs. Rowland makes matches in a more blatant bid for village esteem and control than Mrs. Grey does, though the difference in the women’s behavior is in degree rather than kind. Possessed of a young, handsome, personable brother in Philip Enderby, she is keen to get the best value possible for this desirable commodity on the marriage market. When she suspects that Philip inclines toward Margaret Ibbotson, Hester’s sister and another Grey family protégé, she immediately moves to disrupt the match. Mrs. Rowland’s methods are unsubtle. “I mean that it shall be true,” she warns her brother when he asserts his own will. “You will marry no one but Mary Bruce at last, you will
see, whatever you may think now” (377). Incapable of issuing outright fiats to her adult brother, Mrs. Rowland resorts to underhanded strategies to influence his choice, which her status as respectable mother and wife to a prominent man facilitates. She publically denies the rumors of a love match blossoming between Philip and his choice of bride, Margaret Ibbotson. With Philip in London preparing for his legal career and unable to directly confirm or deny the rumors of his engagement, Mrs. Rowland’s position as his sister and as a long-standing member of the Deerbrook community gives her disavowals greater weight than newcomer Margaret’s truthful statements about her impending engagement.

Later, Mrs. Rowland carries her mission to match Philip to anyone but one of the Ibbotson sisters to an antisocial extreme—from passively denying their connection to overtly sowing mistrust between the lovers. First poisoning her brother’s perception of his relationship with half-truths and outright fabrications, Mrs. Rowland eventually stoops to tamper with Philip’s correspondence, secretly burning a letter to him from Margaret that explains away the doubts his sister has fostered. The scene in which Mrs. Rowland burns this letter reads as a mini-disquisition elaborating the conflict between her roles as mother and matchmaker, revealing the ways in which her destruction of Philip and Margaret’s engagement complements (and fosters) the abdication of her maternal duties:

While the baby, crawled and gazed quietly and contentedly there, Mrs. Rowland broke the seal of Margaret’s letter, turning her eyes from the writing, laid the blistered sheet in the hearth, and set fire to it. The child set up a loud cowl of delight at the flame. At that moment, even this
simple and familiar sound startled its mother out of all power of self-control. She snatched up the child with a vehemence which frightened it into a shrill cry. She feared the nursemaid would come before all the sparks were out; and she tried to quiet the baby by dancing it before the mirror over the mantelpiece. She met her own face there, white as ashes; and the child saw nothing that could amuse it, while its eyes were blinded by tears. (Martineau 476)

The baby’s innocent cry of joy acts as a rebuke and a judgment to the guilty Mrs. Rowland, as a warning that presages discovery of her crime, and as evidence of the maternal responsibility to model moral behavior that she neglects through her intrusion into Philip’s marriage arrangements. As a result she further mistreats the baby, demonstrating none of the soothing indulgence she takes pains to display before an audience. Her performance as a mother evidences the same manipulations and deceptions as her attempts at matchmaking, with selfishness and hidden malice so often at their root of each.  

_Deerbrook_ also puts forward morally worthy feminine foils for its troubling matchmaking mothers, but they are quite pointedly single women. Margaret Ibbotson is generous in her affections and reasonable in her expectations. Her conduct is rational and unselfish, considerate of the needs of others but also aware of her own claims and desires. Though engaged at the end of the novel, she is never a mother or a wife during the course of the narrative. More pointedly, the Grey and Rowland children’s even more  

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82 Eventually Mrs. Rowland’s antisocial maternity (and vindictive matchmaking) double back to literally destroy her own children when her eldest daughter dies of a treatable fever for which she receives inadequate care thanks to her mother’s embrace of the village feud.
praiseworthy and self-sacrificing schoolteacher, Maria Young, will never be a wife or mother—impoverished by her father’s death and maimed in a horrible carriage accident, she stands self-consciously outside the courtship rituals of the other young members of the village. As an unmarried woman, as a non-mother, she believes herself singularly charged to provide the only possible correction to the faults that her pupils’ parents instill in them. “The most that can be done with her,” she says of the “disagreeable” Matilda Rowland, “is to leave her only a poor creature—to strip her of the conceit and malice with which her mother would overlay her feeble intellect. This sounds deplorably enough; but, as parents will not speak the plain truth to themselves about their charge, governesses must” (297). Motherhood, in Maria’s telling, is an inherently self-deluding state and rarely the impetus for positive child development. “Governesses to children at home can do little more than stand between children and the faults of the people about them,” is Maria’s final comment on the place of mothers in education.

In contrast to the partisan, self-deluded, competitive matchmakers of Deerbrook—who treat courtship, marriage, and motherhood as strategic fronts in an ongoing war—Maria and Margaret represent female intellect and companionship as well as the privacy and sacredness of the marriage bond. Sharon Marcus has noted Maria’s centrality in bringing together the novel’s culminating marriage between Margaret and Philip Enderby: intimate with each, she stands as the bridge that allows them to find one another and that solidifies their bond through their shared concern for her well-being. Maria also provides the most passionate defense of romantic marriage and repudiation of strategic or commercially minded marriage in the text:
It is not marriage,—wonderful, holy, mysterious marriage,—that their minds are full of, but connexion with somebody or something which will give them money, and ease, and station, and independence of their parents. This has nothing to do with love. I was speaking of love,—the grand influence of a woman’s life; but whose name is a mere empty sound to her till it becomes, suddenly, secretly, a voice which shares her being to the very centre—more awful, more tremendous, than the crack of doom” (Martineau 187)

Much of Maria’s descriptive phraseology—“mysterious,” “secretly”—reinforces the private inscrutability of the affections that undergird a true love match. Indeed, in her analysis, marriage is not only a private religious pact between two freely affiliated people; it also mandates “the agony of a chance in existence which must be wrought without any eye perceiving it (187). Psychically revolutionary and yet entirely concealed, romantic marriage counters the “connexions” that maintain ease, shore up station, and accumulate riches. With no patience for the values of the marketplace, Maria dismisses a publically aligned marital philosophy in order to privilege the inner revolutions of the romantically matched heart.

Like Smythies, then, Martineau joins the currency of gossip to the commercial hazards of the market, through both Maria’s disquisition on the sacredness of the private bond and through her matchmaking mothers’ unholy union of publically situated domesticity and financial speculation. Mrs. Grey and Rowland depend on the networks of gossip and rumor to fuel their schemes. Before Mrs. Grey concocts her plan to marry Hope to Hester, the villagers have already invested their time and attention in predicting
the young people’s romantic futures. “Everyone wishes to see Mr. Hope married,” the Maria informs Hester and Margaret on their arrival to the village. “[E]very one, even to the servants here, who are always disputing whether he will not have Miss Sophia, or whether Miss Sophia is to make a grander match” (Martineau 47). The Ibbotson sisters are not spared this social inquiry themselves; as interesting newcomers to town they also provoke the villagers to “speculating” about their futures (49). The culture of village gossip likely encourages Mrs. Grey’s insertion of herself as matchmaker into Hester and Hope’s futures; it also provides the means by which she coerces him into proposing to the sister she prefers for him. “There is not a soul in the place that does not think as I do,” she warns him when he reveals shock that his name and Hester’s should be linked. “There is not a soul that will not say—“ (Martineau 136). The power of communal authority compels Hope to marry against his inclinations, for fear of exposing Hester to the village’s scorn and pity. When, on investigation, he confirms Mrs. Grey’s predictions of the village’s conclusions about his romantic interest, he allows this knowledge to sway his judgment. “It seems as if every one else would be made happy by this affair,” he reflects. “It must have been my own doing; there must have been that in my manner and conduct which authorized all this expectation and satisfaction” (145). His bride selected for him by an intrusive matchmaker, Hope functions as a village spectacle on his wedding day, paraded down the street to church for the enjoyment of local “gazers” (175). “No wedding was ever kept a secret in Deerbrook;” the narrator explains, “and Mr. Hope’s was the one in which concealment was least of all possible” (Martineau 175). Public anticipation, conversation, and expectation replace private hopes, desires, and beliefs in the marriage of Hope and Hester.
Imaginative speculation, then, stands as an ordinary and widespread activity that is also a treacherous act of mothering. Maria Young, always Martineau’s exemplar of sense, points to an explanation for the particular evil inherent in Mrs. Grey’s speculation when she ruminates on her own taste for observation in words that seem to align her with the dangerous speculation of characters like Mrs. Grey and Mrs. Rowland. “How I love to overlook people,” she confesses privately, “to watch them acting unconsciously, and speculate for them! It is the most tempting thing in the world to contrast the little affairs one sees them busy about, with the very serious ones which await them,—which await every one.” And yet, a few lines later, Maria reveals the difference in situation that permits her the imaginative freedom that is so worrisome in other minds: “these great affairs of life lie distinctly under the eye of such as are themselves cut off from them. I am out of the game, and why should I not look upon its chances? I am quite alone; and why should I not watch for others?” (46). While *The Women of England* and *The Mothers of England* encourage mothers to make careful observation a hallmark of their maternal practice, Martineau (like Smythies) suggests through her watching, witnessing, speculating matchmakers that the ostensible power of the mother’s domestic role renders such interpretation of others’ thoughts a trespass. Maria, unconnected with the family life and domestic arrangements, has no platform from which to turn speculation into imposition. Mothers, however, like potential courting couples, are never fully “out of the game” and thus must preserve an aura of disinterestedness in order to mitigate the unseemliness of her speculative calculations. In turning private thoughts to public advantage in the form of coerced marriage, matchmaking mothers professionalize their
maternal observation, fatally engaging in the risk, reward, and rumor that typify early Victorian financial markets.

Early in Mrs. Grey’s matchmaking campaign, her husband cautions her against it in financial terms. “Be careful, my dear,” he urges. “Let no one of these young people get a glimpse of your speculation. Think of the consequence to them and to yourself” (Martineau 19). Since the recurrent stock bubbles and collapses of the 18th-century, “speculation” had been a cultural bugbear in English literature—characters who engage in risky investments in the hopes of striking it rich rarely prosper for long. Fortunes made with so little effort outside the initial outlay of money seemed to rely on an immoral ease, and countless novels and treatises belabor the parallels between high-stakes gambling and stock-jobbing or speculative investment83. Mr. Grey’s warning to his wife to refrain from speculation aligns her with this tradition of phantasmagorical wealth and its sudden vanishing. By letting the Ibbotson girls and Mr. Hope into the secret of her speculations about them, Mrs. Grey threatens to fundamentally warp the natural innocence of their interactions in just the way that financial speculation warps the natural connection of industry to wealth. Later, Martineau reiterates the term, writing of the townspeople’s “speculating” (52) about Hope’s feelings toward the Ibbotson girls, reinforcing the association of the financial market’s frightening ability to upend seemingly straightforward monetary relationships and the matchmaker’s similar influence on the

83 For example, John Egmont laments widespread “stockjobbing” as “fatal to our credit and commerce” (vii-viii) in 1763: “The success that has attended many in this kind of business, and the fortunes that have been raised by some, who had no other stock to trade on originally, than impudence, and good intelligence, has induced many, even of very considerable property and high station, to engage deeply in this traffick; and the contagion seems to have spread so universally of late, that it certainly requires some more effectual remedy to stop it than has yet been applied” (23-24). For more on eighteenth-century panics over stock speculation see De Bolla, Hoppit, Pocock, and Thompson.
natural courtship processes of her community. Finally, Martineau provides both her strongest condemnation of the matchmaking impulse and the tightest correlation of speculation to matchmaking through Mrs. Rowland’s always-questionable familial interactions. “Now, no more, sister!” her brother Philip begs after he is subjected to yet another bout of her self-serving attempts to mandate his romantic affairs in the guise of sisterly affection. “I cannot stand to hear the young ladies of my acquaintance catalogued as speculation for my advantage” (84). With implications of shop keeping or bookkeeping in the “catalogue” of prospective brides presented to Philip and Mrs. Rowland’s mercenary motivations conveyed through the reference to “advantage”, Philip’s expostulation ties together the risk and unwarranted reward of speculative investment and the crass accounting of small-business ownership into the vulgar business of matchmaking, as practiced by his sister.

The matchmaking mother’s insupportable fusion of public speculation and private emotion offers women writers of the early Victorian era an imprimatur of ideological purity even as it implicates them in a more crassly commercial system than they might wish to claim as their own. For despite the useful dodge matchmaking mammas continue to provide—absorbing the accusations of relational utilitarianism and worldly greed that might otherwise adhere to the courtship plot’s frequently hard-up heroines who frequently marry into security and comfort, if not outright luxury—they also maintain the habitual association between female authorship and female matchmaking that persists throughout this study. Readers of Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1815) including Tony Tanner, Nancy Armstrong, and D. A. Miller have long acknowledged the shared valences of the matchmaker’s art and the novelist’s craft. The repeated association of matchmaking with
“speculation” in *Deerbrook* and *The Matchmaker* points toward the courtship plot’s sly integration of moral, marital, and economic value as well as toward habitual practice of writers of imaginative texts. “Speculation,” for all its potent economic implications, suggests other readings. The term encompasses imagination, prediction, and observation of the lives of others and an awareness of the marital and psychological possibilities arising out of the meetings and partings of every-day life. Its use in these novels also raises questions about the imagination and its relation to romantic reality as relates to both motherhood and matchmaking. Both Mrs. Grey and Mrs. Lindsay mentally construct romantic pairings that they then work to manifest in the actual world. Both indulge in daydreams and fantasies about their protégés’ futures that propel them forward in their matchmaking schemes. In *Deerbrook*, this kind of fantasizing born of observation suffuses the society. From the hypothetical stagecoach travelers who pass Mr. Grey’s lovely house three times a week and “speculate” on what it would be like to live there (7), to the “natural” notion that newly acquainted young people will fall in love that “occur[s] to all the minds present” at the meeting (Martineau 18), everyone in the village, male and female, young and old, treats the thoughts, feelings, and futures of others as fodder for entertaining mental experiments. Only Mrs. Grey’s speculations transgress the boundary between harmless rumination and harmful action: “Mrs. Grey was the only one who fixed the idea” of a match between Hope and one of the Ibbotson sisters “in her own mind and another’s by speaking of it” (Martineau 18). Rather than waiting for the performative speech act of the marriage ceremony to solidify the match she envisions, Mrs. Grey ushers it into being through her own speech, by articulating her idle thoughts to her husband in a way that reaffirms their importance in her own mind.
In *Deerbrook* Mrs. Grey’s flaws as a mother, a neighbor, and a matchmaker receive their due dismissal by the narrator as the story progresses. And yet, her act of marriage brokering, her bringing together of Hester and Hope, which is pilloried as the product of her self-satisfaction in her own blind judgment, works out pretty well for everyone involved. The orphaned Ibbotson sisters were confronting a bleak future of genteel poverty in Birmingham. Thanks to Hester’s marriage to Hope, they instead remain in pretty, pastoral Deerbrook, residing in the attractive and comfortable corner house, the very house where Mrs. Grey had imagined them dwelling as she spun her matchmaking schemes. Though Martineau elides the significance of Hester and Margaret’s looming penury, revealing the details of their financial straits through a minor character’s narrated dialogue only after Hester’s engagement is finalized, the horrors of their situation would be vividly apparent to readers in the late ‘30s. In *The Women of England*, Ellis dwells on the “frequent occurrences” (206) of sudden financial ruin in English families, vividly illustrating the Ibbotson sisters’ plight in her lament:

> [T]here is no class of beings whose circumstances altogether are more calculated to call forth our tenderest sympathies, than those delicate females whose fireside comforts are broken up by the adverse turn of their pecuniary affairs, and who are consequently sent forth to share the lot of families unknown to them, and to throw themselves upon the kindness and consideration of strangers. (Ellis, *Women* 205)

Hope—and Martineau’s narrator—may bemoan his proposal to Hester as “wrong,” the product of “warped” judgment and “sophisticated” feelings (Martineau 139), but it is
difficult to believe that the engagement’s timing would strike many readers as 
unfortunate, given its providential effect on the sisters’ threatened adversity.

Further, after a difficult year of struggle and toil, both emotional and financial, 
Hope finally transfers his affections to his wife, Hester, from his sister-in-law, Margaret. 
He concludes the novel happily witnessing Margaret become engaged to another man and 
in fact doing all he can to ease that engagement. Martineau emphasizes her hero’s 
avowedly Christian virtues of forbearance and acceptance as the prompt for this 
appropriate romantic transition, celebrating that “he had risen, by dint of a religious 
discharge of duty towards her, from self-reproach and mere compassion, to patience, to 
hope, to interest, to admiration, to love—love at last worthy of hers—love which satisfied 
even Hester’s imperious affection and set even her over-busy mind and heart at rest” 
(597). Hester and Hope’s willingness to muddle cheerfully through difficult times and 
willingly shoulder their domestic burdens earns them their rewards: they make their home 
the restorative space necessary to each and their union the private contentment of hearts 
freely and equally exchanged. But without Mrs. Grey’s initiatory meddling, the Ibbotson 
sisters would have returned to Birmingham as paupers and Hope would have lacked the 
wife whom he allegedly finds essential to his happiness.

Martineau extends a generous sympathy to her characters—even the benighted 
Mrs. Rowland—that presages George Eliot’s experiments with the novel later in the 
century\(^{84}\), but doesn’t approximate the polarized approach to matchmaking maternity of

\(^{84}\) Valerie Sanders claims that *Deerbrook* established three central plots that would “reappear[], with variations, in the fully developed Victorian novel”: the plots of two 
sisters, the governess, and the country doctor, combined in a realistic domestic narrative. 
“Harriet Martineau was by no means the first author to use these plots, but she was the 
first Victorian to give them the prominence they later gained from treatment by her
the silver fork novelists like Smythies or the courtship plot story writers for the periodical press. While Martineau appears to accept some of the closeness of method and motive between her matchmaking mothers and her own identity as the professional woman writer who author them, other early Victorian writers of matchmaking plots more pointedly reject the matchmaking mamma’s influence through their reliance on male matchmakers and male author-types intended to shield women writers from implication in the financial games of the matchmaking mother. In Deerbrook, Martineau resists this turn. No male matchmaking savior arrives in town to straighten out the untidy knots tied by the warring mothers’ feud. While the commercially successful Mr. Grey does smooth his daughter Sophia’s engagement to Mr. Walcot, another doctor in the community, by arranging his employment and procuring his home, neither of Sophia’s parents directly oversees the courtship. Mr. Grey’s involvement in his daughter’s courtship extends his business acumen as a dealer in the “coal, corn, and timber business” (Martineau 8) into the emotional realm, but his unwillingness to dictate Sophia’s romantic desires wards against the accusation of his brokering the match: as long as the initial move in the courtship dance belongs to the future husband or wife, nearly all of the subsequent machinations can proceed from their parents’ influence. Yet though she partially

85 The 1843 Punch series “The History of Courtship” satirizes this sort of masculine management of marriage with a description of the “purely city match” in which the “fathers are the match-makers, and the courtship is carried on by means of bankers cheques and ledgers…so that business connexions may be joined as well as the young people” (Willis 26). Though they reduce the prospective marriage to a bald monetary calculation, these matchmaking moneymen do not challenge or threaten the gender norms that prop up that vision of domestic life. These men simply act in concert with their class
redeems her erring mothers at novel’s end by the happy turn the miserable Hope marriage takes, Martineau does not overtly claim Mrs. Grey as a member of her writing sorority. She resists acknowledging her and her matchmaker’s fellowship as co-adjudicators of the Hope courtship, in all its torments and pleasures.

Indeed, the governess Maria Young makes a more appropriate substitute for the matchmaking-author in Martineau’s system. As a single woman, a keen-eyed observer, an unjaundiced educator, a passionate reader, and a philosophical contemplative, she more aptly reflects Martineau’s own multilayered identity as writing woman, invested in certain elements of the domestic ideal but also determined to claim the mantle of uncompromising intellectual inquiry for herself as a woman. Maria’s identity seems confirmed by her constant efforts to unite Margaret and Philip Enderby, subsuming her own hopeless love for the man in the joy of bringing them together, and by the position Martineau grants the governess in the romance plot at its conclusion. As the glowing lamp from her window illuminates her friends’ evening walk, Margaret and Philip confirm their indebtedness to her intercession in their relationship by “talking of Maria” as they “let the twilight go” (Martineau 600). Sharon Marcus writes persuasively of friendship and the “plot of female amity” in Deerbrook, emphasizing Martineau’s deft intertwining of the women’s friendship and the couple’s courtship. Set forth as a counterweight to the necessary, influential, yet frightening vision of female authorship provided by Mrs. Grey, Maria Young suggests that only by separating herself from

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and professional habits—behavior that may be laughable, but also natural in light of their commercial ventures.

86 “The novel’s final tableau allegorizes the social links that the plot of female amity forges between marriage and female friendships,” Marcus writes, “which appear as closely connected as adjacent moments, cottage and shrubbery, or a light source and the object it illuminates” (85).
domestic responsibilities and affiliations can a writing woman claim an admirable professional identity for herself. Easley notes the resonances between Maria’s emotional distance from the family relationships in Deerbrook and Martineau’s belief that “the woman writer must cultivate a sense of personal distance from her subject matter lest she be accused of writing for reasons of egotism or vanity” (36). Despite this delicately negotiated presentation of a writing woman’s identity—feminine yet non-domestic, distanced yet sympathetic—Martineau’s matchmaking mothers, for all their episodes of remorse, affection, or enlightenment, traffic in the same conventions of the matchmaking mamma that define the misogynistic representations of writing women in the periodical press. Maria’s very separation from the women who employ her, and whose families she judges with such severity, points once again toward discomfort with the union of traditional femininity, authorial creation, and professional reward that the matchmaking mother represents even for a writer as iconoclastic and resistant to categorization as Harriet Martineau.
CHAPTER IV.
Match-Making or Match-Marring?: The Duality of the Trollopian Matchmaker

Anthony Trollope could profitably be called the novelist of matchmaking, so frequently do literary matchmakers recur in his work. His career, of course, is virtually synonymous with the story of young women’s marital choices and challenges. Casting a jaundiced eye over the recently deceased author’s career, Henry James concluded, “His story is always primarily a love story, and a love story constructed on an inveterate system…. We are treated to the innumerable forms in which this predicament may present itself,— and the consequences, sometimes pathetic, sometimes grotesque, which spring from such false situations” (“Anthony Trollope” 242). With less scorn, many contemporary critics have agreed with James’s central point, that Trollope’s novels have a system and that this system is essentially the marriage plot\(^7\). When drafting An Autobiography, years before James’s assessment, Trollope even privately confessed his reliance on marriage as a narrative device. “Miss Mackenzie was written to prove that a novel may be produced without any love” (188), he explains, “but even she was in love before the end of the book, and made a romantic marriage with an old man” (189). This self-aware devotion to (or dependence on) courtship as a narratological tool goes someway to explain the overabundance of matchmakers in Trollope’s oeuvre. Beginning with his first novel, The Macdermots of Ballycloran (1847) and continuing until his last completed book, An Old Man’s Love (1884), Trollope spent four decades conscripting an unparalleled variety of characters into the role of romantic mediators: both men and

\[^7\text{For example, Sharon Marcus describes him as “one of Victorian literature’s most assiduous and complacent manufacturers of marriage plots” (227) and Elsie Michie notes the “almost mathematical sense” with which he approaches “the permutations and combinations of the marriage plot” (109).}\]
women (though more frequently the latter); familial and unrelated; kindhearted and mercenary; prudent and foolish; helpful and harmful; effective and incompetent.

Synchronous with their systematic application of the marriage plot to structure, intensify, and resolve the demands of narrative, however, Trollope’s novels also advocate a conventional nineteenth-century vision of romantic marriage and English courtship that prizes personal liking over social esteem and passionate devotion over practical concerns. Characters who break youthful engagements to marry for wealth (like Julia Brabazon of *The Claverings*) suffer from the experience; characters who advocate for worldly “prudence” over romantic attachment (like the Greystock family in *The Eustace Diamonds*) find their moral equations proved wrong by the novel’s end. In his autobiographical writings, Trollope demonstrates his adherence in both practice and principle to the romantic ideal of Victorian marriage. Recalling the financially inauspicious origins of his own marriage, he reflects, “Many people would say we were two fools to encounter such poverty together. I can only reply that since that day I have never been without money in my pocket, and that I soon acquired the means of paying what I owed” (*Autobiography* 71). This lived experience confirms Trollope’s general belief in the superiority of English courtship customs and their emphasized ideals of romantic affection, intimacy, and free choice. Sounding like one of our introductory travel writers, Trollope insists:

There are countries in which it has been in accordance with the manners of the upper classes that the girl should be brought to marry the man almost out of the nursery—or rather perhaps out of the convent—without having enjoyed the freedom of thought which the reading of novels and of poetry
will certainly produce; but I do not know that the marriages so made have been thought to be happier than our own. (Trollope, *Autobiography* 226)

As is so common in the nineteenth century, proper English marriage for Trollope is an expression of free personal agency undertaken by an informed mind and heart, cultivated, at least in part, by the kinds of novels he writes.

Trollope’s simultaneous reliance on matchmaking characters for his plots and adherence to a Victorian marital ideal that disavowed their usefulness or appropriateness could suggest the kind of “paradox” Margaret Markwick identifies in his novels, “that while his story line supports convention, and his authorial intervention reflects the mood and interests of the age, a subversive underlying message declares ‘but this is what life is really like’” (*Trollope and Women* 51). Rather than diagnose incongruities in Trollope’s treatment of independence and interference in courtship, however, I wish instead to focus my attention on the possibilities allowed by the manipulation of fictional matchmakers to Trollope’s career-long experimentation with the marriage plot. Caroline Levine’s term affordance, which she draws from design theory, provides a helpful lens through which to examine Trollope’s engagement with matchmaking in his fiction. “Affordance,” she explains, “is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs” (6). In applying the idea of affordance to literary critique, Levine contends that “Rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms do, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements” (6-7). Matchmakers make transparent the structural configurations of the marriage plot; therefore, a sustained exploration of the possibilities and the parameters of fictional courtship would seem to demand a concurrent exploration of the matchmaker’s
position within that plot. Further, different kinds of courtship plots require different kinds of matchmakers: *Romeo and Juliet* relies on both oppressive parental matchmakers insisting upon an undesirable match and misguided but helpful facilitators of the central union; *Much Ado About Nothing* depends on clever and clear-sighted matchmakers who understand Beatrice and Benedict better than they know themselves. Similarly, in Trollope’s work, his overt fascination with the narrative nuts and bolts of courtship plotting compels a corresponding investment in probing the affordances of a dizzying variety of matchmakers.

“Was she match-making or match-marring?” (27) Mrs. Woodward asks herself in *The Three Clerks* (1858). The line between the two—between the helpful encouragement of a desired match and harmful discouragement of true love or insistence on an undesirable match—is a question to which Trollope recurs, testing his matches against his matchmakers. References to “matches” either arranged, planned, or broken by intermediaries crop up in cursory and conversational ways in *Dr. Thorne* (1858), *The Small House at Allington* (1864), *Miss Mackenzie* (1865), *The Belton Estate* (1865), *Phineas Finn* (1869), *The Way We Live Now* (1875), *The Duke’s Children* (1879), and *Mr. Scarborough’s Family* (1883). Trollope devotes more sustained attention to the affordances of matchmaking—offering intricate portraits of the variable position of matchmakers in courtship—in several other works, including *The Three Clerks*, *Barchester Towers* (1857), *The Claverings* (1867), *Can You Forgive Her?* (1865), *The Eustace Diamonds* (1873), and *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870). Each of these portraits shines a different cast of light on the matchmaker figure, and sometimes on several matchmakers within a single text. *The Claverings*, for example, showcases Lady
Clavering, a familiar familial matchmaker (a sister rather than a mother) plotting for her relative’s worldly advancement, but presents this character against the backdrop of a fraught marriage in which Lady Clavering operates on the sufferance of her authoritarian husband. Matchmaking appears in *Can You Forgive Her?* as a correlative to the political persuasion and horse-trading indulged in by so many of the male characters, a connection underscored by the name Trollope gives to Plantagenet Palliser’s estate, Matching Priory. Whether in the form of gentle advice, concerted bullying, or familial coercion, matchmaking represents the atmosphere of manipulation in which Alice Vavasor and Glencora Palliser try to build lives for themselves as devoted wives to political husbands without sacrificing their investment in personal independence. In *The Eustace Diamonds*, Trollope plumbs a less ethical form of matchmaking, depicting matchmakers as thieves, liars, and abusers through the linked plotlines of Lizzie Eustace’s marital coercion and jewel theft and the macabre horror of Lucinda Roanoke’s match with Sir Griffin, overseen by her grasping aunt Mrs. Carbuncle.

The matchmaker’s supreme flexibility, her ability to perform as villain or hero, as romantic assistant or impediment, proves indispensable to Trollope in his career-wide experiment with the marriage plot. As we have seen consistently throughout this study, one of the matchmaker’s central affordances in nineteenth-century narrative is her aptness as a figure of authorial invention. Unsurprisingly, Trollope engages with the trope of the matchmaker in order to explore his own meta-authorial concerns, as the matchmaker’s pliable nature can encompass the conflicted sense of authorial self represented *An Autobiography*. Recognizing his claims to status inside literary society but also fundamentally an outsider to his social environment, Trollope offers readers a
bifurcated literary identity. He is the son of a popular and profitable author but distanced from London literary society by his profession in the Post Office and location in provincial Ireland; he is the descendant of a prominent family and an Old Boy of several elite public schools but also a poor relation with memories of his dismal scholarship and dispiriting unpopularity; he possess the keen observational talents of a rejected cynic and the fantastical inner life of a romantic daydreamer. He seems compelled by conjoined desires: to entertain and to elevate; to report the world as he observes it and to indulge in imaginative fancy, constructing the elaborate and internally consistent alternate worlds of Barsetshire or Palliser’s Parliament; to insert himself into literary London and make a name that will outlast his own time and to supplement his income and increase his family’s comfort modestly through his authorship. Similarly, in his representation of his professional habits he conceives of himself both as workmanlike—regular, diligent, and thorough—and as inspired or captivated, enraptured by characters who take control of

88 “There can, I imagine, hardly be a more dangerous mental practice [than constant daydreaming]; but I have often doubted whether, had it not been my practice, I should ever have written a novel. I learned in this way to maintain an interest in a fictitious story, to dwell on a work created by my own imagination, and to live in a world altogether outside the world of my own material life.” In after years I have done the same, —with this difference, that I have discarded the hero of my early dreams, and have been able to lay my own identity aside” (Autobiography 43).

89 “I had realised to myself a series of portraits, and had been able so to put them on the canvas that my readers should see that which I meant them to see. There is no gift which an author can have more useful to him than this” (Autobiography 99).

90 “Throughout these stories there has been no name given to a fictitious site which does not represent to me a spot of which I know all the accessories, as though I had lived and wandered there” (Autobiography 154).

91 “To be known as somebody, —to be Anthony Trollope if it be no more, —is to me much” (Autobiography 107).

92 “In the bargains I have made with publishers I have, —not, of course, with their knowledge, but in my own mind, —undertaken to supply them with so many words, and I have never put a book out of hand short of the number by a single word” (Autobiography 119).
their own story as he watches them move through their lives. Both these modes of self-representation, that of minute observer of a world appearing as it is and that of diligent producer of a particular form of literary product, find expression in the matchmaker, who is always both an observer of the social world and the creator of the world she observes.

The matchmaker archetype offers Trollope a compellingly adaptable tool for manipulating his marriage plots while interrogating multiple aspects of his authorial self-conception, the identity he presents in his autobiography as a shifting blend of pragmatism and idealism. The matchmaker’s womanhood is a crucial aspect of Trollope’s relation to the character, particularly as author-figure, in her relation to his first authorial model, his mother, Frances Trollope. An Autobiography reveals a son both awed by his writing mother’s tenacity and talents and ambivalent about, sometimes even resentful of, his indebtedness to her. In describing his mother as author, he emphasizes her remarkable ability to produce pages under extremity: “The doctor’s vials and the ink-bottles held equal place in my mother’s rooms,” he relates of their time in Belgium, early in Frances Trollope’s career. “I have written many novels under many circumstances; but I doubt much whether I could write one when my whole heart was beside the bedside of a

93 “But the novelist has other aims than the elucidation of his plot. He desires to make his readers so intimately acquainted with his characters that the creations of his brain should be to them speaking, moving, living, human creatures. This he can never do unless he know those / fictitious personages himself, and he can never know them well unless he can live with them in the full reality of established intimacy. They must be with him as he lies down to sleep, and as he wakes from his dreams, He must learn to hate them and to love them. He must argue with them, quarrel with them, forgive them, and even submit to them. He must know whether they be cold-blooded or passionate, whether true or false, and how far true, and how far false. The depth and the breadth, and the narrowness and the shallowness of each should be clear to him. And as, here in our outer world, we know that men and women change, --become worse or better as temptation or conscience guide them, —so should these creations of his change, and every change should be noted by him” (Autobiography 233).
dying son. Her power of dividing herself into two parts, and keeping her intellect by itself clear from the troubles of the world, and fit for the duty it had to do, I never saw equaled” (Trollope, *Autobiography* 29). This description of Frances Trollope connects her authorship to her domestic femininity, likening her role as family savior, providing sustenance to her loved ones through her profitable writing, to her role as domestic attendant, offering them comfort through her physical acts of nursing and emotional acts of love. At the same time, Trollope divorces his mother’s intellectual work from her emotional, marveling at her divided self. The lesson he takes from his mother seems to point him both toward a professional practice of literature divided from home concerns and to a fully unified identity as producer of both literary and domestic comfort. To further complicate his position toward female authorship, even while Trollope rhapsodizes over his mother’s industry and her rescue of their family fortunes, he also betrays discomfort with her role as his first patron. His mother may have passed along his first manuscript to her publishers, but by mutual consent she never read it before it appeared in print. “I knew that she did not give me credit for the sort of cleverness necessary for such a work,” is Trollope’s remembrance of his mother’s support of his authorial ambitions (*Autobiography* 74), a favor he returns with his reflection that “she was neither clear-sighted not accurate; and in her attempts to describe morals, manners, and even facts, was unable to avoid the pitfalls of exaggeration” (*Autobiography* 33).

An archetype of female authority, a means for exploring conflicting authorial impulses at play in a single career, and an avatar of the marriage plot itself, the multiple valences in which the female matchmaker operates throughout Trollope’s career justifies her omnipresence in his fiction and the variety of roles she fulfills. While a bird’s-eye
approach to Trollope’s fiction suggests the centrality of the figure to his work and the abundant use to which he put her, each individual novel offers its own distinctly compelling evidence of Trollope’s complex engagement with the figure of the female matchmaker across all of these multiple registers. Any of the aforementioned novels present ample material for interpretation, but for the rest of this chapter I will restrict my reading of the matchmaker in Trollope’s work to two works, *Barchester Towers* and *The Vicar of Bullhampton*. The juxtaposition of these novels gives a sense of the scope of Trollope’s use of the matchmaker within single works and across the entirety of his fiction. *Barchester* is an early text and *Vicar* is a later novel; *Barchester* is a crucial part of Trollope’s first series, the Barsetshire Chronicles, while *Vicar* stands alone; *Barchester* is richly comic, but *Vicar*—if not a tragedy—delves into the darker material of murder trials and prostitution. The novels also feature very different kinds of matchmakers and different manifestations of matchmaking, with a disreputable woman making a successful and redemptive match in *Barchester Towers* and an admirable wife and mother blundering horribly into a failed match in *The Vicar of Bullhampton*. Finally, each novel also presents matchmaking as part of a nexus of socially transformative actions undertaken in a closed community. Thus, the matchmaker represents the constrained authority of the author operating within the hermetic bounds of these novels and the rippling influence of both literary fame and domestic femininity. Reading *Barchester Towers* and *The Vicar of Bullhampton* alongside one another makes plain the intersections of formal experimentation and authorial self-fashioning in Trollope’s work and demonstrates the centrality of the female matchmaker to his development of his roles as social observer and as successful artist.
I. *Barchester Towers: Spinning Courtship*

Madeline Neroni, one of Anthony Trollope’s most fascinating female characters, demands the attention of everyone who comes into her orbit, whether they be readers of *Barchester Towers* (1857) or the besotted gentlemen of the cathedral town who buzz around her. Even her author seems captivated by her, as Trollope finds occasion for a flight of literary fancy in describing the signora’s man-eating proclivities, placing her at the center of a striking metaphor of insect victims and villains. She is, he tells us, “a powerful spider that made wondrous webs, and could in no way live without catching flies,” a kind of black widow entrapping Barchester’s clerical elite for nothing but the “abominable” pleasure of toying with them (242). A hungry female spider, the foolish male flies on which she preys—this all seems obvious enough, if also entertaining. But Trollope does not end his extended arachnidan metaphor so simply. Instead, he brings in a second class of spiders against which to contrast his heroine: “young lady-spiders… whose webs are most frequently of their mother’s weaving” and who “eat [their victims] matrimonially” (242). These competing lady-spiders reveal Madeline Neroni’s alienation from Barchester’s marital economy via contrast: though estranged from her husband, she is still a married woman and cannot engage in the courtship dance as a prospective bride. She’s further barred by disability—strongly suggested, as Kate Lawson notes, to have originated in domestic violence—from even the extramarital exchange of adultery.

In recent years, numerous critics of *Barchester Towers* have demonstrated the centrality of Madeline Neroni’s disability—a shortened leg and injured back—to Trollope’s portrait of her. In many ways, she represents the use of disability as narrative prosthesis as conceptualized by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder in their
groundbreaking studies of the role of disabled characters in literary history. Following their formulations, Madeline’s disability does provide “a distinctive idiosyncrasy…that differentiates the character from the background of the norm” while also serving as “an opportunistic metaphorical device” (47). Accordingly, readers of the novel like Cindy LaCom, Suzanne Rintoul, Julia Miele Rodas, and Kate Lawson have identified the ways in which Madeline’s sexual rapacity and physical disability operate concurrently to suggest metaphors of female power and punishment as well as social contamination, containment, and critique. I acknowledge my debt to these necessary readings of Madeline that grapple with both her undeniable force in the novel and her ultimate departure from it via an examination of her disability. However, guided by Trollope’s telling inclusion of other spiders as Madeline’s foils, I frame my examination around Trollope’s career-long fascination with the matchmaker. Comparing Madeline Neroni to the weaving mother spiders, Trollope emphasizes her dissimilarity from the conventional literary matchmaker, as viewed in the previous chapter. He seems to suggest the Signora disrupts the same rhythms of the courtship plot that the spider mother seeks to uphold. Yet to the great surprise of first-time readers of this novel, Signora Neroni, by the end of *Barchester Towers*, not only assumes the role of the apparently imimical spider mother, but does so with even greater subtlety and skill than the most practiced motherly matchmakers. Befitting the narrative prosthesis others have claimed her to be, Madeline Neroni brings the courtship plot of *Barchester Towers* to its necessary conclusion, uniting the suitably respectable (and suitably romantic) pair of Eleanor Bold and Francis Arabin without sacrificing any of her anarchic vigor or flagrant independence. Trollope places Madeline Neroni—as a matchmaker—in a position of power, not only by linking his
fictional couple-crafting with hers but also by gifting her with the same strategies of self-presentation, revelation, and disguise that he claims in his posture as narrator. Playing with the conventions of matchmaking through an incongruous character like Signora Neroni—one who both mocks and makes marriages, who represents both sexual appeal and sexual violence, and who inhabits a world-view somewhere between chivalric honor and romantic cynicism—allows Trollope to crack open the seemingly straightforward trope of the woman-as-matchmaker and explore the narrative possibilities she contains.

The narrator of *Barchester Towers* archly insists upon the organic inevitability of courtship, celebrating “Young men and girls linking themselves kind with kind, pairing like birds in spring because nature wills it” (339). But the reliance on matchmakers as both characters and narrative tools across Trollope’s oeuvre underscores his awareness of the mediated, constructed status of both courtship and courtship plots. Matchmakers provide Trollope the space to interrogate and integrate the disparate strains that motivate his work: the political or ecclesiastical battles that provide their narrative contexts, the marriage plots that provide their form, and the self-reflectiveness about his authorial identity as a master of plots that infuses their narration. In *Barchester Towers*, Madeline Neroni is no less crucial a textual tool. First, as a structurally significant plot element she performs the necessary narrative work to bring the courtship plot to its predestined conclusion. Beyond the purely plot-based, this narrative work opens the space for Trollope to examine—perhaps even refute—a crucial stock image of Victorian literary femininity, providing a locus around which to pin questions about the stakes and

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94 Deborah Denenholz Morse notes a similar critique of the “effortless fruition of the pastoral” in 1864’s *The Small House at Allington* (Reforming Trollope 23).
standards of the courtship plot. Ultimately and most thrillingly, the unmistakable synchronicity as dual textual spiders of Madeline and her creator Trollope himself points to a figuration of authorship as mediated courtship, connecting in a many-stranded web concerns about women’s writing, middle-class women’s social labor, and his own position of celebrated author.

Significantly, Madeline is not just one in a series of female matchmakers spanning the length of Trollope’s career. She is also one of a series of women attempting to manipulate the marriage plot within Barchester Towers. Much in the way that various ecclesiastical factions compete for authority in the cathedral and the city at large, and much in the way that various suitors vie for Eleanor Bold’s hand (and purse) in marriage, there is also a competition for control of the generic development of the courtship plot of Barchester Towers between three would-be matchmakers. Each of the women presents a different permutation of the literary matchmaker. Charlotte Stanhope (Madeline’s sister) is a classic mercenary matchmaker scheming for her family’s interest, the elderly spinster Miss Thorne is a representative of bygone courting rituals from a feudal, agrarian age, and Signora Neroni is the femme fatale redeemed through altruistic matchmaking. Each of these three characters plays with and against literary expectations for matchmaking women, expectations produced by and productive of the changing role of marital intermediaries in British courtship that unfolded over a century and a half prior to Victoria’s reign.

Historians of marriage agree that by the Victorian period, British marriage custom had become both more legally regulated and more privately conducted than in earlier
centuries. Before the eighteenth-century, “kin, neighbors, and other outsiders, such as judges, priests, or government officials, were usually involved in negotiating a match” (Coontz 7) in ways both informal and highly structured. By the late eighteenth century, however, middle-class writers and social commentators had elevated love to the preeminent justification for marriage decisions, dismissing as inadequately unworldly the social, financial, and familial motivations that had for so long structured courtships. Accordingly, fiction represented the influence of peers on marital choices as evidence of an inappropriately mercenary and inadequately romantic vision of conjugality. In nineteenth-century texts, matchmakers, particularly matchmaking relatives, no longer embody the essential approval of an interested community but rather represent the improper commercialization of courtship.

Charlotte Stanhope inhabits this role of suspect familial matchmaker to perfection. Though Charlotte is a sister rather than a mother, the narrator emphasizes the behaviors that align her with maternal matchmakers: “the influence which she had in her family” and her singular focus on “their worldly well-being” (Barchester 64) instead of their moral or ethical development. Like the matchmaking mamma, Charlotte focuses her power within the family unit and the female social world on mercenary goals. She accommodates the laziness and selfishness of her father, mother, sister, and brother while contriving to maintain the appearance of respectability in the Stanhope household. Above all, she schemes to entrap the young, wealthy widow Eleanor Bold as a wife for her

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impecunious brother Bertie. The narrator ascribes both craft and a sort of malevolence to Charlotte's matchmaking, particularly in the "pretended friendship and warm cordiality" (307) that bring Eleanor into Bertie's orbit. Charlotte relies on the conventions of sociality between women of her class—the signifiers of friendship, the implications of assumed intimacy, the presumption of honest intentions and good will between neighbors and the female family of male colleagues—to make a calculated play for Eleanor's wealth. Trollope treats the moral implications of her guile severely. Even when Charlotte's schemes end in ruin, however, Charlotte remains unabashed. While she calls Bertie to task for his inability to seize upon the opportunities she presented him, Charlotte never questions the rightness of her actions taken, after all, in the service of her family.

The second unsuccessful matchmaker in *Barchester Towers*, the affectionately ridiculed elderly spinster Miss Thorne, represents the obsolete vision of matchmaker as the embodiment of societal investment in marriage decisions. Appropriately, Miss Thorne is enamored above all of her vision of a Saxon past in which rank was accorded by bloodlines, in which the rigidity of social strata seemed to yield deeper community cohesion, and in which marriage was of communal concern, requiring the involvement of matchmakers. The ideals that drive the Victorian vision of romantic marriage—among them powerful desire, monetary disinterestedness, and an elevation of marriage above

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96 In *New Men in Trollope's Novels*, Margaret Markwick identifies Bertie Stanhope as potentially bisexual (98).

97 Elizabeth Langland's *Nobody's Angels* asserts the importance of the social work of middle-class wives to Victorian capitalism and Victorian literature. By "displaying the signs of middle-class status, toward which [the Victorian husband] contributed a disposable income" (Langland 9) Victorian wives achieved "priority" over "the means through which social groups were formed and maintained" (30).
other ties—have no part in her matchmaking schemes, which center wholly on the correspondence of a particular match to her vision of what ought to be communal standards. Thus, when “Miss Thorne Shows Her Talent at Matchmaking” (in the chapter of that name) and brings vicar’s daughter Eleanor Bold and unmarried parson Mr. Arabin together, she does so because of her “opinion that rectors and vicars should all be married” (458) and her belief that a clergyman’s wife must be a specific sort of person to deserve such elevation. Operating on an ideal of hierarchical social arrangements and marriages reflecting and complementing those standards, Miss Thorne places the intended lovers in one another’s orbit, trusting in the objective rightness of the match and refusing to connive like Charlotte Stanhope.

Miss Thorne’s reasoning leads her to the novel’s culminating union too late. Both Eleanor and Arabin have already been primed to express their true feelings by Madeline Neroni’s intercessions. In fact, their passionate (and ostensibly sudden) conclusion to Miss Thorne’s maneuverings strikes her as unseemly, “fire among the tinder” instead of “a middle-aged studious clergyman and a decent matron who might possibly be induced to marry again” (Barchester 460). Though the planned affair concludes with the vicar married and the vicar’s wife a woman well suited for the role, the grand emotions that result in that conclusion “vex” rather than please Miss Thorne (460). The “fire” of romantic desire has no place in the old-fashioned world of marriage-by-hierarchical-fiats for which Miss Thorne yearns. Rejecting the significance of romantic marriage, Miss Thorne cannot occupy the position of narrative agent in the novel. Her after-the-fact

98 In The Vulgar Question of Money, Elsie Michie argues that anxiety over changing forms of capital lies behind the emphasis on non-monetary motives for marriage in Victorian fiction. Ruth Perry likewise offers an illuminating narrative of the rise of conjugality over other kinds of domestic affection in Novel Relations.
approval of the match affirms its accordance to traditional notions of financial and social conjugal suitability while her striking inutility as a driver of plot underscores her alienation from the ideals that should undergird Victorian romantic marriages.

This brings us at last to Signora Neroni, certainly an unprepossessing matchmaker to appear in a Victorian text. A Stanhope by birth, the Signora shares the selfish insularity that typifies her family. Further, her very presence in Barchester testifies to the real dangers of marriage for love: having “married the very worst of those who sought her hand” (65-66), she suffered a crippling injury—possibly at her husband’s instigation—that has returned her to her father’s house. As a separated legal wife, Madeline Neroni is barred from the traditional marital economy. Further, as a physically disabled woman who requires the assistance of numerous attendants even to leave her home, Madeline is also denied the transgression of adulterous romance. In retaliation, she mocks the cherished ideal of love-at-first-sight, staging public spectacles of romantic devotion from the would-be suitors she ridicules: “Such matters were her playthings, her billiard-table, her hounds and hunters, her waltzes and polkas, her picnics and summer-day excursions. She had little else to amuse her, and therefore played at love-making in all its forms” (Barchester 367-368). Madeline turns the central question of the courtship plot—Who will marry whom?—into a trifle that can be picked up or discarded at will for her amusement.

And yet, despite her selfishness and cynicism, Madeline behaves with unaccustomed generosity when she facilitates the union of Arabin and Eleanor. In contrast to Miss Thorne’s matchmaking schemes—in which the unspoken claims of tradition and social respectability must do the work of bringing together Arabin and
Eleanor—the Signora articulates the ideals of romantic marriage that justify the Arabin/Bold match as something more, something better than a calculated arrangement for monetary advantage or an earnest attempt to fulfill their social roles. Madeline Neroni speaks only of love when she makes Arabin’s case to Eleanor:

Do you love him, love him with all your heart and soul, with all the love your bosom can feel? For I can tell you that he loves you, adores you, worships you, thinks of nothing else, is now thinking of you as he attempts to write his sermon for next Sunday’s preaching. What would I not give to be loved in such a way by such a man, that is, if I were an object fit for any man to love! (439)

Madeline emphasizes the singular nature of Arabin’s affection for Eleanor—no other emotional ties compare to it and its power is all-consuming, overriding even his attention to work and religious devotion. Yet at the same time, she draws attention to its conformity to social regulations by acknowledging her own debasement. An unfit “object” for love, Madeline cannot be the subject of a courtship plot in the way that she now encourages Eleanor Bold to be. In referencing her exclusion from any kind of licit romantic connection, Madeline defuses the potentially worrying power of Arabin’s all-consuming passion for Eleanor, rechanneling it into the same communally sanctioned avenues upon which Miss Thorne relies. Madeline truly knows her craft, as this slighting self-reference, seemingly superfluous to the message of true love she imparts, is the crucial element of her speech. “When the signora thus alluded to herself,” the narrator informs us, “the widow’s heart was softened” (Barchester 439). Of all the text’s would-be matchmakers, only Signora Neroni can accord the Victorian ideal of romantic
marriage the full power of its passion while simultaneously delineating its utter respectability through the contrast implicit in her very championing of its propriety.

In orchestrating the conclusion to the novel’s central marriage plot, Madeline Neroni not only guides Eleanor and Arabin toward their generic destinies. She also, through her unwonted communal-mindedness, redeems the selfishness she and the other Stanhopes have displayed throughout the novel. “If ever you are a happy wife in that man’s house,” she reflects before ending her interview with Eleanor, “we shall be far away; but I shall expect you to write me one line to say that you have forgiven the sins of the family” (440). In Madeline’s estimation, Eleanor’s happiness in a domestic space as the appropriately matched wife of a socially indispensible husband cleanses the Stanhopes’ previous impurity. Though far removed from England, returned to the Italy that is synonymous in the novel with decadent amorality, they retain a place in Barchester’s community by virtue of the marriage plot’s appropriate conclusion and her efforts to facilitate it. Madeline’s matchmaking, then, is a recuperative rather than suspect gesture, the proof of improbable generosity persisting despite self-interest. Far from signifying the inevitable financial considerations in even the most disinterested love matches, Madeline’s forays into matchmaking represent an embrace of the Victorian values of generosity, social connection, and sympathetic understanding. The contrast between these different kinds of matchmaking—and the implied vindication of a certain kind of social engagement in contrast to others—follows a similar symbolic model to that proposed by Elsie Michie in *The Vulgar Question of Money*, her reading of the courtship plot and nineteenth-century capitalism. Michie contends that the deployment of a crass heiress figure as an ultimately rejected marital option for the hero allows authors to
position their ultimate love-matches as shielded respites from the financial anxieties that otherwise plague their texts.\textsuperscript{99} Similarly, the unsuccessful matchmakers of \textit{Barchester Towers} absorb the conventional critiques of narcissism, meddlesomeness, and financial acquisitiveness, positioning Madeline Neroni as an exemplar of service to community resisting the factionalism of the rest of the novel.

The spider metaphor through which Trollope characterizes Madeline epitomizes the counterintuitive stance toward matchmaking he adopts in \textit{Barchester Towers}. The narrator declares Signora Neroni a “powerful spider” by virtue of her ability to weave a web of romantic entrapment that no man can resist and contrasts her with the motherly “lady-spiders” who weave matrimonial webs to catch husbands for their daughters. Yet the Signora’s stance of antisocial disconnection from traditional forms of community intercourse available to women—marriage, friendship, and charitable work—turns out to be much more damning than the mother spider’s abundant self-interest. Hobbled by her need to dictate the perspective through which she is viewed—her resolution “to be seen, but only to be seen reclining on a sofa” (\textit{Barchester 67})—Madeline cannot have a moment of honest intimacy with anyone until she puts all her knowledge of the power of tableaux and the artifice of presentation in the service of matchmaking on another’s behalf\textsuperscript{100}.

\textsuperscript{99} Michie argues in \textit{The Vulgar Question of Money} that literary heiresses are “the symbolic lynchpin that makes it possible for the novel to extol, by negation, the values she does not embody” (1-2). In Michie’s reading, nineteenth-century novels quarantine problematically common capitalist behaviors within a single, negative character in order to elevate love over commerce via financially pure marriages.

\textsuperscript{100} This corresponds in some ways to the dynamic Monica Cohen locates in Victorian domestic fiction, in which the heroine’s use of specialized knowledge for the betterment of her family aligns her with an increasingly professionalized culture (Cohen 7).
Matchmaking, as a symbol of generous engagement in a wider community, acquires special significance perhaps only possible in a novel like *Barchester Towers*, which narrates the constitutional divisions that trouble a small, seemingly internally consistent society like a cathedral town. Numerous critics, following the lead of D.A. Miller in his influential *The Novel and the Police*, have noted the fractiousness of the community of clerics that occupies Barchester.\(^{101}\) Trollope convincingly narrates the ways in which the very existence of these social factions, regardless of the causes behind them, determines the personal and career trajectories of Barchester’s inhabitants.\(^{102}\) Alongside the rampant schism dividing the inhabitants of the town, the novel advocates tolerance as its central virtue, tolerance that resides principally in the narrative voice itself. Trollope’s narrator freely acknowledges the faults of the characters he likes and the virtues of those he doesn’t, confirming Miller’s sense that “it would be difficult to identify, much less identify with, the ‘hero’ of *Barchester Towers*, so evenly and dispassionately does the novelist’s shifting attention circulate among all his characters” (133). The narration’s promotion of tolerance as a means of surmounting social division does much to justify Madeline’s success as a matchmaker: unlike her sister Charlotte or Miss Thorne, Madeline demonstrates an ability to cross the party lines that divide the town in order to finalize the match between Eleanor and Arabin. Charlotte’s matchmaking, solely for the benefit of her brother and by extension herself, makes no

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\(^{101}\) Nicholas Dames comments on “the recurrent tendency of even the most minor professional disagreements to immediately ramify into a series of larger scale conflicts, conflicts which can then be re-sorted into a single stable binary of two familiar parties” (265). See also Elsie Michie on “social groups as tribes” (*Money* 120) in Trollope and Lawson on “The language of violence and war” in *Barchester Towers* (54).

\(^{102}\) Nicholas Dames notes, an “individual’s own agency is relatively helpless as compared to the business-as-usual warfare” that structures Barchester’s divisions (265).
effort to bridge the town’s divisions. Miss Thorne shapes her small village of Ullathorne to reflect her interests, dreaming of a homogenous, feudalistic society requiring none of the tolerance for opposing views and methods that a philosophically heterogeneous place like Barchester must depend upon for any sort of harmony. Only Madeline Neroni—congenitally selfish but capable of superseding her own worst nature simply for the unexpected pleasure of doing “a good turn”—reveals the feminine social capacity of matchmaking to elide the segmentation of Barchester’s society. Indeed, in her ability to overcome self-interest and familial social apathy in order to promote the romantic union that symbolizes the restoration of order at the comedy’s end, Madeline embodies the narrative’s trumpeting of tolerance as a force capable of extending across the text (and the geographical community it represents) to bring together adversaries in the same dispassionate embrace.

Of course, there is a darker edge to the practice of toleration by the narrator of *Barchester Towers*. In order for the narrator to demonstrate his supreme tolerance, he must also reveal his awareness of the faults that solicit it. Miller locates in this mode of simultaneously identifying flaws and forgiving them the central dynamic of the novel, “a socializing art of controversy” in which “interrogation of ‘problematic’ behavior” (139) performs the role of policing society and dictating the norms to which individuals must shape themselves. In a similar way, Madeline’s matchmaking—the evidence of her own embrace of community membership over atomized singularity—both demonstrates her ability to transgress the boundaries of the factions that make up Barchester society and reinforces their limits. The Arabin/Eleanor match itself does nothing to disrupt the town’s/novel’s factions, realigning the rebellious Eleanor with her family of origin.
Further, Madeline’s matchmaking is as much a demonstration of her social and sexual power as it is an exercise in altruism. The narrator emphasizes that she “resolves” to make a match, “gifts” Eleanor with her husband, and “chooses” to be unusually generous (Barchester 371). Inherent in this insistence on Madeline’s choice in bringing the marriage about is the alternative possibility that she could equally well have scuttled the match. Much in the way that Madeline arranges herself visually to best effect, in order to better display her beautiful face and conceal the “deformity destroying her figure” (67), Madeline arranges the novel’s central marriage in order to better display her romantic power. Her pursuit of an outcome more beneficial to others than to herself redeems her Stanhope-ness. Yet at the same time, she reinforces her self-importance through the control she wields over Eleanor’s romantic fate. Eleanor will have a husband only because Madeline willingly gave her one.

Madeline’s mastery over her neighbors’ romances (and the great delight this control affords her) ultimately implicates the feminine maneuvering of the courtship plot with the power-broking that is endemic to Barchester’s clerical community. Of all the novel’s characters, however, only Madeline manages to ply the course of the novel’s narrative to her will. Madeline, in turning her skills at social manipulation to Arabin and Eleanor’s benefit, has the powerful effects on the community and the narrative after which the men aspire: control over the text that approximates that of the novelist himself. Given this approximation—given her comprehension of the unspoken rules of social

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103 Rodas draws a similar connection: “By choosing to perform the cripple, Madeline exerts considerable power and influence (she is instrumental, for instance, in bringing together Eleanor and Arabin), at the same time maintaining an astonishing capacity to discompose the likes of Mrs. Proudie and Lady De Courcy, those most seemingly able of women” (372).
conduct in Barchester, her ability to manipulate them to serve her own interests, and her
desire to determine the course of the novel’s courtship plot—it should come as no
surprise that Madeline Neroni is also a writer. Physically isolated, vain, and quixotic,
she is yet the most effective communicator in the novel, able to create scenes, mold
impressions, and attain the results she wants.

Accordingly, Trollope gifts his author-matchmaker with a comprehension of the
negotiations that underpin social groups similar to that of his narratorial persona,
including their shared conception of marriage in terms both combative and romantic.
Though Madeline betrays in her matchmaking interview with Eleanor Bold an investment
in the Victorian notion of the love match, she also separately articulates to her sister a
vision of marriage as a battle between committed opponents:

“You know as well as I do in what way husbands and wives generally live
together; you know how far the warmth of conjugal affection can
withstand the trial of a bad dinner, of a rainy day, or of the least privation
which poverty brings with it; you know what freedom a man claims for
himself, what slavery he would exact from his wife if he could! And you
know also how wives generally obey. Marriage means tyranny on one
side, and deceit on the other. Say that a man is a fool to sacrifice his

104 Sharon Marcus finds Kate Vavasor a similar Trollopian female author figure in Can
You Forgive Her? (253-255). Marcus also emphasizes Kate’s ability to set plot in motion.
105 Trollope writes in An Autobiography of his ambition to “‘hew out some lump of earth’
and make men and women walk upon it just as they do walk here among us” (145). He
gifts Madeline with a similar comprehension of human nature, emphasizing her
instinctive ability to sense romantic desire, psychological weaknesses, and ambitions in
the men and women with whom she interacts.
interests for such a bargain. A woman, too generally, has no other way of living” (*Barchester* 126).

Opponents tethered by necessity, husbands and wives in Madeline’s telling pitch daily battles over the routines of ordinary life, transformed from a conjugal pair to a master and slave\(^{106}\), a tyrant and a deceiver by the ordinary frustrations of household management and even the weather. Though a bitterly, even terrifyingly hyperbolic image of marriage, it finds an echo later in the text in the narrator’s perspective on the dysfunctional Proudie match, which Trollope often describes with mock-epic gravity. “Those who are married will understand very well how the battle was lost and won,” the narrator explains of the many Proudie contests of will over the management of the bishopric (*Barchester* 228). In the narrator’s aside, the comically, exaggeratedly contentious Proudie match stands for all experiences of marriage, past and present, even the reader’s. Madeline Neroni’s conception of marriage as combat enables her to make matches more effectively than any other Barchester dwellers—seeing marriage as battle, she can therefore treat courtship as a competition (like Charlotte), but one with stakes beyond simply the individuals and their pairing (as Miss Thorne recognizes). Like the narrator, Madeline has enough awareness of the power dynamics that dictate behavior in Barchester (and drive the novel’s plot) to manipulate them to her own ends; also like the narrator, she remains constrained by the system of competition and division that shapes the novel. Ultimately, she serves as both foil and complement to the image of the novelist that Trollope’s narrative persona creates.

\(^{106}\) Morse notes a dynamic of coercion and resistance between women and men in *Women in Trollope’s Palliser Novels*. Kathy Psomiades also focuses on the master-slave dynamic of marriage in Trollope in “He Knew He Was Right: The Sensational Tyranny of the Sexual Contract and the Problem of Liberal Politics.”
An indefatigable letter writer, Madeline restricts herself primarily to this genre in the way an author might specialize in melodramas or realist novels. She approaches her genre of the personal letter with a professional spirit:

The ‘Signora’ was not without talent, and not without a certain sort of industry: She was an indomitable letter-writer, and her letters were worth the postage: they were full of wit, mischief, satire, love, latitudinarian philosophy, free religion, and, sometimes, alas! loose ribaldry. The subject, however, depended entirely on the recipient, and she was prepared to correspond with anyone but moral young ladies or stiff old women. She wrote also a kind of poetry, generally in Italian, and short romances, generally in French. (Barchester 68-69)

Like a professional author—like Trollope, for that matter—Madeline aims to give value for money. Her subject matter alters with her audience, and she’s willing to adapt her style within certain limits to entertain, stimulate, and entrance her readers. Madeline’s writing has a distinctly Continental flavor, and not merely due to her facility with Italian and French; her cleverness with words, loose morality, and fondness for romantic subjects call to mind the decadence often ascribed to French literature during the Victorian period. Madeline approximates a professional author, as well, in her

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107 As civil servant in the Post Office, Trollope not only dealt with letters daily as a professional concern but insists he “imbued myself with a thorough love of letters, —I mean the letters which are carried by the post, —and was anxious for their welfare as though they were all my own” (Autobiography 278).
willingness to correspond with nearly anyone who will receive her letters—excepting only the moral young ladies who make a crucial part of Trollope’s chosen audience.

Despite Madeline’s refusal to accommodate maidenly reticence, she shares with Trollope’s narrative persona a certain attentiveness toward herself as writing subject and emphasis on the nature of writing as craft, as belabored rather than immediate expression. Far from a direct conduit of thought or emotion from one person to another, Madeline’s letters perform a version of the self-presentation she masters in person. In much the same way that her considered placement of herself in a room, her body on a couch, or a bracelet on her arm draws spectators’ attention to the display of her finest features, the virtuosic wit, encyclopedic subject-matter, and experimentation with a variety of literary forms in her letters construct an image of the sparkling woman who deigns to offer such entertainment to her correspondents. Her ability to suit her writing to her recipients brings to the fore her letters’ role as literary performance rather than confession or self-revelation.

The Trollopian narrative persona likewise draws his readers’ attention to the artifice of the novel form, its requirements and expectations, and the fact that producing such a text is a particular form of labor. This is accomplished through moments of direct address that attempt to dissolve the barrier between all-knowing author and blindly following reader, moments that transform the novel into something like one of

108 In the preface to *The Vicar of Bullhampton* Trollope declares his intention to “write for the amusement of the young of both sexes” (xxix), particularly “the sweet young hearts” with “delicacy and cleanliness of thought” (xxx).

109 Fittingly, the novel associates the Stanhopes with literary inauthenticity in the form of mimicry and pastiche. In their visits with Eleanor Bold, the family inveigles her into a literary game of “writing stories in rhyme, … turning prose tragedy into comic verse, or comic stories into would-be tragic poetry” (*Barchester* 308).
Madeline’s letters through both their directness and their demonstration of authorial skill. He conveys the glancing assurance that “It is not destined that Eleanor shall marry Mr. Slope or Bertie Stanhope” (*Barchester* 126) at just the moment when those two outcomes appear most frighteningly possible. The formally self-aware acknowledgement that Francis Arabin, on his first appearance in the text, “is worthy of a new volume” (168) arrives just before the conclusion of the first. Subsequent to several dazzling instances of character description in which he sets the residents of Barchester before the reader in all their physical and psychological distinctness, Trollope inserts a self-pitying lament:

> How often does the novelist feel…that he has conceived within his mind and accurately depicted on the tablet of his brain the full character and personage of a man, and that nevertheless, when he flies to pen and ink to perpetuate the portrait, his words forsake, elude, disappoint, and play the deuce with him. (168)

Even in expressions of self-doubt, the narrator directs his reader’s awareness to the author’s “mind” and “pen” and the effort it takes to transcribe with one what he conceives with the other. Each of these narratorial insertions, and others like them, display the author crafting a compelling plot, vivid characters, and a realistically complex community. Authorship, in both Signora Neroni and Anthony Trollope’s hands, is an exercise in self-display as much as an attempt to inform or entertain.

Finally, at the novel’s conclusion Madeline transforms from an embodied person in Barchester into disembodied text, known only through her writing. Despite the

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110 Markwick traces Trollope’s development of this self-displaying narrative persona from his earliest work to his most productive period in the 1860s, charting the “tension between reality and mimetic representation” that Trollope’s “metafiction” allows (*New Men* 63).
significance of Signora Neroni’s body throughout the novel—in its disability and display and in the use she makes of significant glances or gestures and touch in her matchmaking conversations with Arabin and Eleanor—she ends the novel as pure text, a letter, “bright, charming, and witty, as the signora’s letters always were” (Barchester 498), sent to Eleanor from Italy. Once Madeline succeeds as a matchmaker, once she authors the novel’s culminating marriage into being, she joins the narrator in the realm of pure textuality, no longer an insistently physical presence in the community, but rather a characteristic literary voice communicating across time and space.

This is not to say that Madeline Neroni is an uncomplicated proxy for Trollope the author. Madeline’s promiscuous use of language—her dabbling in various forms, copious subject switching, and showy familiarity with French and Italian—point both to her dilettantism as a writer (anathema to a money- and status-minded professional such as Trollope) and to her more worrying essential untrustworthiness. We expect fabulation in fiction, but it is quite another matter in life writing. Madeline Neroni treats her letters primarily as a mode of entertainment (both for herself as producer and her readers as consumers) and only secondarily, if at all, as a conveyance for sincere emotion, the relation of factual news, or an earnest debate of moral questions with interested interlocutors. Her matchmaking visit to Eleanor is an unwonted example of honest-speaking, but even there, in nearly her concluding moment in the text, she withholds from Eleanor her previous manipulation of Arabin’s sexual interest. Their flirtation was a

111 Despite her role as disabled facilitator of a marriage for an able-bodied couple, Signora Neroni resists the parameters of this character type as formulated in Margaret Stoddard Holmes’s Fictions of Affliction (6). Though she insists of her unworthiness as a wife, Madeline seems disinclined toward another marriage. Her use of her body and her writing to influence the community’s courtship practices grants her greater power as a force of narrative than she would have as a potential future wife.
game that Madeline views as “no mortal injury,” but the narrator suggests that, if aware of the truth, Eleanor would not agree (*Barchester* 441).

In contrast, as noted, Trollope insists upon the fairness and trustworthiness of his narrative persona. Amanda Anderson has argued that “In the context of [the] formal economy between narrator and character, honesty emerges as the crux virtue” in Trollope’s work, representing both “individual Virtue” and “a kind of impersonal truth-telling or critique that is aligned with …the evaluative diagnoses of the narrative” (512). Anderson reads Trollope’s honesty as both the hallmark of a gentleman’s relation to his society and as a form of distanced authorial critique on the ethical vagaries of the embedded social world. Appropriately, in his self-critical commentary on “the very important art of telling tales” (126-127), Trollope distinguishes his method from Signora Neroni’s half-truths and exaggerations. He bewails the “system which goes so far as to violate all proper confidence between the author and his readers, by maintaining nearly to the end of the third volume a mystery as to the fate of their favorite personage,” asking, “is there not a species of deceit in this to which the honesty of the present age should lend no countenance?” (127) Trollope treats the trust a reader puts in an author as an obligation and celebrates his ostentatious refusal of suspense as a narrative tool. He promises in his fiction the kind of trusting union of writer and reader than Madeline—like those authors who devote more to “the profoundest efforts of genius” (*Barchester* 127) than to their relationship with their readers—eschews in favor of creating spectacular effects.

This union of author and reader that the narrator promotes accords in many ways to the version of sympathy that Rachel Ablow formulates in her study of sympathetic
relationships in the Victorian novel, *The Marriage of Minds*. Ablow takes as a starting point the slippage of Victorian marital ideals between “discussions of marriage as making husband and wife one person legally (under coverture), practically (as in a household with division of labor), romantically…or psychically (as in an extreme form of sympathy)” (11). The idea of marital sympathy helped combine all these definitions into an ideal of a perfect union between husband and wife that absorbed their individual identities into a singular one and in which they experienced each other’s emotional life as their own. Ablow argues that this vision of marital sympathy was not merely articulated in the 19th-century novel, but epitomized by it. In this version of the author/reader relationship the reader absorbs the author’s thoughts and envisions with the mind’s eye the same scenes the author originally conjured with his. Following Ablow’s logic, deeper conflicts emerge between Madeline and Trollope as matchmaking authors. While Madeline’s productive insight into Eleanor and Arabin’s mutual regard stems from her grasp of the social field (including marriage) as a place where competing interests play against one another, Trollope’s vision of narrative fairness dictates that “the author and the reader should move along together in full confidence with each other” regardless of “ever so complete a comedy of errors” (*Barchester* 127) through which the novel’s characters may suffer. The ideal union of the text is the perfect sympathy of Trollope’s narrator and reader, made possible by his insistence on narrative transparency over sensational literary effects.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{112} Sharon Marcus notes a similar dynamic in *Can You Forgive Her?:* “Alice’s refusal of hierarchical marriage mirrors the ‘delicate’ female reader’s resistance to the narrator, and the marriage plot can achieve closure only when all resistance ceases and characters, reader, and narrator agree to absolve Alice” (250).
In another moment of authorial transparency, Trollope’s narrator offers his readers a paragraph-long disquisition on the difficulties of concluding a novel, the very task at which Madeline Neroni proves herself such an adept. “I despair of success” (Barchester 482), he bemoans, “who can apportion out and dovetail his incidents, dialogues, characters, and descriptive morsels, so as to fit them all exactly into 930 pages, without either compressing them unnaturally, or extending them artificially at the end of his labour?” (481). The arbitrariness of publishers’ requirements for volume lengths and numbers, the reader’s expectations for the order, type, and frequency of certain kinds of scenes in a novel, the generic expectations of comic or tragic endings: all of these dictate the form that the realist novel takes and the form to which Trollope must fit his imagination. However, in ostentatiously bewailing his authorial difficulties, he draws attention to his ultimate skill at concluding his many-stranded plots. He doles out the “sweetmeats and sugar-plums” (495) of Eleanor and Arabin’s perfectly apt union, delights his readers with Slope’s comeuppance and expulsion from Barchester, and allows them the victory of a position to match the deserts of the long-suffering Mr. Harding. He facetiously mocks the unnamed critics of his work who question his abilities, the straw man he admits he will obey only after he has “labored…till experience has made him perfect” (Barchester 482).

These allusions to critics, publishers, and readers—and the cunning way in which he denotes his mastery of all their expectations—place Trollope’s work in the context of his literary competition. They allude to the fact that writing is a business with certain requirements, that publishers are merchants and readers are consumers, “picking and choosing between values for sale in the open market” (Ablow 120). Like his Barchester
Towers characters, Trollope is a player in a competitive field. And with his fame as an author inextricably tied to the successful courtships that fill the forty-seven novels to his name, he makes his literary matches for his own benefit. The delight Trollope’s narrator appears to take in emphasizing the awkwardness of his ungainly characters (which signifies the thoroughness of his realism) and of his own novel-craft (which denotes the sincerity of his authorial voice) suggests a devotion to honesty that requires radical disclosure to the reader with whom he communes and that puts him at odds with Madeline Neroni, whose physical and rhetorical postures betoken her devotion to artifice. And yet this same honesty is as carefully considered a posture as Madeline’s arrangement of skirts upon a sofa or phalanx of pallet bearers who facilitate her public appearances. Cindy LaCom has written of the way in which “Trollope’s management of [Madeline’s] disability also irrevocably directs our attention to it; though he appears to cover her disfigurement, he in fact returns our gaze to it again and again, prompting our (potentially uncomfortable) desire to uncover and really see her” (194). This also describes the way in which he presents his authorial labor. In each case, the ungainliness of a writing method or a damaged limb draws attention to both the inherent beauty or talent and the cultivated artistry that exist within and alongside apparent defects. Much has been made of Madeline Neroni’s eventual novelistic fate, her “banishment” to Italy as befits a fallen

113 Following Frank O’Connor’s identification of Trollope’s tendency to “lead his reader very gently up the garden path of his own convictions and prejudices and then to point out that the reader is wrong” (167-168), Morse argues for a reassessment of Trollope’s work as “experimental and innovative” rather than solely mimetic and calls for an acknowledgment of the “radical critiques of the English cultural and legal institution of primogeniture and of English race discourses” in his narrator’s jovial familiarity (Reforming Trollope 1).
woman and an exemplar of disabled, over-sexed femininity. But Trollope does not simply excise Madeline from the action of the text; through her absorption into the lines and figures of her letter he also grants her a final opportunity for cultivated self-presentation on the same textual level as his own. This gesture of total artifice, in its profound consistency with Madeline’s desire to dictate her social effects, is also entirely sincere. Though the spider has scurried away, her glittering, ingenious webs remain.

II. *The Vicar of Bullhampton*: Imaginary Unions

In *Barchester Towers*, Trollope seems both impressed and dismayed by Madeline Neroni’s alchemical ability to transform her epistolary self to suit her readers. While his steady maintenance of a particular style during the course of his career—signified by his character-focused realism, wide-ranging social portraits, suggestion of avuncular familiarity with his readers, and fair-minded compassion toward even his most flawed creations—suggests Trollope’s ideal of a very different sort of authorship, *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870), written some dozen years after *Barchester’s* debut, demonstrates the adaptability of Trollope’s method. Janet Fenwick, *Vicar’s* portrait of a matchmaking woman, appears here as almost the direct antithesis of Madeline Neroni: not a scandalous foreign bride and indifferent mother, but a happily married clerical wife and center of a large brood of contented children; a safely ensconced member of the local hierarchy rather than a suspect interloper; and a fast friend to the novel’s heroine rather than a formidable romantic rival. Further, while Signora Neroni operates in quixotic solitude, changing course practically in mid-stream when she decides to give Arabin up to Eleanor Bold and discounting her family’s desires when they conflict with her own, Mrs. Fenwick

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114 See LaCom, Lawson.
adheres to a preordained system of matchmaking throughout and conspires closely with her husband Frank, the titular vicar, to execute her plans. Despite their unimpeachable position in their community and the unquestioned benevolence of their intentions, however, the Fenwicks’ interference in Mary Lowther’s courtship turns them from the heroine’s friends to her adversaries. This speaks partially to Trollope’s general fascination with the intricacies of the marriage plot, with the pliability of its components and its prismatic tendency to fracture a few, discrete elements—romantic affection of men and women, class position and professional ambition, family or community influence—into a dazzlingly diverse array of outcomes. It also points, once again, to Trollope’s dramatization of authorial self-fashioning through narrative. Inspired by his wife to attempt matchmaking, Fenwick soon replicates his bombastic and close-minded practices toward Mary in several other relationships of advocacy across the village. Female influence becomes male imaginative over-reach in a way that must suggest Trollope’s own relation to his inspirational, yet methodologically flawed author-mother. Tellingly, *The Vicar of Bullhampton* is the only novel for which Trollope wrote and published an explanatory preface, a practice he abjured on principle. This unwonted act of authorial self-advocacy stands as both refutation of Frank Fenwick’s wife-prodded matchmaking and—in a text abounding in scenes of advocacy, defense, and explanation—as a suggestive acknowledgement of the shared valences between novel writing and Frank’s overly imaginative form of pastoral investment in his parishioners. Authorship in *The Vicar of Bullhampton* falls on a continuum of influence and advocacy across a spectrum of social institutions, from courtship to the courts of law and public morality.
This multiplot novel features two major through lines. The more lighthearted of the two central plots features the respectable heroine Mary Lowther’s courtship and echoes *Barchester Towers* in its focus on matchmaking as a plot element. Desired by two suitors, Mary waffles between accepting her impoverished cousin, Captain Marrable, whom she loves but can’t afford to marry, and the wealthy Harry Gilmore, an independent gentleman of Bullhampton and the close neighbor of her dear friends. The second, more somber plot addresses Frank Fenwick’s imbrication with the Brattle family, local yeomen, when their son Sam stands accused of murder and their daughter Carry tries to rehabilitate her standing in the community after sexual indiscretion. Beyond noting the involvement of the eponymous vicar, Frank Fenwick, in both plots, contemporary readers and even the author himself struggled to organically connect the various narrative strains of the novel. Meanwhile, latter-day critics have linked these ostensibly apposite stories with varying degrees of success in their attempts to construct a unifying theory about this text around such concepts as Christian moral virtue, gender identity, and 19th-century sexual morality. Trollope suggests this plot’s ephemerality in *An Autobiography* when he avers, “As I have myself forgotten what the heroine does and

115 One critic in the Saturday Review insists there is “no connexion whatever between the two trains of events and two groups of characters which occupy its pages” (quoted in Skilton xv).
116 In *An Autobiography*, Trollope explains that the courtship plot of Mary Lowther was “subordinate” to the secondary plot of the fallen Carry Brattle and that his heroine was in fact “a second-rate personage in the tale” (*Autobiography* 330).
117 See Cadbury, Hapke, Hauerwas, and Rinehart. Markwick does find a compelling link between Mary Lowther, Carry and Fanny Brattle, and other minor women in the novel with her claim that “The sub-plots are about how some women marry and some women do not marry, though all of them would choose to marry” (*Women* 40). This claim isolates the female characters from the male plots of political, religious, and legal authority, while a focus on matchmaking as influence and advocacy draws the “male” and “female” plots together.
says—except that she stumbles into a ditch—I cannot expect that anyone else should remember her” (333). As Kathy Psomiades notes, however, in her reading of *He Knew He Was Right*, “gender relations parallel political relations in Trollope” and “marriage and politics alike in his novels involve power struggles…. [as] part of a general tendency in the era of the Second Reform Act to use marriage and gender to construct social and political theories about how human society and culture work” (Psomiades 44). Wendy S. Jones further contends that the rise of the ideal of consensual married love throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries not only kept pace with the development of a liberal discourse of individual rights and correspondent agitation for franchise reform of the period, but this new marital model also in “its emphasis on the individual’s significance, identity, and right to self-fulfillment articulates the very characteristics that liberal theory grants to its citizen-subjects” (Jones 5). Therefore, despite Trollope’s retroactive claims to the contrary, Mary’s plot is not a distraction, an evasion, or merely a blind for his more controversial “true” plot of the Brattle family, but is rather an integral and necessary part of the examination of advocacy and interference across a matrix of registers that Trollope weaves throughout the work. In fact, the culture of advocacy—of beneficial and high-minded interference that undergirds much Victorian legal doctrine, social reform, and philanthropic institutions—reveals itself at its most damaging through this “small” plot of one woman and her romantic choices. The essential character that permits this exposure is the very figure he eschews in *Barchester Towers*, the misguided matchmaker.

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118 Turner also argues compellingly that the “vexed question…of what constitutes a proper marriage” relates in Trollope’s work to “what it means, more generally, to be a socially authorized member of a family or a community” (45).
Mary’s oldest friends and hosts for much of the book, Janet and Frank Fenwick typify a kind of benevolent, charitable, good-hearted eagerness to assist others that constitutes the apogee of Christian good will. Yet the very fervency of this good will and the intensity of their desire to see Mary well settled encourages their ruthless manipulation of their friend, as they prod Mary into self-doubt, error, demoralization, and despair through their matchmaking. Aggressively championing Harry Gilmore’s suit out of a combination of partiality and prudence, they misconstrue Mary’s feelings and misinterpret her words in their efforts to bend reality to suit their wishes. While repeatedly declaring themselves Mary’s friends and supporters, they nonetheless dwell more insistently on Harry’s deserts than on Mary’s desires. “Of all the men I know he is the most constant…and the best deserves that his constancy should be rewarded” (*Bullhampton* 237) Janet insists to Mary, ignoring her friend’s disinclination to become the “reward” that Gilmore’s merits have earned him. “He is too much in earnest, and too good, and too fit for the place he aspires to miss his object” (55) her husband Frank explains to Mary earlier, justifying his refusal to help Mary sort through her romantic quandaries except by encouraging her to become his friend’s wife. Aligning themselves with Mary’s elderly Aunt Sarah Marrable, whose modest inheritance provides Mary’s permanent home, the Fenwicks seek to “drive [Mary] into Mr. Gilmore’s arms simply because Mr. Gilmore is an excellent gentleman with a snug property!” whose wealth will assure Mary’s future security (*Bullhampton* 113).

Over and over, Mary attempts to convey to the Fenwicks her frustration, her doubts, and her deeply held convictions that prevent her from accepting Harry Gilmore’s proposal. But the friends who insist he is her proper match continually thwart her
attempts at honesty, substituting their wishful perceptions of the future for Mary’s accurate statements of her individual reality. “Fenwick had made up his mind that Mary was to be his nearest neighbor for life” (Bullhampton 49), the narrator reports, later echoing that phrase in Janet’s dialogue: “I have long since made up my mind” (52) that Mary and Gilmore will wed. These authoritative pronouncements indicate that their wishes are Mary’s commands, despite their assurances elsewhere that her happiness is all they endeavor to promote. “Her dearest friends wrote to her and spoke to her as though she would certainly take Mr. Gilmore at last,” Mary reflects once she has left their immediate influence in Bullhampton. “And yet Mary was very nearly certain it could not be so” (108). “Very nearly” and yet not quite certain, Mary finds that the Fenwicks’ whole-hearted advocacy of their friend has the power to override her desires for her own destiny. Janet and Frank imagine an ideal both for Mary and for themselves, a vision of monetary security for a woman in impoverished dependence, romantic affection between the partners they bring together, and neighborly intimacy that draws friends even closer through mutual married bonds. This fantasy encompasses so many of the elements of ideal Victorian marriage, with its perfect harmonization of prudence, romance, and propriety, that the Fenwicks feel compelled to discredit the one impediment to this dream of matchmaking perfection, Mary’s unfortunate disinclination to be Gilmore’s wife. Their very affection for their friend, their sense of responsibility to her as their guest, encourages their imaginative overreach, and from offering interest or providing counsel, the Fenwicks move into outright coercion.

Though conscientious in most other ways about living up to their roles as religious exemplars in the community, the Fenwicks resort to a variety of less than holy
tactics in their efforts to further Gilmore’s marital claims. Janet, in particular, possesses a masterful control of middle-class social scenarios—the visits and trips to the village, the rooms in which to sit and the occasions on which to mingle—that allow her to advance Gilmore’s courtship in a way Mary often responds to with discomfort. In an early chapter, Mrs. Fenwick coordinates a walk during one of Gilmore’s evening social calls to achieve the result she desires, walking with one person, then another in a calculated way “in order that there might be no appearance of a scheme” all the while intending that on the return trip “there might be a ramble among the paths, and the question would be pressed, and the thing might be settled” (Bullhampton 15). Mrs. Fenwick and her husband also deploy every subtle register available to them in the unspoken code of their class to punish Mary for her reluctance to accept Gilmore’s hand or encourage her to allow his resumption of the courtship. “At dinner,” the night after Mary has again refused to give Gilmore a firm response to his proposal, “they were very merry,” all dissatisfaction with Mary’s recalcitrance apparently forgiven. But the narrator makes clear the wealth of social condemnation that can be expressed through socially agreeable politeness:

The usual courtesies of society demand that there shall be civility—almost flattering civility—from host to guest, and from guest to host; and yet how often does it occur that in the midst of these civilities there is something that tells of hatred, of ridicule, or of scorn! How often does it happen that the guest knows he is disliked, or the host knows he is a bore!

(Bullhampton 56)

Fenwick and Janet express their disapproval to Mary through a slightly colder farewell at night or a shade less solicitousness at the table in a manner that conforms to the strict
requirements of good etiquette but that their friend nonetheless perceives as chastisement. When separated from Mary, Janet Fenwick promises in writing “that no advice should be pressed upon her, —the meaning of which, of course, was that nothing should be said to her urging her to marry Mr. Gilmore.” Still, all parties understand that upon Mary’s next visit “Mr. Gilmore was to be allowed to come to the house” and that Mary “would at least endeavor to bring herself to accept him when he did come” (346).

Unspoken social compulsion is only one of the Fenwicks’ weapons as they execute their mission of marital advocacy. They are also quite willing to wheedle and coax, to shame and frighten, and even to threaten Mary in order to win Gilmore his prize. “I should like to shake you till you fell into his arms” (32), Janet grumbles to her dearest friend when Mary hints that her reluctance to accept Gilmore’s proposal suggests she ultimately doesn’t want to marry him. Later, Mrs. Fenwick upbraids Mary’s sincere qualms over the morality of marrying a man because he loves her when she is attached to someone else: “I shall be driven to condemn you if you now allow a foolish, morbid, sickly idea to interfere with his happiness and your own” (387). The narrator describes both Fenwicks as being “rather savage to [Mary]” (50) when she leaves their home without acquiescing to their will. Above all, they attempt to use Mary’s understandable worries about her future security—she possesses very little money of her own and will no longer have a home once her similarly impecunious elderly aunt dies—to compel her to marry for strictly financial motives, always suspect in a mid-Victorian novel. “You should remember that we grow grey very quickly, Mary” (Bullhampton 54), the vicar warns, while his wife cautions, “That is the way old maids are made” (32). Even Mary’s romantic (if temporary) engagement to her financially straitened cousin cannot stem the
eloquence of her friend’s advocacy for Gilmore’s worth, as they insist “that she was bound to give it up for her own sake, and more especially for his; that the engagement, if continued, would never lead to a marriage, and that it would in the meantime be absolutely ruinous to her,—and to him” (230).

Eventually, these tactics succeed in compelling Mary to begrudgingly accept Gilmore. Crucial to their success is her loneliness following her broken engagement and her sense of aimlessness and lack of purpose in life as an unmarried woman, her belief that “it was a good thing for a woman to be married; that she would live and die unsuccessfully if she lived and died a single woman; that she had desired to do better than that” (323). Her sense of unreturned obligation to the Fenwicks and her pity over Gilmore’s unhappiness—produced in no small measure by the Fenwicks’ harping on his plight—also compel her acquiescence, as she resolves to “force herself to love him” and “do her best to reward him for the constancy of affection with he had regarded her” (Bullhampton 347). Like the Fenwicks, Mary begins to consider herself an object owed to Gilmore as a reward for his gentlemanly worthiness, and viewed that way, she acknowledges she lacks agency in determining what happens her or by whom she is possessed. As she resolves to marry him, the narrator emphasizes that Mary believes she “must accept Mr. Gilmore” (Bullhampton 353), “that it was no longer in her power to refuse him” (354), and “that it was her duty to disregard herself” (386-387). At this point, the novel vividly reveals Mary’s quietly tormented despair over her impending marriage to a man she respects but does not love, and the reportage of her thoughts becomes suffused with charged words like “shame” (353), “fear” (387), “repentance” (433), and “wretched[ness]” (480).
At the root of Mary’s despair lies her conflict with the Fenwicks over their fanatical support of Gilmore’s claims. “If they had told me to into a convent or to be a nurse in a hospital I would have gone,” she later admits. “I had nothing to care for and if I could do what I was told perhaps it might be best” (*Bullhampton* 480). The text makes clear that Mary’s abandonment of her self-interest happened gradually and in response to external pressure. She is aware that she “fought in opposition to well-disciplined forces on the other side” (400) and acknowledges, “it was her friend who was mainly the cause of this mischief which surrounded her, and who had persuaded her to evil” (433). A rhetoric of law and judgment comes to dominate this section of the novel, in which Mary has bowed to her friends’ marital pressure yet emotionally resists their control. The narrator describes Mary’s fear of Janet Fenwick as the fear of the guilty toward “those who will judge their guilt” (433) while Harry Gilmore insists—in the middle of his third proposal of marriage—that “it is for [him] to judge” (357) whether Mary’s reluctance should disincline him from marrying her. “She speaks of it as though she was going to be hung,” Frank Fenwick comments portentously to his wife after Mary informs them of her engagement to Gilmore.

This language of judgment and doom, of punishment and guilt, establishes continuity between the innocent Mary Lowther—victim of manipulation and circumstance—and the laboring Brattle family, whose involvement in a criminal trial for murder constitutes the text’s second major plot and second examination of advocacy, autonomy, and social institutions. So too does the involvement of Frank Fenwick as advocate and enabler in both plots link the domestic drama of courtship to the legal affairs of the courtroom and the public gossip of the town square. Unlike Mary, the
Brattle family requires and even benefits from the vicar’s advocacy. Respectable tenants on Gilmore’s land, they lack the resources and clout to protect their wayward son, Sam, when he is implicated in a vicious murder-robbery in the village. Meanwhile, Sam’s older sister Carry languishes in destitution and possible prostitution after her seduction and abandonment by various reprobates, one of whom is on the run for his involvement in the Bullhampton murder. Fenwick takes both their struggles in hand: securing Sam legal counsel, attending Sam’s court appearances and standing him bail when his family is unable, publically trumpeting Carry’s moral reformation to his fellow ministers when he overhears her maligned as a worthless fallen woman, and even paying her rent at a local boarding house while he begs her stern patriarch, Mr. Brattle, to accept her under the family roof once more. In many ways the Brattle-plot could be read as a compelling counterpoint to Mary’s courtship, with Fenwick offering comfort and aid in his role of vicar that he doesn’t or can’t in the role of matchmaking friend. One could argue that Trollope suggests the same kind of patronage and counsel that’s so problematic when instigated by a woman in the female-centered domestic arena redeems itself in the male realm of religious institutions, semi-formal patronage, and legal advocacy and in relationships where Fenwick operates alone, without his wife’s equal input.

In fact, however, Frank Fenwick’s conduct in the Brattle family affairs is of a piece with his behavior toward Mary. Without completely invalidating Fenwick’s impulse to help his parishioners or the direct action he takes to assist them, Trollope’s narrator reveals the common echoes between Frank’s problematic involvement with the Brattles and his treatment of Mary in the matchmaking plot. Just as his desire to see Gilmore and Mary wed requires him to discount her individual desires separate from his
own, so does his determination to defend his former “favorite” (*Bullhampton* 33), Sam, force him to ignore his uncomfortable doubts about Brattle’s involvement in the crime. An emotional predisposition toward Gilmore’s claims determines Fenwick’s strident support of his courtship of Mary; so too his enjoyment of Sam’s former hero-worship encourages his support in the courtroom. And just as his adamant solicitation on his friend’s behalf oppresses Mary and damages the Fenwicks’ friendship with her, so did his former favoritism toward Sam “do[] something towards marring him” (33). Carry’s vulnerable situation also elicits a combination of admirable and troubling responses from Fenwick. His desire to support and assist her arises in no small part from his belief, as a vicar, in the power of Christ-like forgiveness and the cruelty of the punishment reserved for young women who transgress sexual morality out of ignorance rather than defiance. He holds strong the belief that “fallen” women are still “redeemable” as productive members of small communities, and that casting them out from all sources of familial or local support only encourages further desperation and, as a result, sinfulness. At the same time, Fenwick’s partiality to Carry and willingness to endure public calumny and the insults of her obstreperous father stems in no small measure from the girl’s renowned beauty and former vivacity. Constantly, Fenwick reflects on his memories of Carry’s “clear, sweet, young voice…and of the heavy curls which it was a delight to him to see” (*Bullhampton* 70) and of the pride he used to feel in having such a lovely girl in his congregation. The narrator reveals that, though Fenwick suspected harsher discipline would have beneficial effects on Carry’s nature, “it was a fault” of his that he resists placing Carry in “the cold and unpleasant safety of a Reformatory” (281)\(^{119}\). In both the

\(^{119}\) Jill Durey draws on the history of clergymen’s engagements with reforming institutes
Mary and the Brattle plots, Fenwick’s affection and sense of responsibility to those he “helps” encourages a blind advocacy of his favored cause in defiance of his protégées best interests and personal feelings. His investment in the resolution of the plots he oversees—marriage plot, court drama, moral reformation—fosters overstep from counsel to control and nearly coercion.

When Trollope allows the reader a glimpse into the private fantasies of noble forgiveness and bounteous gratitude that drive Fenwick’s frantic efforts on Carry’s behalf, the danger of his myopic devotion to his self-constructed role of village savior become clear. In a passage that modulates between suggestion, condemnation, and approval with great subtlety, Trollope presents his sensible vicar hero as a man whose imagination has run away with him:

And then, too,—but let not the reader read this amiss,—because she was young and pretty and might be made bright again, and because he was young, and because he had loved her, he longed, were it possible, to make her paths pleasant for her. Her fall, her first fall, had been piteous to him rather than odious…. But as regarded Carry herself, when he thought of her in his solitary rambles, he would build little castles in the air on her behalf, in which her life should be anything but one of sackcloth and ashes. He would find her some loving husband, who should know and should have forgiven the sin which had hardly been a sin, and she should

for prostitutes in order to make a similar point about Fenwick’s inappropriate personal involvement in Carry’s affairs: “Trollope’s depiction of clerical men carrying out this task was bound to strike a note of warning, for clerics interested in this kind of charitable work tended to act through institutions…. Trollope, by having vicars help fallen women in a private capacity, is drawing attention to their possible secular motives” (48).
be a loving wife with loving children. Perhaps, too, he would add to this, as he built his castles, the sweet smiles of affectionate gratitude with which he himself would be received when he visited her happy hearth (Bullhampton 283).

Here, Fenwick belies the high-minded disinterestedness of his advocacy—the pose of hard-working reverend embracing all under his purview with the same spirit of Christian love and forbearance—through his overt prejudice in Carry’s favor born of his early attraction to her. Further, his romantic fabrications of her future life (which, significantly, he can only develop in solitude, outside the constraints of social role and familial ties) focus more on the rewards to himself than on the benefits to her, redirecting the image from one of a happy family created thanks to his efforts to one of a beautiful woman smiling her gratitude at the man who was her savior—more husband than her husband, who appears in the vision as only a shadowy form120. As with his involvement in Mary’s courtship, Fenwick places himself at the center of this marital tableau, speaking volumes on the correlation between his friendly support of Gilmore and his pastoral support of Carry, between his meddling in the lives of friends and neighbors and his transaction of his most sacred duties.

120 Fenwick’s fantasies grant Carry more extensive social recuperation than the novel itself allows. Far from endorsing the vicar’s imaginative portrait of Carry as a contended wife and mother at the narrative’s end, Trollope’s narrator sadly confesses that she lives out her days “doomed by her beauty…to expect that no lover should come and ask her to establish with him a homestead of their own” (Bullhampton 526-527). Trollope’s novel is the rare mid-Victorian text that allows a fallen woman even this degree of subsequent happiness.
As is so often Trollope’s practice, he signposts the danger of a type of behavior or cast of thought by replicating it in multiple channels in the same novel. Trollope critiques Fenwick’s interfering vicarhood—too often oriented around feeding his pride and self-importance rather than attuned to his beneficiary’s discomfort or desires and profoundly driven by his fantasies of what might be rather than what is—both through mirroring Frank’s behavior as matchmaker in the courtship plot and as counselor to the Brattles, but he also refracts Frank’s characteristic behavior through another character who is both double and foil. Fenwick’s prominent position in the backwater of Bullhampton places him in frequent conflict with the neighborhood’s greatest landowner, the elderly Marquis of Trowbrige. Like Frank, the Marquis aims to influence the community toward his notion of the good through his patronage of the Methodist preacher Mr. Puddleham. In his zeal for his cause and his conviction that Puddleham’s low-church evangelism is better for residents of Bullhampton than Fenwick’s moderate Anglicanism, the Marquis ignores Fenwick’s claims to fair treatment and railroads him with a plan to build a chapel on an unclaimed parcel of village land practically on church grounds. Perhaps recognizing in the Marquis signs of his own pridefulness and partiality, Frank’s tangle with the nobleman draws out corresponding ire and obstinacy, even a certain relish in the pleasure of pitched combat. “How you do like a fight, Frank!” (Bullhampton 136) Gilmore exclaims after observing one of Frank’s heated exchanges with the pigheaded old man. Fenwick and the Marquis share a propensity toward insults

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121 Markwick describes this dynamic operating in Trollope’s presentation of unmarried women in The Vicar of Bullhampton, with Mary Lowther and Edith Brownlow as a pair of poor but well-born women and Carry and Fanny Brattle as a pair of poor, working-class women contrasted with one another (the fates of beautiful Mary and Carry are further contrasted with those of the plain Edith and Fanny). (Women 40).
and raised temper, an obstinate insistence on viewing the conflict through their preferred values and discounting the others, and a devotion to the images of Bullhampton that fill their imaginations—visions that place themselves and their religious institutions at the center. They also share a susceptibility to feminine influence; as Janet’s desire to have Mary placed in the neighborhood as Gilmore’s wife drives Fenwick’s matchmaking, so does the fervent Methodism of the Marquis’s middle-aged spinster daughters prod along his championship of Puddleham’s chapel.

Both men temporarily abandon prudence and good sense in their feud. The Marquis arrogantly promises land for Puddleham’s chapel that he later discovers he does not control. Fenwick, meanwhile, intentionally antagonizes his community’s most prominent member, piqued by the Marquis’s habitual displays of foolish superciliousness. To drive home the common behaviors of these two village authorities wrestling over a small parcel of land, Trollope integrates Fenwick’s patronage of the Brattles into his conflict with the Marquis. Admitting that his opponent “would be sure to condemn him for taking such a step” (Bullhampton 363), Frank relishes the public nature of his material support for Carry Brattle and the outcry Trowbridge raises once word of his visits to her lodging place circulate. Gilmore and Mrs. Fenwick caution the vicar against such overt demonstrations of his connection to the Brattles, but Fenwick plows forward, ignoring the reality that “Gentlemen who are Quixotic in their kindness to young women are liable to have their goings and comings chronicled with much exactitude, if not always with much accuracy” (337). Thus, Fenwick’s devotion to his role as Carry’s advocate compromises the exercise of his official duties as the community’s representative of the Church of England. As Durey notes, the “[p]ublic scorn” that
Fenwick’s unconventional advocacy provokes allows the Marquis and his flunkies to “relabel one of the Church’s so-called virtues into one of its vices” (48). Though the security of Fenwick’s position is never truly in doubt, his involvement in the Brattles’ affairs distracts him from his other responsibilities in the parish, particularly his role as representative of the official Church’s legal and political interests. In this vacuum of Church authority, Puddleham goes so far as to begin construction of his chapel on Anglican grounds because Fenwick neglects to investigate the Marquis’s claims to the glebe land in a timely way.

Through his conflict with and connection to the Marquis, the dangers of this well-intentioned man of God’s integrated practice of matchmaking and pastoral ministry become clear. While passionate conviction, generosity, forgiveness, and a desire to offer consolation and comfort (moral and material) to the threatened or suffering influence Fenwick’s actions, his self-righteousness, his reliance on wishful imagination, and his over-imbrication in the lives of his beneficiaries undermine his nobler goals and threaten his standing in the community. Perhaps the sharpest rebuke to Fenwick’s image of himself as Sam and Carry Brattle’s savior or as Gilmore and Mary’s cherished marriage facilitator is the response of his protégées themselves, all of whom must reject his patronage in order to flourish. As noted earlier, Mary submits to the Fenwicks’ matchmaking with a sense of powerlessness and a detached resignation in her engagement to their friend, the sense that her close relationship with the Fenwicks and their adamant belief that she should marry Gilmore has forced her hand: “it was no longer in her power to refuse him” (Bullhampton 354). Yet even as she renounces her claims to autonomy and performs the role of docile appendage to Gilmore’s life, she inwardly
rebels against the sacrifice. At novel’s end, she cuts off her engagement to Gilmore and possibly even her friendship with Janet Fenwick by triumphantly marrying her newly financially solvent cousin, Walter Marrable. Trollope presents Mary’s conduct with some disapproval, yet the intensity with which he paints her misery while Gilmore’s intended bride ensures that she remains sympathetic to readers, even if less than the perfect heroine. Janet Fenwick’s remorse over her matchmaking’s unexpected consequences—the double loss of friendship of Mary and Gilmore—further exculpates Mary from charges of fickle waywardness. “Mrs. Fenwick was not without a feeling that much of all this unhappiness had come from her own persistency on behalf of her husband’s friend” (455), the narrator reports coyly. Janet herself is more forceful, promising Mary in writing that “nothing on earth could tempt me to set my hand at match-making again” (513).

While the vicar’s advocacy for the Brattle siblings is more successful and more gratifying than his and his wife’s experiments with matchmaking, Sam and Carry must also step outside of his influence and protection in order to free themselves from their literal and metaphorical trials—in both cases, by speaking up on their own behalf rather than allowing Fenwick to continue speaking for them. Sam, throughout the novel, insists on claiming from Fenwick the right to defend himself and support himself in the way he sees best: “he fought his own battle,” the narrator explains, “declaring that…as it had been admitted that there was no evidence connecting him with the murder, no policeman could confine him to one parish. He argued the matter so well that Mr. Fenwick was left with nothing to say” (Bullhampton 253). At the murder trial, “Sam declared that he would

122 As Markwick notes, “while the plot grants [Mary] her marriage to the man she loves, the telling of it denies her endorsement for her actions” (Women 40).
not say a word about his sister one way or the other” (503), using eloquent silence to express his disgust at the magistrate’s attempt to win convictions for the accused murderers by maligning Carry’s character in open court. Sam’s refusal to make Carry’s sexual history a matter of public record even by defending her represents a more honest form of advocacy than Fenwick’s ostentatious displays of patronage because it grants Carry the authority to defend or refuse to defend her actions as she wishes. Sam’s forthright ability to speak for himself when warranted and remain silent when not earns him his father’s long-withheld approval at the novel’s end. “It was well said, Sam. Yes; thought thou be’est my own, it was well said” (525) are Mr. Brattle’s only remarks following Sam’s vindication in the murder trial; Sam wins them by demonstrating his strength of character under interrogation rather than through Fenwick’s repetitive attempts at cajoling the older man into forgiveness. Similarly, Carry’s efforts to speak of and for herself succeed at earning her a measure of forgiveness, even while Fenwick’s ostentatious support further damages her public esteem. When called as a witness to the murder trial to testify about her illicit involvement with one of the accused men, Carry’s tears and meek, abashed demeanor inspire sympathy in her listeners, not one of whom, “man or woman…would not have prayed that Carry Brattle might be spared if it were possible” (Bullhampton 501). When Carry does speak on her own behalf, falling at her father’s feet with the exclamation, “I know I have been bad, but if you could forgive me!” (473)—she finally wins his desperately desired kindness. Carry acknowledges her father’s continuing shame at her actions, which no doubt encourages him to listen to her appeal. By speaking on her own behalf, voicing the truth of her misconduct and the earnestness of her desire for reconciliation, she succeeds at breaking past her father’s
stern pride in a way that Fenwick’s reasoned arguments and carefully plotted modes of
attack could not.

   Fenwick’s advocacy falters because it relies too much on imaginative construction
and too little on clear-sighted observation. Because he can envision Mary as Gilmore’s
wife and his near neighbor, and because such a vision pleases him and his wife, he
ignores Mary’s obvious reluctance to accept his friend and her discomfort during their
engagement. He brushes aside Gilmore’s unhealthy fixation on Mary and attributes his
friend’s jealousy and possessiveness to temporarily thwarted love. Enraptured by
fantasies of himself as beneficent savior in the Brattle plot he constructs in his mind—
images of a restored Carry’s gratitude and a once-abrasive Sam returned to eagerness to
please—he positions Carry as the subject for further gossip and scorn and tries to deprive
the proud Sam of his claims to self-governance. Only when forced to relinquish his hold
on their futures do Mary, Sam, and Carry manage to arrange their own affairs, less
perfectly than in Fenwick’s plans but more realistically. By requiring the three besieged
characters to speak on their own accounts rather than trust to Fenwick’s advocacy in their
interests, *The Vicar of Bullhampton* seems to fall in line with other mid-Victorian novels
that privileged an older mode of criminal defense, the accused speaks model, in contrast
to the Victorian development of defense counsel advocating in court on the behalf of the
accused. As Jan-Melissa Schramm explains in her *Testimony and Advocacy in Victorian
Law, Literature, and Theology*, the passage of the Prisoner’s Counsel Act in 1836 granted
defense counsel the right to address the jury on behalf of the accused, obviating the need
for a suspected criminal’s individual testimony to be presented in court and guaranteeing,
legal reformers hoped, a stronger support of the accused’s interests in criminal trials.
Victorian critics, however, feared the lawyerly rhetoric of defense counsel could spin convincing narratives that would acquit the guilty of their due punishment in spite of the evidence of facts or the truth of the case. “[T]he years immediately after the enactment of the Prisoner’s Counsel Act,” Schramm notes, “saw a vigorous debate about the ethical limitations of an advocate’s brief, especially the extent to which he could manipulate evidence in defence of a client whom he knew to be guilty” (102).

Schramm contends that the competition between the literary and legal fields over the province of truth telling drives the development of both spheres of linguistic influence. Literature in particular derives subject matter and narrative fodder from legal incidences and cases, as well as from the public’s desire for legal reporting, even while privileging its deeper engagement with realms of emotion—both psychological and bodily—and thus its access to a deeper honesty than a court report can provide. “Time and time again in Victorian fiction,” she claims, “we see the law ridiculed for its reductionism, for its legalese, for its callous failure to acknowledge that behind the language of rights, duties, and sanctions lies a seething world of emotional turmoil and physical experience” (Schramm 15). With *The Vicar of Bullhampton*, Trollope appears, like Dickens and Gaskell, among other novelists, to endorse the privileged perspective of private testimony over the public advocacy of the trial. The official reticence of the accused characters (and, by extension, the novel’s ability to represent it through reported internal reflection) seems more honest than the advocacy of the recently permissible

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123 According to Rowland McMaster, Trollope possessed “not just the average novelist’s need to deal on occasion with the legal consequences of marriage, death or inheritance but a keen interest in the intricacies of law as expressing and sustaining social order and accommodation” (1).
defense attorney’s tactics. And correspondingly, he honors Mary Lowther’s conflicted, imperfect, unspoken quest to best fulfill her romantic destiny over the public claims-making inherent to matchmaking. Yet this seemingly straightforward correlation of Fenwick’s advocacy with a kind of legal language and the self-advocacy of Mary, Carry, and Sam with the novel’s privileged access to the depths of emotional truth is complicated by Trollope’s position as author-advocate, both for his novel and for his characters, and by the motivational power of Fenwick’s authorial imagination.

In *An Autobiography*, Trollope makes claims for both a detached, observational stance toward his characters (the posture of a technically brilliant but heartless Madeline Neroni, perhaps) and for a loving attitude for his creations (the possessive affection of an interfering advocate like Frank Fenwick). With similar contradiction, during his career he resists advocating on his fiction’s behalf, insisting that once written a novel must live or die by its own merits. “No dedication and no preface,” he bald-facedly asserted in a letter from 1867 regarding the conclusion to his Barsetshire Chronicles. “It’s all nonsense. I never wrote a preface and never dedicated a book” (Quoted in Skilton vii). Yet three years later, in *The Vicar of Bullhampton*, he does write a preface, his only one, specifically in order to mount a moral defense of his fictional creations and his authorial intentions. In order to “defend [him]self against a charge that may possibly be made against [him] by the critics” (Bullhampton xxix)—namely that the novel’s extension of forgiveness the sexually transgressive Carry Brattle could encourage vice in impressionable readers—Trollope crafts a preface that walks an uncertain path between self-righteous indignation and apologetic equivocation. In the preface, Trollope acknowledges the dangers inherent in his chosen subject matter, asking “whether a
novelist, who professes to write for the amusement of the young of both sexes, should allow himself to bring upon his stage such a character as Carry Brattle?” (xxix). In order to answer this question in the affirmative, he offers positive supporting evidence in the possibility that “if the matter be handled with truth to life, some girl, who would have been thoughtless, may be made thoughtful, or some parent’s heart may be softened” (xxxi). He also rests his claims on negative grounds in his insistence that the novel resists the immoral impulse to “reward [Carry] because of her weakness, as one whose life is happy, bright and glorious” (xxx). To justify Carry Brattle’s place in his text, Trollope must become an advocate for the novel to the world at large. Like defense counsel for the accused, he crafts an exculpatory narrative out of facts and emotion to convince readers of his text’s innocence, its intention to do good rather than harm. Yet at the same time, he expresses doubt about the efficacy and appropriateness of this self-adopted role. He worries that the “writing of prefaces is, for the most part, work thrown away” and asserts his intention to do so despite his awareness that “not many people will read [it]” (xxix). As David Skilton notes, the preface to The Vicar of Bullhampton “seems to indicate a doubt about his ability to speak to [his readers] through his fiction so that they will not misunderstand him” (Bullhampton vii).

Having compromised his long-held authorial principles to speak in Carry Brattle’s name, Trollope recommits himself to (as Edwin Yoder refers to it) “authorial kibitzing and agnostic speculation” (Yoder 372) as regards the rest of the novel’s characters. If, like Frank Fenwick, something about Carry’s beautiful victimhood elicits his advocacy, he ensures that this kind of partiality extends no further. For example, Trollope’s narrator declares early on that Mr. Gilmore “is to be our hero,—or at least one of two” and further
promises, “The author will not in these early words, declare that the squire will be his favorite hero, as he will wish that his readers form their own opinions on that matter” (Bullhampton 4). Courtly in his restraint, in his desire to give both “heroes” fair play and in his reluctance to sway the reader’s perceptions in one direction over the other, Trollope nonetheless raises the possibility of favoritism in his very disavowal of the act, alerting the reader to the special attention owed at least to this hero of the two. Neither of Mary’s suitors seems to deserve the descriptor “heroic”: Gilmore tries without shame to coerce an unwilling woman into marriage; sybaritic Walter Marrable spends most of his narrative real estate dithering between his love for Mary and his desire for a comfortable living. Yet even while admitting through disavowal that he, the narrator of the text, could have the intimacy with the characters required for a preference of one over another, Trollope also insists on his distance from the events unfolding through his telling. “No doubt, at that time of year, they went to Italy,—but of that the present narrator is not able to speak with any certainty,” the narrator comments following his report of Mary’s eventual marriage to Walter Marrable. “This, however, is certain—that if they did travel abroad, Mary Marrable travelled in daily fear lest her unlucky fate should bring her face to face with Mr. Gilmore” (Bullhampton 517). Though capable of relating each possible emotional fluctuation of Mary’s hypothetical wedding tour, Trollope maintains a specious aura of detachment from details of the wedding events themselves, suggesting the position of a real-world observer of Mary’s courtship rather than the orchestrator of her plot.

In this novel, as in so many of his fictions, matchmaking affords Trollope the means to consider his place in the text as its author and his relation to the characters and
the plots that fill his imagination almost without effort but also require diligent exertion to produce. If, like Fenwick, he feels tenderness toward Carry, he also makes clear in his preface the dangers of this affection—his concern that support for this fallen woman will drive young ladies from his books, much as Frank’s support for Carry reduces his standing in the community. Trollope as author, as creator of this inhabited fictional world and orchestrator of all the ethical dilemmas, moral quandaries, and partings and reconciliations between its characters, attempts throughout his narration to be both advocate and reporter, both matchmaker and friendly observer. Nowhere is this clearer than at the novel’s conclusion. Trollope “bid[s] adieu to Mary Lowther” (Bullhampton 518) several chapters before the novel’s end with a scanty report of her eventual marriage, a brief allusion to her possible wedding tour, and a summation of her various misdeeds and best intentions during her tenure as heroine. The relationship between Mary and the matchmaking Fenwicks, which sustained the lion’s share of attention, interest, and development from the narration, likewise concludes without any sort of satisfying resolution. While repenting of her matchmaking enterprise, Janet Fenwick yet belabors Harry Gilmore’s melancholy in her congratulatory message on Mary’s engagement to Walter Marrable. Mary’s subsequent written invitation to the Fenwicks to visit her and her husband at their new home goes—in the world of the novel—eternally unanswered. The friendship divided by imaginative matchmaking appears irreparable.

The ends of both novels of matchmaking examined here ultimately link their acceptance of matchmaking and advocacy to the possibility for authorial claims to privileged knowledge of the world of the narrative. The last lines of The Vicar of Bullhampton report of travels undertaken but not yet completed and are relayed with
none of the authority or finality one might expect from a novel’s final line. “Mr. Gilmore has been some years away from Bullhampton;” the novel concludes, “but when I last heard from my friends in that village I was told that at last he was expected home” (Bullhampton 527). Forced at the novel’s commencement to make himself and his intentions explicit, Trollope insists at its conclusion on contingency, irresolution, and unresolved desire, both for his characters and for his readers. He relinquishes the self-adopted position of textual advocate and, along with it, of chronicler of social and institutional forces. He instead leaves his fictional enterprise with an image of two atomized individuals cut off from social ties, trapped in ephemeral worlds of wishing, wanting, and journeying toward but never arriving. Mary and Harry both end in indeterminate process, undergoing narration and never reaching consummation. Madeline Neroni embraces a textual identity at the conclusion of Barchester Towers, filling the role of author as disembodied voice distanced from the fruits of her creation, laughing from beyond the English Channel. At the conclusion of the intentionally posthumous An Autobiography, Trollope too salutes his future readers from a similarly unimpeachable position, “the further shore” from which he “bid[s] adieu to all who have cared to read any among the many words I have written” (Trollope Autobiography 367). The difficulties of authorship first presented by his mother, Frances—the challenges of uniting imaginative reverie and accurate observation, of bringing emotional investment and “clear-sighted” accuracy to bear in the same work—may appear unresolvable at the conclusions of his fictions. In all instances, though, the authorial matchmaker provides Trollope with the ideal tool through which to grapple with his authorial ambitions and constraints.
CHAPTER V.

Matcham Is Symbolic: Unions of Money, Marriage, and Art from *Watch and Ward* to *The Wings of the Dove*.

Henry James’s earliest novels demonstrate his preoccupation with the matchmaker as a character type. Many of these early plots revolve around contests between male protagonists and secondary female characters for the narrative control traditionally held by women over the marriage plots that set the contours of James’s initial fictional project. Just as they were for Anthony Trollope, the Victorian predecessor James most infamously rejects, James’s matchmakers are profoundly implicated in his artistic method, providing a medium through which he can interrogate his relation to the novelistic tradition, to commercial success, and to his aesthetic ideals. Further, as we witnessed with Trollope in Chapter Four, female matchmakers remain significant authorial proxies for James throughout his career. Closely shadowing his

124 Among the scholars who pinpoint the importance of the marriage plot and marriage plot novelists to James’s literary self-development, Elsie Michie proposes that “James returns to the marriage plot in order to retrace the ways his literary forefathers (and foremothers) used that patterns to inculcate models of taste” (*Money* 181).

125 In several posthumous assessments of Trollope’s career, James belittles his technique and undermines his artistry. In 1884’s “The Art of Fiction,” James laments Trollope’s “want of discretion” in narration, which “bring[s] tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously” (Future 6). In 1883’s “Anthony Trollope” he damns with faint praise Trollope’s talent for observation as belonging to the “walk of literature in which the female mind has labored so fruitfully” (Future 236). James Kincaid insists, “In arguing for and explaining his own methodology and his own aesthetics, it suits James to sharpen his distinctions by inventing some opposition, some fixed symbol for alternate methods and assumptions. He called this symbol Trollope” (Kincaid 7).

126 The shared affiliation with matchmaking women for both James and Trollope speaks to James’s greater reliance on Trollope than he willingly admitted. Michie asserts, “A comparison of Trollope’s *The Prime Minister* and James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* bears out the idea that, improbably, Trollope’s ‘vulgar’ novels inspired some of James’s more abstract, refined, and delicate prose” (“The Odd Couple” 10). Artese finds parallels for *Portrait* in *Barchester Towers*. 
developing aesthetic theories about narrative, perspective, and consciousness, his approach to matchmaking shifts with the evolution of his narrative method. Initially presenting them as deliberately acknowledged competitors with whom male protagonists struggle for control of their social destiny, James transforms his matchmakers by the time of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880) into subtle masters of novelistic subterfuge whose efforts to entrap virtuous heroines in Byzantine social plots both reflect and imperil James’s self-conception of his artistry. By 1902’s *The Wings of the Dove* (James’s extended experiment with and rejection of the marriage plot), matchmakers explode in number and importance in the text, occupying a variety of narrative roles and ideological positions. Mutating from relatively benevolent and over-all ineffective representatives of traditional unions of wealth and virtue in the earlier works, James’s female matchmakers become sinister presences later in his career, women who dictate the course of the heroine’s fate via subtle manipulation—aptly-chosen silences, deceptions, concealments, and revelations—for their own monetary benefit, a practice that I take as representative of James’s narrative technique.

James evidences an interest in matchmaking in his earliest experiments with the novel, though he does not engage as deliberately with the trope as he will in his later fiction. Four of his first five novels feature or make mention of stereotypical matchmakers or marital advisors: *Watch and Ward* (serialized in 1871, reissued in 1878), *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The American* (1877), and *Confidence* (1879). (Only

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127 Throughout this chapter, I quote from the earliest editions of each novel subsequent to initial serialization (when relevant). James resolved printing errors and made minor textual changes between serial and volume publication, often bringing the latter more in line with his initial desires. As I am interested in tracing James’s engagement with the matchmaker across his career, the revised 1912 New York editions of his novels
The Europeans (1878), his fourth novel, lacks a reference to matchmaking.) In Roderick Hudson and Confidence, matchmaking activity hums in the background chatter of the characters via references to “arranging a match” (Roderick 302) for a prominent society figure, for example, or a lament of the “horrid match-making arrangements” (Confidence 89) that young Americans believe represent European courtship. While these comments don’t rise to the significance of sustained inquiry, they nonetheless suggest James’s preoccupation with literary matching, social expressions of femininity, and courtship narrative as he authors his creative method into being and explores the ramifications of his national identity in a European context. Both Watch and The American, however, do contain women characters explicitly described as matchmakers who attempt to find the male protagonists a suitable wife: Watch and Ward’s Mrs. Middleton, an elderly matron parochially attached to Boston society, and The American’s Mrs. Tristram, a young American wife living in Europe whose cultural fluency is her greatest currency. Each novel also features a tacit matchmaker in addition to these two direct examples: Mrs. Keith, a cosmopolitan and amoral young American widow in Watch, and the Marquise de Bellegarde, a cruelly manipulative Anglo-French aristocrat in The American. Licensed by their social position or their personal relations to orchestrate the courtships of other characters, these matchmakers, whether declared such overtly or by association, comprise a spectrum of managerial women in James’s early

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128 Parisian ex-pat Tom Tristram’s also bewails in The American that in New York, “Girls are bullied or coaxed or bribed, or all three together, into marrying, for money, horrible cads…. The Morals of Murray Hill!” (American 112). In Henry James, “horrid match-making arrangements” appear always to be the province of elsewhere.
career. They make their matches out of pitying compassion for a former suitor, friendly interest in a fellow American abroad, investment in a local community’s maintenance, or a ruthless devotion to European *ancien regime*. Together, these women illuminate the centrality of matchmaking to James’s craft at its earliest stage and the necessity of the matchmaker for his developing conception of both the novel tradition and himself as novelist.

Despite their differences, the two avowed matchmakers of James’s early novels intersect in several important ways: both of them attempt to demonstrate their control over the social realm through the art of matchmaking and neither of them succeeds. The crowing of Mrs. Middleton, the matronly busybody who appears late in the narrative of *Watch and Ward*, can stand as an emblem for the Jamesian matchmaking sorority: “I have thought it all out. Allow me! In this matter I am a woman of genius. I know at a glance what will do and what won’t. You are made for each other” (108-109). Less dictatorial but even more culpable is the matchmaker at the center of *The American*, Mrs. Tristram, whose clever, subtle manipulation of the mores of both French and American society produce the disastrous, abortive match between Christopher Newman and Claire de Cintré that forms the engine of the text. Mrs. Tristram undertakes to match Newman with her dear friend Claire out of, presumably, an abundance of taste, good will, and nationalist pride in the success of a self-made American man abroad. In no sense will she herself benefit monetarily from the match. Yet James indicates both her divided motives and her eventual failure when she and her husband refer to her matchmaking enterprise as “a bureau de placement” for which she deserves a metaphorical “commission” (49) and as “the right market” (52). Mrs. Tristram may possess the fluency with the French
language and Parisian society that Newman struggles to acquire throughout the novel, but her commercial mindset in social matters signals her essential misalignment with the city she inhabits and her hubris in offering herself as cicerone to Americans abroad.

The tacit matchmakers in these novels fare seemingly better. *Watch and Ward’s* Mrs. Keith rejects association with those “horrid” matchmakers, but she is “determined to lend an artistic hand” (*Watch* 96) to her former swain’s courtship of a beautiful young woman. *The American*’s Marquise de Bellegarde more emphatically eschews the title, vowing to Newman, with cutting disdain, “I have never made a match in all my life” (*American* 194). While the Marquise may not intrude in the courtships of strangers, she is perfectly willing to commit murder in the service of forcing a noble marriage on her daughter Claire. Mrs. Keith, the artistic marital arranger, orchestrates the final reconciliation between Roger Lawrence and his under-age ward, Nora. The Marquise, a heartless aristocratic marriage broker, successfully destroys Claire’s engagement to Newman and prior to the action of the novel successfully compelled Claire’s marriage to the vicious, sadistic Comte de Cintré. Both tacit matchmakers, then, succeed in their quests. Whether in victorious or defeated, tacit or explicit, however, both kids of matchmakers receive scorn and condemnation from Roger Lawrence and Christopher Newman, the male protagonists whose marital fortunes they aid or thwart. Roger responds with disgust to Mrs. Middleton’s overt machinations, but he is not less disdainful toward his helper Mrs. Keith, given her dramatic rejection of his offer of marriage in the novel’s first chapters. Newman, too, may loathe the Marquise more than any other character he encounters in Paris while esteeming Mrs. Tristram as an admirable
woman and true friend, but he blames his friend for his distress in the aftermath of his failed engagement.

In *Watch and Ward* and *The American*, James represents his authorship as a context between male intellectuals and female matchmakers. By elevating male intellect over female social manipulation, James attests his superiority to his female literary forebears. He crafts his initial authorial persona by asserting his power to use the tools of the courtship plot while rejecting the female literary models that formed and inspired it. But in *Watch and Ward* and *The American*, the outcome of this literary tournament also depends on two narrative elements: James’s overt association of matchmaking with superficial forms of artistry and the spectacle of male victimhood by female hands. When James describes matchmaking as a potent, yet superficial, ability to create appearances, stage scenes, and compel emotional responses, he connects the narrative-level struggle between male character and female plotter to his meta-literary reconsideration of his role within the tradition of the novel, specifically to women novelists like Jane Austen who developed the substantial artistic legacy with which he engages. If the matchmaker, as we have seen in other texts, represents a type of female artist, a master and arranger of plots, she is also for James the voice of social compulsion, of received ideas, of unthinking nationalism, and of class-positioning and prestige—of everything

129 The women novelists with whom James grappled include: the Bronte sisters and their cult, Ouida (who he termed ridiculous), and George Eliot, who he admired but also blamed for her handling of Will Ladislaw, “a woman’s man” (“Review of Middlemarch 84).

130 James’s reckoning with Austen was notoriously conflicted. In “The Lesson of Balzac” he both praised her “little touches of human truth, little glimpses of steady vision, little master-strokes of imagination” (*Future* 100-101) and depicted her as unthinking in creation as “the brown thrush who tells his story from the garden bough” (99). Incomplete but beautiful, miniature and dainty, Austen’s genius fits docilely into the small box of experience James allows for it
that limits and delimits an individual person’s progress through the world. She represents both a history of achievement and a burden to resist successfully or unsuccessfully. Simultaneously, the conflict between self-cultivated men and the women who attempt to control their marital fortunes points to a notion of male victimhood as foundational to James’s authorial self-creation. In treating female creativity and literary inheritance in such baldly antagonistic terms, however, in presenting figures of male prowess brought low by artistically venal female matchmakers, James’s earliest fictions create an impossible double-bind for his renovations of the courtship plot, a simultaneous insistence on and disavowal of the power of female artistic models that he will spend the remainder of his career attempting to resolve.

In his later masterpieces, *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Wings of the Dove*, James will rework these same elements of manipulative matchmakers and self-important men. Revising the generic confines of the traditional courtship plot, he shifts his fictional focus to his independent American heroines’ struggle toward and failure to find liberty in social contexts that conspire against them. James’s turn toward the independent woman heroine does not mean that he has resolved his contested relationship with female artistry and the matchmakers who represent it. Both of James’s mature masterpieces of malevolent matchmaking depend upon the work of female matchmakers to facilitate the heroine’s possibilities for independence and to compel the plot toward victimization. Both also reduplicate the dynamic of tacit and explicit matchmakers sketched in James’s earliest novels, grappling with the power and absurdity of the female matchmaker’s image through doubled representations. Concurrently with his foregrounding of bold, young American women like Isabel Archer and Milly Theale, his treatment of the tacit
female matchmaker grows more complex, more villainous, and more closely integrated with his artistic method and theories. No longer content to stage simple and direct confrontations between hopeful men and the matrons who interfere in their wooing, James sublimates his awareness of and resistance against his female literary progenitors into complex plots of warped affections woven by morally bankrupt matchmakers. Interceding in the courtship plot out of vicious drives toward self-preservation and elevation, Portrait’s Madame Merle and Wings’s Kate Croy seem to magnetize both their creator and his readers and reflect, through their artistry, subtlety, and psychological acuity, James’s literary method at its highest powers. Increasingly eschewing the happy union of the conventional courtship plot, James yet mimics his matchmakers’ artistry and technique as he formulates an authorial identity. As his career advances and his art becomes more confidently and self-consciously wrought, his relationship with his matchmakers as co-authors of his plots of doomed courtship grows every more convoluted, both reliant and resistant. Believing in his art’s transformation of the female-authored genres out of which he builds his house of fiction, James’s matchmakers become ever more perfect models for his formal technique. James’s work eliminates the division between matchmaker and match in much the way that his prose method approximates a union of character’s psychology and author’s narrative perspective, a total mastery over and revelation of the inner life. He makes explicit the matchmaker’s triangular role in the supposed marital duo by inserting her as a physical and emotional partner in the love triad, bound by biology, family, sexual desire or history, and emotional and psychological awareness and affinity. Within a foreboding cloud of marital distress, the matchmaker possesses a clear-headedness of vision and intent that not only
threatens the vulnerable young women (James’s test-cases for liberty) around whom she spins her plots, but also unites her vitally with her creator, the master plotter, the visionary psychological novelist himself.

I. The Portrait of a Lady: The Janus-Faced Artist

*Ralph gave a small laugh. "What a rage you have for marrying people! Do you remember how you wanted to marry me the other day?"
(The Portrait of a Lady 315-316).

Shortly after her first meeting with Madame Merle, Isabel reflects on her other close female friend, the endearingly abrasive newspaper correspondent Henrietta. “She sometimes wondered what Henrietta Stackpole would say to her thinking so much of this brilliant fugitive from Brooklyn,” Isabel ruminates, “and had a conviction that Henrietta would not approve of it” (*Portrait* 386). Against Henrietta’s blunt manner, pragmatic pursuit of her goals, and dogged fixation on American exceptionalism Isabel weighs Madame Merle’s deft social abilities, beautiful sentimentality, and cosmopolitan perspective. Isabel’s comparison of her two friends suggests the roles they occupy for her as models of single female potentiality. “Henrietta, for Isabel, was chiefly a proof that a woman might suffice to herself and be happy,” James explains (*Portrait* 243). In her activity, self-sufficiency, cheerfulness, and energy, Henrietta offers Isabel hope that a life devoted to productive work and the full exercise of one’s talents can stave off the limited perspective that Isabel most fears. Equally potent for Isabel and her English associates, though, are Henrietta’s numerous indelicacies of manner and approach. The ridiculousness of her zeal for her various tasks—the absurdity of her commitment to Isabel’s marital future, the unrestrained opinions she insists upon offering to anyone who will listen, her guilelessness in the face of European customs and mores, her hard-driving
approach to writing and to social interactions—prompts much mockery and disdain from Isabel, Ralph Touchett, Lord Warburton, and even Henrietta’s romantic protégé Caspar Goodwood, notably in the novel’s first half. Madame Merle, by contrast, seduces Isabel’s desire with her perfected social manner, her apparent graceful indifference to the strain of poverty and disappointment, and the panache of her European upbringing and perspective. “She does everything beautifully. She is complete,” Ralph remarks to Isabel. This completion, the notion of a secret trick to life which only an elect few—Madame Merle and, perhaps, Isabel among them—can guess, appeals to Isabel’s inherent sense of herself as set apart from the common herd of women, of Americans, of novel heroines. Thus, in evaluating her two closest friends, both avatars of strenuous work in the service of distinction, but with radically different approaches and results, Isabel begins to refine her sense of her life as something she must cultivate with intention to fulfill her desire for rarified experiences.

As Isabel’s comparison implies, in The Portrait of a Lady, Henry James hinges his plot on the competing efforts of his two matchmakers. The laughable (if ultimately admirable) lady correspondent Henrietta exhibits all the qualities of literary hackwork that James bemoans in writing women: vulgar striving for pay; audience-directed choices of theme and treatment; reliance on observation and reportage rather than imagination or invention; hide-bound preconceptions that she mangles her columns to

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131 James’s excoriations of writing women are legion. In a 1902 preface to Madame Bovary he decries “the dreary desert of fictional prose” produced by spinster writers for spinster readers (Future of the Novel 146). In 1880 he bewails the “almost excessively feminine” literary climate in which he writes (“Review of Nana” 94). In several stories in the 1890s—“Greville Fane” (1892), “The Death of the Lion” (1894), and “The Next Time” (1895)—he satirizes the claims of professional writing women to literary identities.
accommodate; and indelicacy of presentation, both in person and in print. The very avowedness of her matchmaking intentions matches the unsubtlety of her prose. By contrast, the tacit matchmaker Serena Merle embodies an impressively graceful artistic perfection in her person and persona, all of which obscures the utilitarian designs that buttress her relationships and the greed and worldly ambition that motivate them, just as her matchmaking intentions remain disavowed and undetectable to all but the most carefully initiated viewers. To understand the relation between Henrietta and Madame Merle as rival matchmakers, I draw on Alex Woloch’s theory of character-space, “that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole,” and character-system, “the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a unified narrative structure” (Woloch 14). In *The Portrait of a Lady*, James devotes greater attention to the character-spaces of his matchmakers and shifts them to a more prominently central position in his character-system. James’s increasingly focal positioning of them in *Portrait* and his increasingly textured rendering of them as characters signifies equally his continuing frustration with the legacy of female literary artistry they represent and his movement from dismissal to complex acknowledgment of his complicity with the forms of the traditional courtship plot, even as he struggles to revise it.

Isabel, Ralph, and Goodwood bemoan Henrietta’s insistently public orientation, her vulgar inclination to make communally visible what they reserve to be privately held. Their laments make plain the interconnection of Henrietta’s professional role as lady correspondent and her personal mandate to matchmake for Isabel and Goodwood. In both
roles she oversteps the bounds of good taste and polite manners. Isabel reflects that she “liked her friend’s private epistolary style better than her public; that is, she thought her public letters would have been excellent if they had not been printed” (Portrait 400-401), an acknowledgement of Henrietta’s skill as a correspondent (personal or public) as well as an indictment of her professional indiscretion. However, the earliest of Henrietta’s private letters to Isabel that James includes in the novel explicitly takes up Caspar Goodwood’s cause, blazoning her blurring of private and public even in personal exchanges. Henrietta’s professional practices exist not so much on a continuum with as contiguous to her personal relationships, a fact Goodwood brings forward when he attributes her invasive matchmaking to her choice of career: “writing for the papers had made Miss Stackpole sensational. She was too fond of early news” (712). For Goodwood, Henrietta’s continual reports of the married Isabel’s happiness stem from her role as newspaper columnist, dedicated to reporting early and often. In fact, however, both her matchmaking and her literary endeavors support a common cause, her deeply held conviction of the primacy of communal identity over private. The corporate identity of “American” rises above all others for Henrietta; she is a citizen of the United States and enters into all transactions (social or literary, professional or personal, structured or casual) with full awareness of herself as both representative and champion of her native land. Matchmaking, for Henrietta, is both a redemptive act and a moral imperative. This same impulse toward a corporate American identity also drives Henrietta’s professional goals and impulses. She longs to relay to her readers the “inner life of Great Britain” (Portrait 401), but to understand the public she must discover the private; to excel professionally she must engage socially.
Despite her lofty ideals and conviction of their merits, Henrietta struggles in both of her self-appointed tasks. Isabel heeds none of her advice or warnings, responds to none of the overtures Henrietta offers on Goodwood’s behalf, and refuses to disclose her private emotions to Henrietta until her marriage to Osmond becomes intolerable. Isabel’s final action in the novel is to flee Goodwood’s impassioned plea for an extra-marital union and return to her husband; while Henrietta’s meddling is surely the least of her concerns by that time, her abrupt flight also puts the period to Henrietta’s unabating matchmaking for her two friends. With striking parallelism, Henrietta also fails in her literary goals. Longing to throw “some light on the nobility” (Portrait 274), Henrietta must make do with public outings alongside hordes of sight-seers, discontented that “Landscapes by Turner and Assyrian bulls were a poor substitute for the literary dinner parties at which she had hoped to meet the genius and renown of Great Britain” (335). The inner life she so craves is denied her by her compatriots (Isabel, Goodwood, and Ralph) and by the English who remain a puzzling and dissatisfactory people to her. While she goes “about with her guide-book and pencil” (335-336) reporting on the conventional sights of Continental tourism that open themselves to her, she has “a depressing sense of falling below her own standard” (Portrait 336). Even if gratified with her columns, though, Henrietta’s talents would no doubt fail to impress her creator. Like the writing women James analyzes in his criticism—indeed, like Trollope in his most troublesomely “feminine” iterations—Henrietta’s literary talents lie accurate observation and evocative reportage but are deficient in imagination and the commitment to fully rounded

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132 In various assessments of the recently deceased author’s career, James aligns Trollope with women writers implicitly and explicitly, comparing his brisk pace of literary production to “the wonderful Madame Sand and the delightful Mrs. Oliphant” (“Anthony Trollope” 234).
psychological invention that James elevates as the writer’s primary goal. Henrietta founders without “ideas” ingested from without. Not only does she beg Isabel, “I want some introductions to the first people” when she arrives in London, she also expresses a desire to “talk over” her first impressions of the English with her friend (274). This demand of the world and her associates for constant fresh material has an almost cannibalistic quality, and Isabel certainly dislikes “Henrietta’s reproductive instincts” (her stock in trade as a reporter) above all (274). Henrietta is not and never claims to be a novelist, and certainly not one with the severe aesthetic credo of the demanding James.

Serena Merle, when she first appears at Gardencourt, seems a singularly decorative person, a fact for which Isabel admires her. Like Isabel, Madame Merle has no strivings after a literary career or professional life in the hard-charging manner of a Henrietta Stackpole. Instead, the simple tasks of her ordinary existence appear as finely wrought works of art presented by this professional houseguest for the benefit of her hosts. She can play the piano exquisitely, craft witty and endearing letters, dress for dinner to perfection, and converse dazzlingly with anyone invited. “When Madame Merle was neither writing, not painting, nor touching the piano,” James reveals on her introduction, “she was usually employed upon wonderful morsels of picturesque embroidery, cushions, curtains, decorations for the chimney piece, a sort of work in which her bold, free invention was as remarkable as the agility of her needle” (Portrait 388). If Henrietta stands in for Trollope at his plodding worst, Madame Merle approximates Jane Austen at her elegant best, wielding the same needle that James fancifully places in Austen’s hand as she sits at her worktable among her literary and
fabric creations\textsuperscript{133}. While Henrietta relies on examples from life, capable only of direct mimetic duplication of conversation and experience and cramped by her paucity of material to work with, Madame Merle approaches her artistry with boldness, agility, and invention, necessary weapons in an ambitious novelist’s arsenal. Imagination, that hallmark of the matchmaker’s craft in so many other courtship plot novels and a key signifier of artistic merit for James\textsuperscript{134}, seems to define Madame Merle’s approach not just to her handicrafts but also to her artful relationships. She speaks of the delicate act of encouraging or discouraging Isabel’s romantic inclinations in one direction or another as an exercise in imagination; she encourages her friends to imaginatively speculate about her past life through her façade of both mysterious sadness and emotional disclosure; she attributes her desire to arrange young Pansy Osmond’s marriage to Lord Warburton to the satisfaction of her imagination. Further, in contrast to Henrietta’s work-for-hire, dependence on publishers’ budgets and schedules, and unceasing need to promote herself and her opinions to anyone who might assist or remunerate her, Madame Merle ascribes no monetary value to even her most impressive works. “She worked and talked at the same time, and she appeared to attach no importance to anything she did. She gave away her sketches and tapestries; she rose from the piano, or remained there, according to the

\textsuperscript{133} “The key to Jane Austen’s fortune with posterity has been in part the extraordinary grace of her felicity, in fact of her unconsciousness: as if, at the most, for difficulty, for embarrassment, she sometimes, over her work basket, her tapestry flowers, in the spare, cool drawing-room of other days, fell a-musing, lapsed too metaphorically, as one might say, into wool gathering, and her dropped stitches, of these pardonable, of these precious moments, were afterwards picked up as little touches of human truth, little glimpses of steady vision, little master-strokes of imagination” (“The Lesson of Balzac” 100-101).

\textsuperscript{134} In “The Art of Fiction,” written just a few years after The Portrait of a Lady’s publication, James speaks of the effects of experience operating on a mind inflamed with imaginative powers: “It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” (12).
convenience of her auditors, which she always unerringly divined” (Portrait 388).

Madame Merle’s beautiful detachment from her own skill serves to set off its rarity and brilliance: her tapestries’ perfection redoubles when accorded such little possessive importance, her claim to artistic elevation guaranteed by her seeming disdain for conventional rewards of merit.

If this description suggests the work of “The Master” himself, that is no coincidence. In the manner of all successful literary matchmakers, Madame Merle joins her task to her author’s, making the match between Isabel and Osmond on which both her and the novel’s career depend. She is a co-plotter, in all senses of the word, a social “Machiavelli” or “Vittoria Colonna” (457). In her utilitarian role as driver of narrative she hones the “little plan” (465) that dictates her behavior and prompts her diligent “calculating” (466) and “wait[ing] and watch[ing] and plot[ing] and pray[ing]” (752).

Like James, Mme. Merle displays taste, judgment, and artistic skill. The art of Florence’s museums and churches prompts the “vividness of [her] memory” (443) in detailed description and analysis, recalling James’s frequent and apt ekphrastic references and inclusions in his fiction. In her relationships, as well, Serena Merle paints impressions with a delicate touch, skilled investment, and the appearance of graceful detachment. She mentions her old friend in Florence, Gilbert Osmond, off-handedly to Isabel in early conversations, dropping picturesque details of his collections, his distinction, his romantic poverty, his exquisite daughter, in the same way that she fills in her chimney piece decorations with free-hand embroidery that coheres into a dazzling whole. Devoted to an illusion of aesthetic detachment from commercial concerns, at pains to convey an impression of completion, wholeness, and truthfulness in her self-presentation, artful at
penetrating the inmost desires of her fellows, Madame Merle’s approach to both domestic crafts and social interaction closely approximates the aesthetics of her creator.

Most tellingly, she echoes her author as much in her silences as in her speech. Of course, she comprises a dazzling example of the power granted a narrator “with a system, a passionate conviction, a great plan” (94), as James describes his novelistic ideal in 1880 (“Review of Nana” 94). Moreover, she shares his artful habits of concealment and disclosure, suggestion and implication, and carefully timed revelations as the method to advance narrative, direct audience responsiveness, and maintain dominance in informational exchanges. Madame Merle’s characteristic mode is suggestion: she builds Isabel’s romantic expectations through implication and allusion, through ellipsis, through restraint, through profound communicative control, through artfully layered narrative presented as truth, and through nearly unfaltering commitment to the illusions she creates. Just as Madame Merle makes glancing reference to her somber past or refined expatriate associates in Italy to cultivate an aura of romantic decay that entrances Isabel, so does James suggest through equivocal phrasing and exactingly chosen turns of phrase that Madame Merle herself is not all she appears to be. Several passages from the turning point of the novel, as he tightens the noose of his plot around Isabel’s wealthy neck—introducing her (through Madame Merle’s intercession) to Osmond and his picturesque poverty—illustrate the echoes between James’s habit of suggestion and implication and Serena Merle’s.

For the first example, I’d like to draw a simple comparison between Madame Merle’s initial discussion of Gilbert Osmond with Isabel and Henry James’s early narrative asides once Osmond appears in the narrative. As mentioned before, Madame
Merle encourages Isabel’s interest in Osmond through subtle, nearly undetectable means. While appearing to disparage him she in fact praises him in just the terms that have the most currency for her young friend. Her first words to Isabel on the subject are to label Osmond the “worst case” of an enervated American male expatriate that she can think of, but her subsequent conversation terms him “a friend of mine, a countryman of ours, who lives in Italy (where he was also brought before he knew better), and who is one of the most delightful men I know” (Portrait 393). Playing on their shared expatriation and social links, she prods Isabel’s interest. “He is Gilbert Osmond—he lives in Italy; that is all one can say about him,” Madame Merle continues with an appearance of bald honesty. Of course, that is not all she can say about him: “He is exceedingly clever, a man made to be distinguished; but, as I say, you exhaust the description when you say that he is Mr. Osmond who lives in Italy. No career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything” (393). Against this litany of negatives and lack Madame Merle offers only two counterpoints, both of which she immediately dismisses. Mr. Osmond can paint, she admits, “like me, only better than I” (393), and Mr. Osmond has a daughter, “a dear little girl…. He is devoted to her, and if it were a career to be an excellent father, he would be very distinguished. But I am afraid that is no better than the snuff-boxes; perhaps not even so good” (393). Cleverness, refinement, perfect taste that echoes Madame Merle’s own, deep familiarity with Europe, and an enchantingly sad family relationship: these may seem small attractions when mentioned along with Osmond’s obscurity, poverty, disinclination for exertion, and disconnection from his own people and country. Madame Merle knows her craft well, however. While not yet angling to entrap Isabel (who has not yet been identified as an heir to Daniel Touchett’s fortune),
she still fosters her attraction to Osmond by emphasizing the very qualities that will, years later, entice Isabel to accept his proposal of marriage.

Some ten chapters and one-hundred-odd pages later, James reduplicates Serena Merle’s conversational habits as he, too, brings Gilbert Osmond to his audience’s attention. Describing Osmond’s disposition at the beginning of his acquaintance with Isabel, James relays Osmond’s mingled pleasure with Isabel, happiness with their relationship, joy in his rediscovered appreciation for society in Rome and its simple pleasures, self-pity over his dearth of opportunity for greatness in life, repulsion toward effort without success, disdain for certain of Isabel’s personal attributes, and relish at the thought of their future contest of wills and his own inevitable victory. At the conclusion of this extended rendition, James offers his readers what appears to be a candid assessment of his literary method in sketching Osmond’s character for them:

Though I have tried to speak with extreme discretion, the reader may have gathered a suspicion that Gilbert Osmond was not untainted by selfishness. This is rather a coarse imputation to put on a man of his refinement; and it behooves us at all times to remember the familiar proverb about those who live in glass houses. If Mr. Osmond was more selfish than most of his fellows, the fact will still establish itself. Lest it should fail to do so, I must decline to commit myself to an accusation so gross; the more especially as several of the items of our story would seem to point the other way. (Portrait 504)

Interfusing condemnation with celebration, and ostentatiously adopting a pose of exquisite impartiality, James mimics Serena Merle’s representational strategies toward
Gilbert Osmond. Where she flagrantly emphasizes his failings and lacks in order to draw out his enticements, like jewels presented on black velvet, James deliberately overdoes his posture of detached fairness in order to make the case more compellingly for Osmond’s vicious selfishness, ensuring their attention toward Osmond’s flaws through his very insistence that they look away. However much they labor toward different ends, though—the one in service of Osmond’s appeal and the other engaged in piquing the very suspicion he disavows—both Madame Merle and Henry James shape their discussion of Osmond through implication and suggestion, through counterpoise and misdirection, and through thorough-going awareness of their audience’s psychological response to their modes of presentation.

In the second passage I wish to highlight, James summarizes the results of Isabel and Madame Merle’s travels together in Egypt. At this point, Gilbert Osmond has declared his affections and Isabel has responded indeterminately, captivated by the vision of intellectual and aesthetic reward a union with him seems to promise, but unwilling to reverse her commitment to singleness so rapidly. During this period of reflection, the narrative grows quiescent. James alerts his reader to the fact that he will pass over many months until incidents more pertinent to his story arise, but also offers them a glancing synopsis of the state of Isabel’s emotions during this period of waiting and traveling. She visits Greece, Turkey, and Egypt in the company of Madame Merle, and James presents this portrait of Isabel’s relations with her friend:

Isabel liked her as much as ever, but there was a certain corner of the curtain that never was lifted; it was as if Madame Merle had remained after all a foreigner. She had once said that she came from a distance, that she
belonged to the old world, and Isabel never lost the impression that she was the product of a different clime from her own, that she had grown up under other stars. Isabel believed that at bottom she had a different morality.

(*Portrait* 524).

These slight references to hidden corners, foreign natures, and differing moralities build the case for what James will later spring upon his readers and his heroine: Madame Merle’s calculating duplicity, her avaricious matchmaking, and her secret manipulations of Isabel’s feelings for Osmond. Isabel also notes “an occasional flash of cruelty, an occasional lapse from candour” (524), further glimpses of the truth Madame Merle conceals behind her appearance of “delicate kindness [raised] to an art” (524).

Lest the reader become too alert to Madame Merle’s hidden motives, however, James encases these suggestions of dishonesty with mitigating explanations, slighting references to Isabel’s moral immaturity, a dismissive description of Isabel’s “absurd” (525) shock at the suspicion that her friend’s opinions sometimes differ from her own. Jovially, he promises that “the reader will be amused” (*Portrait* 525) by Isabel’s periodic unsettlement in the company of her friend. In the service of his narrative, he offers both hints and blinds to his reader, declarations of intimacy and complicity coupled with misdirection, glimpses of the truth concealed within equivocations. The mode of his précis of Isabel’s trip with Madame Merle reflects the content of the trip itself and Madame Merle’s artful ability to conciliate Isabel whenever she alarms her, to stoke her imagination enough that she ignores her fear. Madame Merle, too, tells tales during their voyage:
relating her history from her own point of view…. This history was so sad a one (in so far as it concerned the late M. Merle, an adventurer of the lowest class, who had taken advantage, years before, of her youth, and of an inexperience in which, doubtless, those who knew her only now would find it difficult to believe), it abounded so in startling and lamentable incidents, that Isabel wondered the poor lady had kept so much of her freshness. (524)

This cunningly told saga of disillusionment and victimization captivates Isabel with its pathos and drama. Lambent with emotion and tragedy, it previsions in many ways James’s startling and lamentable plot, the tragedy of Isabel’s entrapment. At the same time, it fosters Isabel’s sympathetic response to her friend, encourages her conviction that Madame Merle’s “nature was too large for the narrow ways of deception” (524).

Her management of the courtship of Isabel and Osmond constitutes Serena Merle’s finest moment as a character, as a narrator, as a plotter, and as a Jamesian double. As if to compensate for his unholy union with his troublesome character, however, James arranges Madame Merle’s downfall through matchmaking, as well. Far from insisting on Serena Merle’s claims to aesthetic nobility, James relies on her practice of matchmaking—adroit as she makes it, essential to his plotting as it is—in order to relegate her to the same artistic realm as a woman like Henrietta Stackpole, or a feminized man like Anthony Trollope. Her affinity for matchmaking reaffirms her artistic inadequacies. “There were people who had the match-making passion, like the votaries of art for art,” James admits, “but Madame Merle, great artist as she was, was scarcely one of these” (Portrait 725). The sentence’s structure strands her syntactically opposed to
artists for art’s sake and, implicitly, opposed to Henry James. James transforms Madame Merle from Jane Austen to Greville Fane. Like Greville Fane, like Anthony Trollope—indeed, like so many of the female matchmakers examined previously in this study—the root of Madame Merle’s evil lies in the likeliest source: the profit-seeking of the conventional matchmaking mother. In the plot to arrange a match between her secret and illegitimate daughter, Pansy Osmond, and Isabel’s rejected suitor Lord Warburton, Madame Merle recruits Isabel into a managerial role in this courtship plot. Only then does Isabel discover the central role her friend played in her own courtship and the hidden truth of Pansy’s maternity. Exposing her secret motherhood to Isabel and to the reader, Madame Merle’s second matchmaking effort circumscribes her seemingly omniscient power of manipulation; it transforms her motives from Jamesian creative delight to ordinary familial ambition. Linking Madame Merle’s failure to her maternity, James insists upon the femaleness of her female artistry, vexing the connection of author and female matchmaker that his plot required.

Isabel’s consideration of Pansy’s marriage trains her to reconsider her own, a dynamic that persists throughout her participation in Pansy’s courtship plot. As Isabel finally abandons her reverie by the fireside and prepares for bed, she twists her mind into a shape pleasing to her husband, “trying to persuade herself that there was no reason Pansy shouldn’t be married as you would put a letter in the post-office” (Portrait 639). At nearly the same moment, she experiences a “remembered vision—that of her husband

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To further disclaim Madame Merle’s entitlement to artistic merit, both she and Osmond accuse one another around this time of speaking “like a sentence in a copybook” (Portrait 731), the lowest form of literary expression possible: entirely repetitive and rote, piecemeal and partial, associated with the predominantly young and overly female readership whose numbers degrade the possibility for novelistic artistry in English.
and Madame Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated” (*Portrait* 639). Isabel’s effort to treat Pansy as an object, and the discomfort her indisposition to utilitarian relationships provokes under these circumstances, prepares her eventual acknowledgement of her husband’s and friend’s utilitarian manipulation of her feelings, as well. Regarding Pansy as a letter in a post-office is the first step in allowing Isabel to recognize herself as “a dull un-reverenced tool” (759) in the drama enacted by Madame Merle and Osmond. Her fanciful identification of Pansy as “a childish martyr decked out for sacrifice and scarcely presuming even to hope to avert it” (673) feeds her eventual self recognition of her own victimhood, of the “architectural vastness” of “the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror” (768). Finally aware of herself as a matchmaker’s dupe, Isabel’s affection for Pansy deepens into something more like sympathy than pity or patronage. They embrace “like two sisters” (764) when Isabel departs for her final journey to London, and Isabel’s determination to help Pansy, little as she may be able to, is solidified by her sense of the resemblance between Pansy’s hopeless submission to Osmond and Madame Merle’s rule and Isabel’s imprisonment in the bonds of her torturous marriage.

In the final chapters, James affiliates Isabel and Pansy across several registers: both victims of women’s disempowerment in marriage and family life; both threatened by Osmond’s egotistic craving for control; both discomfited by Madame Merle’s influence in their lives. Isabel abdicates the matchmaker’s superiority in her relations with Pansy in favor of a pseudo-sisterly tenderness. Suggestive of the text’s condemnation of matchmaking as utilitarian objectification of relations, Isabel’s turn from the hierarchical structure of the matchmaker/*jeune-fille* relationship to that of co-
sufferers in a shared family structure implicates matchmaking as part of a European system of ritual and form that smothers individual autonomy and free expression. Given the tight collusion of author and matchmaker through the prior forty-odd chapters of the novel, however, James cannot adequately discredit his female matchmaker solely through Isabel’s high-minded rejection of the role. Ill at ease with the likenesses between his and Madame Merle’s methods, James insists upon their final discordancy by ensuring Madame Merle’s downfall—her textual exposure, humiliation, and disempowerment—through her matchmaking, rather than despite it. When Serena Merle calls upon Isabel to chide her (with apparent good-humor) for letting Warburton slip through the Osmonds’ clutches while Madame Merle was away, her perfect poise slips for the first time:

But apparently she had only reserved herself for this occasion; for she had a dangerous quickness in her eye, and an air of irritation which even her admirable smile was not able to transmute. She had suffered a disappointment which excited Isabel’s surprise—our heroine having no knowledge of her zealous interest in Pansy’s marriage; and she betrayed it in a manner which quickened Mrs. Osmond’s alarm. More clearly than ever before, Isabel heard a cold, mocking voice proceed from she knew not where, in the dim void that surrounded her, and declare that this bright, strong, definite, worldly woman, this incarnation of the practical, the personal, the immediate, was a powerful agent in her destiny. She was

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136 James engages with the equation of romantic marriage and political liberalism with Anglo-Saxon (or, in this case, American) culture and matchmaking with hierarchical and despotic political structures that was discussed in Chapter One. The rootlessness of his expatriate Americans and their tendency to absorb the mores of their new homelands coupled with an inability to fully shed their American identities disrupts the model constructed by mid-Victorian travel writers, however.
nearer to her than Isabel had yet discovered, and her nearness was not the charming accident that she had so long thought…. Ah, yes, there had been intention, there had been intention, Isabel said to herself, and she seemed to wake from a long pernicious dream. What was it that brought home to her that Madame Merle’s intention had not been good? Nothing but the mistrust which had lately taken body, and which married itself now to the fruitful wonder produced by her visitor’s challenge on behalf of poor Pansy…. Madame Merle’s interest was identical with Gilbert Osmond’s; that was enough. (Portrait 720).

The marriage of wonder and mistrust guides Isabel to her profound relational insight, her realization of Madame Merle’s implication in all the seemingly free decisions she made in her marriage to Osmond. Expressing Isabel’s consciousness through marital terminology, James points to both Madame Merle’s disproportionate investment in the career of Pansy’s courtship and to the union of her desires with Osmond’s. This newly spoken, freshly acknowledged identical interest between Madame Merle and Osmond replaces the previous implicit union of Madame Merle and Henry James as co-authors of Isabel’s destiny, as mutually unforthcoming narrators of tales of drama and suspense. The adulterous union of minds, rather than bodies, stands opposed to the intellectual union of Isabel and James’s readers; Isabel’s dawning suspicion places her, at last, on equal footing with James’s more astute readers, whose suspicion of Madame Merle should have been whetted long before, and who discover alongside Isabel the maternal secret that has so-long ordered James’s plot. The author, however, has elevated himself above both
women: not victimized like Isabel, not deceptive like Madame Merle, unjoined to any of the parties in this dynamic of disclosure and concealment.

With her motherhood exposed to Isabel and to the audience whose reception of the plot she has helped to guide, Serena Merle loses her status as perfect matchmaker, as ideal female artist, reduced to just another Victorian matchmaking mamma, arranging her child’s destiny out of worldly ambition and grasping for money and consequence. Persistently in the concluding chapters of *The Portrait of a Lady*, James ties Madame Merle’s motherhood to her missteps and to her humiliation. Both Countess Gemini and Isabel refer to Madame Merle as “the mother” (*Portrait* 753) in their frank discussion of her secrets, her talents, and her arrangements. Reflecting on her conversations about Pansy with Madame Merle, Isabel indeed attributes to her maternal disappointment Madame Merle’s discomfort, her awkward self-revelation, her near betrayal of secrets and her “almost dropp[ing] the mask” (753) she perpetually wears. A figure of cosmopolitan ephemerality throughout the text, Madame Merle’s very excision from rooted domesticity seemed to convey upon her greater powers of psychological penetration and narrative manipulation; in fact, however, she was just another mother, helplessly invested in her child’s welfare and bound to the child’s father with an unequal devotion. “She has waited and watched and plotted and prayed; but she has never succeeded,” Amy Gemini concludes. “I don’t call Madame Merle a success, you know” (*Portrait* 752). In confining Madame Merle to her maternal relations, and her inadequate maternal relations at that, James bestows on Isabel (and through Isabel, his readership) the satisfaction of witnessing “the cleverest woman in the world, standing there within a few feet of her and knowing as little what to think as the meanest” (759) followed quickly
by her banishment from the novel and from Europe, sent back to America never to be heard from again. Resolute as this textual dismissal may be, however, it cannot and does not countermand the power James previously granted to the matchmaker’s role. Madame Merle’s artistry, corrupt as it was, retains its effects: the turn of the plot still depends on her intercessions; the Osmond marriage still demands its reckoning. James plays with the same patterns that, as we have seen, animated Trollope in *Barchester Towers*, also energized by the anarchic artistic potential of the female matchmaker, also unable to efface her as completely from the text as her scandalous nature and (in *Portrait* if not *Barchester*) tragic consequences would seem to warrant.

As Madame Merle’s space in the text contracts, Isabel returns to “the arms—or at any rate into the hands—of Henrietta Stackpole” (*Portrait* 769). A train voyage and channel crossing, several national borders and surely many days divide her concluding encounters with her dueling matchmakers, but they are passed over, in single volume editions of the novel, with the infinitesimal quickness of a page turn and the graphical markings of a chapter break.\(^{137}\) Steadily, James grants Henrietta increasing dignity and respect to match Madame Merle’s plummeting fortunes. Henrietta’s final actions in the novel betoken her charitableness, her empathy, her iconoclasm, her diligence: she weeps at Ralph’s funeral; houses Isabel in crisis; marries her long-devoted swain, Mr. Bantling,

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\(^{137}\) The novel’s first readers, following along with its serial publication in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in England and *The Atlantic Monthly* in the United States, would have experienced the break between Madame Merle’s farewell and Henrietta Stackpole’s greeting as a juncture of time more in keeping with Isabel’s journey; the chapters appeared in separate volumes and numbers and were published about a month apart. While dividing the two matchmakers from one another and preserving Isabel’s lengthy solitude between her meetings with the two women, the serial break may nonetheless have heightened the implicit connection between Isabel’s two friends for the magazine readers, the leap from one woman’s realm to the other’s perhaps gaining additional potency from weeks of anticipation over the next installment.
and preservers in her efforts to promote Caspar Goodwood’s cause. Indeed, the final words of the novel belong to Henrietta, as she pursues Goodwood down the London street, no doubt full of recommendations for his pursuit of Isabel, once more lost to Rome. Isabel may initially interpret Henrietta’s interference in Goodwood’s courtship as “treachery” (Portrait 348), but Henrietta’s refusal to dissimulate about her matchmaking intentions grants Isabel full awareness of her friend’s affiliations, expectations, and hopes. Possessed of many inadequacies as a writer and as a social navigatrix, and as useful a source of comic delight as she is for James, Henrietta Stackpole also provides an opportunity for him to acknowledge the traditional association of women’s writing and women’s matchmaking with some celebration. Equally blunt and inartful in both realms, Henrietta is also equally well intentioned, kind-hearted, and unselfishly sincere. Though an inveterate, incurable matchmaker from first to last, Henrietta never seeks personal gain or acclaim from the marriages she tries to arrange.

As though speaking on behalf of the tradition of literary matchmaking that insists upon self-interest as the motivation for any sort of interference in courtship, Ralph initially discredits her disinterestedness. “When a marriageable young woman urges matrimony upon an unencumbered young man, the most obvious explanation of her conduct is not the altruistic impulse” (283), he reflects; his assumption of personal benefit confounds his understanding of Henrietta’s matchmaking on Isabel and Goodwood’s behalf, though. “That a young woman should demand that a gentleman whom she described as her very dear friend should be furnished with an opportunity to make himself agreeable to another young woman, whose attention had wandered and whose charms were greater—this was an anomaly which for the moment challenged all his
ingenuity of interpretation” (*Portrait* 315). Accustomed to a popular literature of matchmaking that requires personal interest as motivation and to representations of young womanhood that present courtship as competition and marriage as the only possible prize, Ralph flounders in the face of Henrietta’s union of fervent interference and apparent high-mindedness. He, along with the reader, must learn to take her at her word when she declares, “It’s everyone’s duty to get married” (*Portrait* 283). In marrying her ever-faithful English admirer, Mr. Bantling, Henrietta accepts for herself the same matrimonial duty she demands of others; she lives by the principles that motivate her matchmaking. Alone among James’s writing women characters, Henrietta marries to further her artistic ambitions. Henrietta and Mr. Bantling marry out of inexhaustible curiosity in the other. Through this marriage, Henrietta reveals herself to be both “human and feminine,” to Isabel’s dismay, not the “light keen flame, the disembodied voice” (775) of single womanhood Isabel had set her up as. If her future role as embodied wife embedded in British society threatens her position with Isabel, it appears to enhance her performance as lady correspondent. In engaging herself to Mr. Bantling, Henrietta “had not renounced an allegiance, but planned an attack. She was at last about the grapple in earnest with England” (776). Through this marriage, James reveals Henrietta to be the greater artist than Madame Merle. She is the woman whose life serves her art rather than the reverse, in the fashion of Madame Merle’s calculated effects and calculating postures.

In *The Portrait of a Lady*, a pivot point in his literary career and his engagement with matchmaking and female artistry, James rewards and honors one matchmaker while maintaining narrative distance from her; he joins more intimately with the other while thoroughly punishing and discrediting her. Henrietta does not change the world or even
The Portrait of a Lady’s plot, as Madame Merle manages; she does, however, join matchmaking and artistry, literature and love, without compromising either. In this portrait of the artist as a laughable busybody, James both mocks his continuing fixation on the pattern of the courtship plot and suggests the purity of purpose he sees in her agitation for romantic marriage and his devotion to his art of fiction. In giving Henrietta the feminization of his own name, James matches himself to this admirable and ungainly representative of purity of purpose mingled with hard-charging professionalism. Yet the tightly woven interfusion of his and Madame Merle’s shared modes of narrative manipulation retain their force, even after her banishment to Brooklyn. Authorship, as James conceives of it here, seems to require both Henrietta’s disinterested passion and Madame Merle’s ruthless ambition, qualities his matchmakers possess in isolation but that only he unites, as his torture of Isabel’s fine dreams and sensibilities reveals. As though inspired against his will by this vision of dueling female creative impulses in his portraits of Henrietta Stackpole and Serena Merle, James will redouble his investment in the villainous female matchmaker in his late, great novel of tragically effective matchmaking, The Wings of the Dove.

II. The Wings of the Dove: The Matchmaker’s Defeat

“There had been, in all the case, too many women” (The Wings of the Dove 497).

Given James’s well-documented objections to the proliferation of women authors and readers in the literary world, one could be forgiven for ascribing Merton Densher’s rueful lament against petticoat government to his creator. Densher—newspaper man of sorts, with literary ambitions of a kind—finds himself penned on all sides by the management of matchmaking women, women who wish him to act to their benefit, in one
way or another, “a circle of petticoats” that he “shouldn’t have liked a man to see” (Wings 421). Densher’s discomfort with his susceptibility to female management grows throughout the novel and forms a central narrative strain along with Milly’s declining vitality and Kate’s unceasing ambition. Initially registering to him as charming preparedness in a wife-to-be, his fond and “wonderful” conviction that his beloved Kate Croy “keep[s] the key of the cupboard” and will “dole me out my sugar by lumps” (263-264) curdles into bitter resentment as the number of women with authority to direct his movements and orchestrate his associations grows and as their efforts increasingly collude. Marooned in Venice late in the novel with his assortment of female companions, obeying their dictates while deeply conscious of the foolishness of his circumstances, Densher grasps fully for the first time the hidden complicity of their disparate aims:

She wanted, Susan Shepherd then, as appeared, the same thing that Kate wanted, only she wanted it, as still further appeared, in so different a way and from a motive so different, even though scarce less deep. Then Mrs. Lowder wanted, by so odd an evolution of her exuberance, exactly what each of the others did; and he was between them all, he was in the midst.

(Wings 421)

What the women want, of course, is Densher’s courtship of the dying Milly Theale. Each compelled by different motives—personal financial gain, family authority, the satisfaction of bestowing joy on another—the women coalesce in their matchmaking impulses: this man, Merton Densher, and this woman, Milly Theale, must be united, whether they wish it or not, for the good of all involved. James concludes his adventures with the courtship plot in a paroxysm of matchmaking.
The proliferation of matchmakers in *The Wings of the Dove* may surprise, given the novel’s famous refusal to conclude with any marriages performed or betrothals fulfilled, reserving only the consummation of death for one marriageable young woman and condemnation to eternal indecision for the other. The sheer force of female compulsion in the novel, the relentless pressure placed on Densher to join his fortunes quite literally to Milly’s, recalls the force of the entire tradition of the courtship plot within which James marks his specific territory. Following Elsie Michie’s reading of the nineteenth-century courtship plot as a structure “providing a set of laws that needed to be followed in order for the novel to make moral and aesthetic sense” (*Money* 182), I read the matchmaking imperative in *The Wings of the Dove* as, in one sense, a sign of the literary legacies with which James wrestles throughout his career, and particularly intensely in this text. As Michie notes in reference to the overtly matchmaking Mrs. Lowder, by “[c]reating a character that consciously works to make the novel follow the form of the nineteenth-century marriage plot, James effectively asks what the stakes are of that plot” (190) both for the participants in the courtship drama and for himself as a novelist conscious of his place as analyst and reviser of traditional forms. Matchmaking carries more symbolic weight than Michie allows at this late stage of James’s career, however, as both an intervention into the social world and a mode of literary creation and interpretation. The profusion of matchmakers and matchmaking in the novel speaks to a fragmentation of perspective that develops across James’s career, with the initial lopsided relationship of tacit and explicit matchmakers that structured his earliest works shading into the oscillation between the dual matchmakers in *The Portrait of a Lady* and finally erupting into a multiplicity of matchmakers corresponding to the multiplied narrative
consciousness of *The Wings of the Dove*. James continues to tie his narrative method to the strategies of his mushrooming matchmakers even as he dramatizes more resolutely the tragic consequences of their imposition of the courtship plot in the face of death and dishonor.

If the novel can be read as a drama of male resistance to female management, artistic and otherwise, with Densher increasingly thwarting his female handlers (particularly Kate), one must also acknowledge that Kate’s management, her matchmaking objectives, provide the creative engine that drives the story inexorably forward. *Wings* both grants Kate enormous narrative consequence, turning the novel over to her consciousness in a manner never bestowed on Madame Merle, granting her the fulfillment of her plots. In approaching the story through the lens of Kate’s preoccupations and constraints—her desires, her beliefs, her despair, her vital craving for liberty—James predisposes his readers to treat Kate’s actions and their consequences seriously, to read matchmaking as an earnest attempt at autonomous free-will in circumstances that conspire to prevent it. Yet James also bends the novel away from her toward the male writer-figure Densher throughout the course of writing. For while the novel is full of female writers—letter writers like Aunt Maud, novelists like Susan Stringham, even the eventual testator Milly herself—only Densher receives narrative control, a writing profession, and narrative consciousness. Through this shift James dramatizes the contest between male and female authorship that has motivated him since *Watch and Ward*. He also evidences his continuing, even deepened commitment to exploring both female victimhood and female villainy through the relationship of matchmaking. Resisting the easy binary opposition of the postures of tacit and explicit
matchmaking, the triumvirate of matchmakers in *The Wings of the Dove* evidence James’s fascination with female creative potential and authority. Each a figure of artistry and accomplishment, the novel’s three matchmakers—Kate Croy, Mrs. Lowder, and Susan Stringham—approach their social powers and limitations in interrelated but crucially distinct ways. Together, they indicate the inexorable connection of marital manipulation and narrative technique in James’s late work.

Kate Croy is, of course, the most significant of the three matchmakers who operate in *Wings*. Like Madame Merle, her methods align most with James’s narrative artistry in the novel. Also like Madame Merle, she intercedes in Milly’s courtship plot out of greed, her desire for both money and love, and this intercession both propels the novel’s action and leads to hopeless and dispiriting conclusions for the central triad of Kate, Densher, and Milly. In the manner of Serena Merle, she attracts nearly everyone who encounters her—Densher, Maud Lowder, Milly, Lord Mark, the reader, even perhaps James himself—with her good-looks and elegance, her forthright elegant brutality (as Milly terms it), her aura of amplitude and greatness. Again like Madame Merle, she is a master of artful appearances, shrewdly perceptive about psychological relations, nearly remorseless in her manipulation of affections, and lacking all compunction about dishonesty in pursuit of her goals. She is also a channel for narrative consciousness as James never allows the inscrutable Madame Merle to be. Throughout *The Wings of the Dove*, James plays with Kate’s position in the text, from central to peripheral and back again, from fully exposed to carefully masked, from entirely sympathetic to utterly repugnant. Given the complexity of the novel’s stance on Kate and of her moral position in the narrative, however, addressing her less ambiguously
presented co-matchmakers allows for a better introduction to James’s exploration of matchmaking in *The Wings of the Dove*. Through the characters of Maud Lowder and Susan Stringham, both less integral to the architecture of plot and narration than Kate, James presents two versions of female authority and social control that build upon his prior correlation of female authorship—with its maddening yet unavoidable legacy for James—and female matchmaking.

Maud Lowder initially resembles the explicit matchmakers from James’s earliest fictions, the forthright women who proclaim their intentions with confidence in their social altruism. Aunt Maud always appears similarly transparent in her intention to manage a brilliant match for her niece Kate, preferably to her acolyte Lord Mark. Yet James suggests a dynamic of compulsion and reward structures Mrs. Lowder’s relationships in the guise of care. Combining the finesse and will to power of an early tacit matchmaker like *The American*’s Marquise with a delighted sense of her beneficent nature, Mrs. Lowder renders hopeless the attempt to categorize matchmaking in this novel as either altruistic or selfish, effective or failed. Unflinching in her acknowledgment of her matchmaking intentions, Mrs. Lowder demonstrates considerable subtlety in her execution of them, particularly in her treatment of Merton Densher, Kate’s unacceptable fiancé. An early conversational bout between the two illustrates several elements of her approach to social influence and control. “Her terms of aggression, her weapons of defence, were presumably close at hand,” Densher observes, “but she left them untouched and unmentioned, and was in fact so bland that he properly perceived only afterwards how adroit she’d been” (67). Just as she characterizes her bargain with Kate as implicitly accepted and fully understood, she approaches her skirmish with
Densher from the position of transparency so total her desires never need to be mentioned. In adopting this strategy of interfused firmness and silence, Mrs. Lowder requires Densher to perform the interpretive work of reading her intentions behind her apparent charm. “She had wanted him to think for himself of what she proposed to say to him—not having otherwise announced it; wanted to let it come home to him on the spot, as she had shrewdly believed it would” (68).

As Elsie Michie contends, one can certainly read Maud Lowder’s position in the novel as that of the “older, propertied woman who seeks to impose the structure of the marriage plot on the other characters” (194), as the advocate of generic convention and adherence to formal templates, part of James’s deconstruction of the courtship plot’s limits and expectations. While Michie overlooks the presence of matchmakers as a distinct category of character across James’s fiction (and part of a narrative tradition spanning the century), her reading of Mrs. Lowder and similar other characters in James’s work squares with my observation of his reliance on matchmakers to grapple with the gendered implications of literary legacy and authorial identity. Despite Mrs. Lowder’s association with the marriage plot and its traditions, however, James does not connect her brand of matchmaking or of female authority to artistic creation, as he does with the matchmakers in other novels. Instead, her mode of social manipulation recalls a specific form of female authority, the traditional “power behind the power” of political hostesses, whose mastery of social relations granted them tangible access to decision-makers and a vehicle to advocate for their political vision in a time before female enfranchisement. Densher evokes this kind of role when he describes Mrs. Lowder as possessing a “splendid and conclusively British” essence. The force of her nature recalls
for him “rare material—precious woods, metals, stuffs, stones” (*Wings* 77), the hard and definite objects of trade and exchange and generational wealth, of the intersection of commerce and international relations. The objective substance of her wealth accords with the inflexible stringency of her opinions and her unshakeable commitment to her objectives. Kate envisions her as a “lioness” (*Wings* 25) and an “eagle—with a gilded beak” and “gilded claws” (*Wings* 63) and describes her methods as a form of terrorism, “the spirit in her that dares and defies her idea not to prove the right one” (*Wings* 405).

Maud Lowder’s insistence that the destitute Kate marry for wealth while the refulgent Milly marry for love advances the typically unarticulated assumptions of the marriage plot, as Michie suggests. To draw the association between matronly matchmaking and literary artistry, though, James relies on a second matchmaker, Susan Stringham, a minor authoress, paid companion, and childhood friend of the former Maud Manningham. James’s descriptions of Mrs. Stringham’s work reads like a fraught union of self-portrait and mocking criticism: “to be in truth literary had ever been her dearest thought, the thought that kept her bright little nippers perpetually in position. There were masters, models, celebrities, mainly foreign, whom she finely accounted so and in whose light she ingeniously labored; there were others whom, however chatted about, she ranked with the inane, for she was full of discrimination” (90). Possessed of ambition, abundant discrimination, and self-seriousness about her art, Mrs. Stringham resembles her creator. Yet James’s derision of her “bright little nippers,” her adherence to models

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138 Like James, Susan Stringham has a healthy appreciation of her own intellectual sophistication and takes keen delight in weighing it against her companions’ and finding it superior: “It made all the difference for Mrs. Stringham, over and over again and in the most remote connections, that, thanks to her parent’s lonely, thrifty, hardy faith, she was a woman of the world. There were plenty of women who were all sorts of things that she
and author “celebrities”, and the “dearness” of her longing for literary success place her firmly in the category of the minor, the complacent, the ladylike. Further, while her milieu as “a contributor to the best magazines” (90) resembles her author’s (whose novels and short stories often debuted in serial publications in Harper’s, Macmillan’s, or The Atlantic), her self-described “‘note,’ her art of showing New England without showing it wholly in the kitchen” (90), again reduces her talents and ambitions to a ladylike policing of class standards: “She had not been brought up in the kitchen, she knew others who had not; and to speak for them had thus become with her a literary mission” (Wings 90).

James’s portrait of Susan Stringham as woman author emphasizes her passion and sincerity, her mastery of her material and study of literary form, but also her inconsequentiality, her isolation, and the inadequacy of her literary dreams to sustain her when Milly’s wealth and beauty offers a more exciting path. Emphasizing her devotion to the tradition of courtship plot or the drawing room novel, James plants Susan Stringham as a signpost of its waning power, its desperation and decay, in the first decade of the new century (a choice, it is worth noting, that places him firmly in step with the work of many of his female contemporaries).139

wasn’t, but who, on the other hand, were not that, and who didn’t know she was (which she liked—it relegated them still further) and didn’t know, either, how it enabled her to judge them” (Wings 100).

139 Both The Wings of the Dove and the marriage problem novels identify social investment in traditional marital mores as a threat to women’s happiness. As Talia Schaffer has noted, the “marriage problem” novel “dominates both traditional and experimental fiction” in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and “decisively ended the century-long convention of representing marriage as a delightful haven, a solution to all plot problems, and a reward for a virtuous heroine. (Schaffer 39). James’s ‘radical’ rejection of the marriage plot and the literary ladies who write them in fact denotes his adherence to scripts writing women like Sarah Grand, Mona Caird, and even the traditionalist LB Walford found equally compelling. See, for example, Grand’s The
More than any other female matchmaker in James’s work, Mrs. Stringham treats her marriage plotting as a “marriage plot.” Her initial encounter with Milly spurs a literary crisis, the confrontation between “the real thing, the romantic life itself” (91) and the “categories” (90) she sketches with her “pen” (91). Though her decision to serve as Milly’s companion in Europe seems to mark the ascendance of reality over fiction, in fact Mrs. Stringham continues to read the social world through a literary perspective. Even as she consciously abrogates the “sustaining sense” of her friendship with Milly “as literary material” (142), as she abjures to turn Milly’s real existence into narrative fodder, she persists in applying a novelist’s impression of events and people to Milly’s character and entanglements. Typically, she characterizes Milly as a “princess,”140 imbuing her with the grace and power of a literary heritage of romance, imagining all her social relations through courtly tropes of elevation, vassalage, tribute, and reward. Even in a less fanciful mode, Milly’s delicate interpretation of Kate’s wishes, Densher’s desires, and Mrs. Condrip’s plans to represent the each to the other become, for Susan Stringham, “such signs of an appetite for motive as would have sat graceful even on one of her own New England heroines. It was seeing round several corners; but that was what New England heroines did” (Wings 167). If Mrs. Stringham’s appreciation of Milly’s powers of social perception best expresses itself through comparison to her literary children, she can only begin to address her disquiet in the presence of Kate Croy through recourse to authorship. “She would like—Milly had had it from her—to put Kate Croy in a book and see what she could do with her.... Mrs. Stringham, oddly, felt that with such stuff as the strange

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*Heavenly Twins* (1893), Caird’s “Marriage” (1888), and Walford’s *The Matchmaker* (1894).

140 See, for example *The Wings of the Dove*: 101, 142, 367, 422, 526.
English girl was made of, stuff that (in spite of Maud Manningham, who was full of sentiment) she had never known, there was none other to be employed” (287). The literary scripts that shape her work—the “thin trickle of a fictive ‘love-interest’” (91) she makes space for in her magazines—also shape her readings of Milly’s social entanglements and possibilities, despite both the realities of the story James chooses to tell and her pride in her New English pragmatism.

The literary scripts that dictate both Susan Stringham’s fiction and her conception of Milly’s place in the social realm also determine her practice as a matchmaker. Maud Lowder exerts her power over Densher in the mode of the politician she is; she presents a genial façade to cover the blunt force of her power, refuses to speak the threats her wealth enforces, and convinces herself that her interference serves the general good of all involved—Kate and Densher included. By contrast, as a writer Susan Stringham’s narrative imagination both inspires her matchmaking and guides its course. Her devotion to the courtly idea through which she understands Milly binds her to the cause of marrying her with Densher; imagining herself essentially as Princess Milly’s sworn subject more than her companion or friend or elder guide, she commits to the ideal of the doomed Milly “having what she does want” (Wings 346). At the same time, her sense of Milly’s life as grand narrative and the keen observational desire it engenders adds urgency to her efforts. This narrative impulse inspires her matchmaking practice, as well, as she invites Densher into a shared vision of Milly intended to persuade him to commit to her. “I’ve given up all to follow her. I wish you could feel as I do” (Wings 420), she implores, characterizing Milly for him as “an angel” (422). She offers a vision of near-religious sacrifice to a figure of sublimity, an emboldening chivalric call with the rhetoric
of higher morality. As devoted as she is to her chivalric illusions, Mrs. Stringham at the same time seems to understand their fictional nature; adept at spinning romantic tales in print, she willingly abandons them for a brutal interplay of honesty and deception when they fail to persuade Densher to commit himself. She has no need to cloak her interference in the guise of general benefit to all: she freely acknowledges to herself that she is “quite willing to operate to Kate’s harm” (345) in wresting Densher away from her. Further, she explicitly deploys Milly’s wealth in a way the heiress would surely cringe from, promising Densher material benefits to go along with the spiritual as a member of princess Milly’s entourage: “With her, at court,…it does pay” (*Wings* 422).

Reliant on Milly’s payments of material support, of social connections, of travel and adventure, Susan Stringham’s dependence as a social participant and an economic agent echoes her dependence as a writer. In all cases she commits herself in service of external ideas, subsumes her individual creativity to a larger project (whether writing marriage plot fiction or easing Milly’s travels). Even as a channel for narrative consciousness, she is supplemental and subsidiary; as Cameron notes, “Mrs. Stringham is repeatedly confirmed as thinking thoughts for Milly, or as thinking Milly’s thoughts so that Milly is relieved of the burden of thinking or speaking them” (133). Yet another example of a matchmaking author or an author as matchmaker, Susan Stringham is also the author as ventriloquist (speaking what her subject can’t say), as interpreter, and most ominously, as parasite. Her narrative perspective thus serves not to illuminate Milly’s from the position of expert observer, as she can only guess at Milly’s mindset (which James will shortly reveal directly to the reader), but to illuminate the workings of a mind that bends itself to others, that invents tales for lives it can’t furnish. She matchmakes for
Milly out of the conviction that Milly deserves what she desires even if it be Densher, but her principles—artistic, romantic, and social—are wrapped up in her sense of her own inconsequentiality and her longing to supersede it. “Oh, the daily task and the daily wage,” she sympathizes with Densher over the writer’s life, mourning her abandoned quest for “the golden guerdon or reward? No one knows better than I how they haunt one in the flight of precious, deceiving days. Aren’t they just what I myself have given up? I’ve given up all to follow her” (Wings 420). Whether construed as loyal companion or opportunistic follower, in both creative arenas—the social and the literary—Mrs. Stringham depends on others to script the contours of her work.

Finally I turn to Kate Croy, the pre-eminent matchmaker in The Wings of the Dove, whose decision to match her friend and her fiancé both arises out of her status as conventional marriage plot heroine and negates the very idea of virtue and reward in courtship narrative. Kate attracts nearly everyone with whom she engages—both on the level of story, in her seeming instant appeal to Densher, Milly, Maud, and Lord Mark, and on the level of narrative, in her necessity to James as his entry-point of narrative consciousness and to the many readers captivated by her boldness, wit, and unabashed confidence. Kate ascribes tremendous value to herself, value drawn from her union of two registers: the qualities of the conventional marriage plot heroine (beauty, conviction, loyalty to her beloved) and those of the matchmaker-authoress (ambition, skill, a talent for synthesis). “She didn’t judge herself cheap,” James remarks with approval on her first appearance in the novel, “she didn’t make for misery. Personally, at least, she was not chalk-marked for the auction. She hadn’t given up yet, and the broken sentence, if she was the last word, would end with a sort of meaning” (5). The apocryphal auction
conjures images of both financial ruin, of grieving widows and orphans helplessly watching their possessions dispersed to strangers, and of the “marriage mart” in which handsome young women await their selection by a potential spouse; in both senses, the chalk-marks of the auction denote dependence and an inability to set one’s own terms. Kate demands for herself instead the agency of the author (or the auctioneer), who resolves broken articulations into meaningful ones. She insists on her capacity to not only calculate her own value according to her own rubric but to extract its full amount from an uncaring world through her facility for self-presentation, for self-authorship.

It is this devotion to self-authorship that gives Kate so much more power as matchmaker than either Maud Lowder or Susan Stringham, women who may be committed to their schemes but who recognize the division between their personal histories and the young characters’ marriage plot. While deeply invested as observers and intercessors, the middle-aged matchmakers are not active participants in the plot itself; Kate, meanwhile, assumes multiple positions within the courtship drama: as heroine, as matchmaker, as villain, as victim. Imbricated within the courtship she plots, Kate’s determination to write her own marital destiny requires her to first bring the full force of her multiplied perspectives to bear on Milly and Densher’s decisions. Milly acknowledges as much with admiration, marveling that Kate “had but to open the floodgate: the current moved in its mass—the current, as it had been, of her doing as Kate wanted” (*Wings* 226). In claiming her right to dictate her experience and name her value, however, Kate also commits to the commodification of her most intimate relationships, agrees to weigh their worth in terms of their utility. “I want,” she explains to Densher of her intentions toward Milly, “…to make things pleasant for her. I use, for the purpose,
what I have. You’re what I have of most precious, and you’re therefore what I use most” (292). Kate’s assessment melds the tenderness of her affection for Densher with her cynical evaluation of his appeal to Milly and the benefit she can reap from that appeal. So, too, do her relationships with Aunt Maud and with Milly—in each she makes exacting account of the precise benefits possible from her association with each and the costs she will outlay to earn them.

Kate’s matchmaking is of-a-piece with the rest of her social management, a skillful performance. For Densher, Kate’s perpetual playacting indicates her essential subjection. “That was the story—“ he explains, “that she was always, for her beneficent dragon, under arms; living up, every hour, but especially at festal hours, to the ‘value’ Mrs. Lowder had attached to her” (Wings 277). This externally imposed value acts, in Densher’s reading, as the script Kate follows, the contours of the role she seeks to fill:

[O]ur young man recognized in it something like the artistic idea, the plastic substance, imposed by tradition, by genius, by criticism, in respect to a given character, on a distinguished actress. As such a person was to dress the part, to walk to look to speak, in every way to express, the part, so all this was what Kate was to do for the character she had undertaken, under her aunt’s roof, to represent…. Densher saw himself for the moment as in his purchased stall at the play: the watchful manger was in the depths of a box and the poor actress in the glare of the footlights. (Wings 277-278)

The managerial Aunt Maud’s “value” confines Kate’s movements, stifles the truthful expression of real emotion and requires instead the adoption of rigid forms and false masks in its place. The weight of tradition and criticism forces the gifted actress to
modify the genius of her interpretation in perhaps a similar manner to the weight that the scripts of female English literary tradition had on James’s earlier work; metaphors of artistic inauthenticity structure Densher’s understanding of Kate’s embrace of the dishonestly representational.

Kate seems less enervated than enlivened by theatricality of her existence, however, a fact that Milly perceives where Densher cannot. Several times, she recognizes in Kate not an actress, but a director, not a Susan Stringham-like novelist, but a dramatist, a fabricator of tableaux. While Kate, like a conjurer, redirects Milly’s awareness from Kate and Densher’s probable romance to Milly and Kate’s developing relationship, Milly both recognizes and consents to the artificiality of her friend’s maneuvers: she notes “that the occasion, in the quiet lamplight, had the quality of a rough rehearsal of the possible big drama,” conceding that “Milly knew herself dealt with—handsomely, completely; she surrendered to the knowledge, for so it was, she felt, that she supplied her helpful force” (Wings 227). Much later, in Venice, Milly follows her director’s lead in the simulation of intimacy and disclosure. James describes the women’s relish in ostentatiously dropping their metaphorical social masks alone in company as such: “they smiled and sighed on removing them; but the gesture, the smiles, the sighs, strangely enough, might have been suspected the greatest reality of the business” (363). Kate has orchestrated a moment that appears entirely honest but permits “the independent pair” their autonomy: each retains a grand secret from the other, each suspects the other’s apparent transparency. Their stratified masks upon masks betoken Kate’s matchmaking modus operandi, her ability to dissever feeling from appearance, to divide emotion from action, and to compartmentalize her identities as daughter, niece, lover, and friend in order to remain
“literally in control of the scene[s]” (242) she stages. The artistry and the inauthenticity of her method is most apparent in her only honest relationship. At the same dinner where Densher fancies her a subjugated actress Kate demonstrates her directorial prowess over him, skillfully guiding his interpretations of Milly and priming him to participate in her matchmaking scheme. With significant looks, simple statements, wonderful smiles, Kate compels Densher to first accept Milly’s illness, makes him aware of Milly’s fascination with him, and finally obliquely suggests the benefit he might extract from Milly’s desire. Their long, meandering conversation, conducted under watchful eyes in Mrs. Lowder’s busy drawing room, winds with perfect intention to each point Kate’s argument needs. “I’m breaking you in,” she teases Densher (Wings 294), compelling him, over and over again, to recognize her mastery over their simmering drama with Milly: “Do as I tell you” (295), she insists. “Try, as I’ve told you before, and you’ll see. You’ll have me, perfectly, always, to refer to” (301).

In this, Kate replicates James—who also compartmentalizes and divides, who separates characters’ facades from their thoughts, who conceals and reveals with deliberation. “Don’t think, however, I’ll do all the work for you,” she warns Densher with an authoritative mysteriousness to match the elliptical James’s. “If you want things named, you must name them” (433). The correspondence of matchmaking and authorial method sounds as a refrain throughout the novel. Lord Mark suggests as much when he reminds Milly in Venice, “Matcham, you know, is symbolic. I think I tried to rub that into you a little” (376). Rather than the symbol of lineage and wealth united, as Lord Mark intends by his allusion to his aptly named estate, however, or of Milly’s first intimations of her approaching death (the only match she can ultimately envision for
herself), Matcham, as I read it, stands for the matchmaking principle at work in James’s late fiction in the realms of both plot and praxis. It bespeaks his reliance on the courtship plot tradition that both shelters his fictions and confines them; it is the vexed marriage of method to material, authorial ambition to execution, and part to whole.

Structurally, James conceives of his authorial task as a form of matchmaking. As he explains in the “Preface” to the novel’s New York Edition, he organizes the novels macrocosmically around discrete “blocks” (*Wings* “Preface” 9) of character consciousness joined together through his authorial control; as Kate, the chaperone Susan Stringham, Milly, and Densher alternatively occupy this central position in the novel, infusing the narrative with their individual preoccupations, concerns, fears, dreams, and moral perspectives, James must preserve each character’s particular perspective while weaving each smaller unit into a unified whole. Even the text’s two volumes constitute two halves he must bring together in equal union. Microcosmically, at sentence level, he relies heavily on pairing and opposition of pairs. In *Thinking in Henry James*, Sharon Cameron notes the recurrent chiasmic relationship of key concepts in *The Wings of the Dove*: James habitually pairs evocations of thinking and looking, pictures and people, death and life in chiasmic union. Indeed, the very scene in which Matcham makes its symbolic reappearance features a prime example of chiasmus as sentence-bound matchmaking literary practice: Milly’s realization that “She mightn’t last, but her money would” (*Wings* 373). The rhetorical equivalence of Milly and her money points starkly to their division, to her money’s immutability and her own imminent mortality, as well as to her value—personal and economic—in the equations of courtship that Lord Mark attempts to solve.
Despite its rhetorical parallelism, James’s chiasmic sentence structure emphasizes division even as it suggests equality and union, as befits a novel in which the indicators of success and failure at matchmaking blur until indistinguishable. Indeed, the various forms of literary matchmaking in the text habitually rehearse this pattern of apparent union foregrounding persistent disjunction. James famously complains in the “Preface” of his deficiencies at uniting his foundational textual blocks: “‘The Wings of the Dove’ happens to offer perhaps the most striking example I may cite (though with public penance for it already performed) of my regular failure to keep the appointed halves of my whole equal” (“Preface” 13). He abjures the novel’s second volume as “false and deformed,” denouncing it “for disguising the reduced scale of the exhibition, for foreshortening at any cost, for imparting to patches the value of presences, for dressing objects in the air as of dimensions they can’t possibly have” (“Preface” 13). While suggestive of the paradigmatic deflation of completed works when compared with plans for them, James’s harsh assessment of his inadequacies as a matcher of halves corresponds to his narrative treatment of matchmaking as a plotting element in The Wings of the Dove. Elsie Michie traces Kate Croy’s strained relationship to the traditionally virtuous poor heroines of the English courtship plot, underscoring Kate’s conflation of romantic and material prosperity and her determination to garner herself all the rewards of the marriage plot novel, whatever the cost. Thus, in order to effectively make her own match—to marry Densher without sacrificing her social place—Kate must turn matchmaker for others. In all these endeavors, she simultaneously fails and succeeds in such equal measure that the terms fail to signify: she arranges no marriages but does stoke Milly’s desire for Densher; she wins Densher his inheritance from Milly but
grapples on the novel’s final page with the same exact Gordian knot—marriage or money—that bedeviled her on the first. At each strata of literary engagement, from the purely narrative to the purely rhetorical, James stages the same conflict between union and disunion and foregrounds the common dissatisfaction inherent to each.

Nowhere does James’s play with unity and division come into sharper focus than in his approach toward Kate herself, who serves—among all her other textual functions—as a means of exploring the very natural of authorial and readerly sympathy. Kate the matchmaker does occupy pride of place in *The Wings of the Dove*. More than James’s prior matchmakers, more than either Madame Merle or Henrietta Stackpole, Kate commands the focus of James’s narrative powers, directing the narrative eye toward her concerns and struggles, her hopes and desires. Kate’s initial dilemma—self-admittedly “in love” (*Wings* 51) and determined to keep it “wholly her own business” (52), bemoaning the damage of her reprobate father to her family name with the defeated admission, “But what could a penniless girl do with it but let it go?” (5)—seems primed to solicit readers’ sympathy for the familiar spectacle of an attractive but poor young woman struggling to unite matrimonial bliss and financial security.\(^{141}\) Further, as the novel begins, both Kate and James share a primary preoccupation with the state of her

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\(^{141}\) “James’s point here, I take it,” Michie writes of the novel’s opening and introduction of Kate’s courtship crisis, “is that the traditional configuration of the marriage plot, with its story of a virtuous heroine who marries magnificently, is less a counter to vulgarity than something that arises out of it. Indeed one way to read Kate Croy’s father and sister would be as readers of the marriage plot, readers who sit in the midst of their slippery armchairs and food-littered tablecloths and imagine something finer as they think about the magnificent marriage Kate can make. Yet Kate experiences herself as like the hero rather than the heroine of the marriage plot. She finds herself torn between a love she describes as ‘not a bit vulgar’ and the fate her family desires for her” (Michie *Money* 196).
union with Densher—the exclusiveness of their tie, the external threats to its consummation. Kate’s tense interfusion of clear-eyed cynicism and besotted devotion initially funnels the text’s narrative perspective; her handsome poise and artful cleverness, an echo of Madame Merle’s, also seems to approximate James’s polished literary style, suggesting her author’s investment in her desires. When James describes his two lovers disposition toward one another in Book One as their “practical fusion of consciousness” (“Preface” 11) he seems to also describe, more than ever, the relation between matchmaker and author—between matchmaker as author and as character, as marriageable participant in the courtship plot and external observer of its forms and requirements, of the “game,” as he refers to it (“Preface” 14).

Kate, too, considers her variations on the courtship plot a kind of game, one with certain rules of conduct that justify her form of play. In excusing her influence over Milly, she insists to Densher that she never discussed the girl’s fortune or how she should have disposed of it: “‘That wouldn’t, on my part, have been playing fair with her. And I did,’ she added, ‘play fair’” (Wings 561). Fair play sounds eminently reasonable, even when one reflects that the game demanded Kate and Milly’s most intimate relationships as its stakes. As both James and Kate acknowledge this game for what it is—their manipulation of appearances, affections, and allegiances to gain what they wish without sacrificing too much to the idols of custom and expectation that threaten to confine them—equation of authorial and character method with one another seems easy. Yet James’s style of play requires him to depose Kate from her seductive union with author
and reader (and, of course, with Densher) for the very reason of her gamesmanship. James chooses the very moments when Kate most resembles her creator, the scenes of her conscious manipulation of the forms of social custom in staging her appealing tableaux, to alienate her from the reader and to distance himself as her writer, toying with her narrational position in a manner reflective of her play with Milly and Densher’s hearts. For even as he takes great and obvious pleasure in writing about and through Kate—marveling in the novel’s “Preface” at the ease with which she immediately appeared before him in all her characteristics—he likewise delights in the narrative and psychological strategy undergirding his presentation of her, celebrating her incipient role as “trap for the great innocence to come” (“Preface” 14) even in her most appealing guise of besieged courtship plot heroine. In casting and recasting his impressions of Kate—revealing her “sides and backs, [the] parts in the shade as true as parts in the sun” (“Preface” 9), in presenting her as deserving heroine, as Machiavellian matchmaker, as vampiric predator, as reduced and scorned other woman—James fractures and fragments his reader’s response to her.

Concurrent with his prismatic presentation of Kate, James grants increasing textual primacy to Densher as the novel winds toward its climax. While Kate’s consciousness drops out as narrative center for the majority of the text following her initial introduction, Densher’s dominates the novel’s final half. From its initial preoccupation with the generic constraints of the courtship plot heroine as imagined

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142 Tellingly, Lionel Croy is the first character to mention the game of courtship in the novel, when he instructs Kate, “The only way to play the game is to play it. There’s no limit to what your aunt can do for you” (Wings 16). As the root of Kate’s crisis rests on her father’s disgrace and selfishness, his embrace of gamesmanship in relationships several hundred pages before Kate follows suit signifies further the distinctions James draws between Kate’s form of strategy and his own.
through Kate and subsequent meditation on Milly’s exquisitely painful and beautiful realization of her imminent mortality, the novel finally settles into the queasy discomfort of Densher’s residence in Venice and his unsettled response to the women who surround him. James offers his readers the narrative’s long-anticipation culminations—Milly’s death, Kate’s final maneuvers, the resolutions of her matchmaking confederates—through the focus of the one character who cannot share the women’s investment in the various courtship plots underway. For of course, simultaneous with his assuming predominance in the narration, Densher struggles for dominance against Kate in the plot. Initial admiration of Kate’s “charming strong will” (*Wings* 265) evolves into abhorrence for “all doing what Kate had conceived for him” and “not in the least doing—and that had been his notion of his life—anything he himself had conceived” (394). Initially he celebrates his inability to master Kate as a body of knowledge, marveling “The women one meets—what are they boy books one has already read? You’re a whole library of the unknown, the uncut” (300). On their final meeting in Venice, however, he delights in successfully coercing her into a sexual encounter: “He had never, he then knew, tasted, in all his relation with her, of anything so sharp—too sharp for mere sweetness—as the vividness with which he saw himself master in the conflict” (438). The shared setting of Venice links Densher’s dual triumphs, both his claiming of Kate’s body through “a service for which the price named by him had been magnificently paid” (443) and his refusal to affirmatively consent to the courtship of Milly that his trio of matchmaking hostesses demands. Though a writing man, Densher is not an uncomplicated author proxy for James, nor can his dominance of Kate in these chapters indicate straightforward elevation of Densher’s perspective over Kate’s. Still, the intersections of matchmaking,
femininity, and control in final section of the novel bring the conflict between Densher and Kate into sharper focus, framing it as not only the struggle for relational dominance between two lovers, but also as a literary man’s resistance toward the coterie of women who attempt to circumscribe him.

The famous final scenes of the novel, in which Kate and Densher confront Milly’s death and various legacies, all the unfortunate consequences of their matchmaking, interfuses the conflict for narrative control with the contest for relational dominance. At the same time that Kate and Densher jockey once again for the center of the narrative—not merely trading narrative perspective from chapter to chapter but disclosing and concealing their responses from one another as they alternate narrative focus—their intentions with regard to Milly’s bequests equally come into conflict. Kate’s schemes reach fruition with Milly’s death and probable bequest of her fortune to Densher; for all of Densher’s prior ambivalence about her machinations, she appears to have achieved her goals. At this moment, however, Densher’s demand for a specific form of courtship plot resolution disrupts her authorial control. Even as Densher claims, “I am in your power” (Wings 573) to Kate, he invalidates all her prior plotting by crafting an alternate narrative juncture. While Kate has struggled to write herself a courtship plot in which Milly’s death will mean her own elevation as a conventionally rewarded heroine, Densher offers instead a choice between marriage without wealth or singleness with it. Positing himself as at the mercy of her decision, Densher nonetheless dictates the parameters of the choices available to her, guaranteeing his own satisfaction, or perhaps more accurately, self-satisfaction, in either case. Plain-speaking though Densher is about his possible actions (his commitment to marry Kate within the hour, should she choose, or to make
over Milly’s wealth to her and never see her again), he critically conceals his potential desires. “The thought,” he admits to himself of Milly’s final bequest, “was all his own, and his intimate companion was the last person he might have shared it with. He kept it back like a favorite pang” (569). Kate accurately pinpoints this withheld information, his confirmation of the exact state of his affections for Milly, as the linchpin in her narrative deliberations. Whether she assume the role of heroine making a noble sacrifice or villainess making an ignoble one depends not so much on her actual action as on the unknowable state of his heart—after all, to relinquish her claims to a man who no longer loves her carries very different associations than abandoning a devoted suitor for the chance of riches. Evasive and uncommunicative, Densher establishes the terms of Kate’s dilemma but refuses to expose his own decision-making to her, echoing James’s evasiveness at novel’s end, the notoriously inconclusive last lines that suggest but refuse to confirm the couple’s rupture.

Densher’s and Kate’s are not the only competing authorial voices in the final chapter of *The Wings of the Dove*. Milly, silent in her grave, nonetheless exerts the power of her authorship through both her legal bequests and through her deliberately timed correspondence to Densher. Throughout the narrative, Milly has accepted her inability to play the part of marriage-plot heroine that Kate willingly assumes and that so many characters seek to impose on her. In defiance of Mrs. Stringham’s optimistic advocacy of her liking for Densher or of Mrs. Lowder’s dreams of a noble alliance for the American princess, Milly embraces solitude as her lot from the moment of her first portentous meeting with Sir Luke. “No one in the world could have sufficiently entered into her state,” she reflects as she wanders through London following her unsettling consultation...
with the doctor; “no tie would have been close enough to enable a companion to walk beside her without some disparity. She literally felt, in the first flush, that her only company must be the human race at large, present all around her, but inspiringly impersonal” (*Wings* 205). Necessary though she is to the matchmaking that permeates the novel, insistent though her various matchmakers are about her desire for marriage, Milly expresses no such compulsion in her private reflections, which are frequently a meditation on her singularity, her isolation, and the ephemerality of all her social relations. Through writing, however, Milly inserts herself irrevocably into Kate and Densher’s ménage in a way even an actual (and inevitably short-lived) marriage to Densher could not have done. While Kate burns “in the little vulgar grate at Chelsea… the unrevealed work of [Milly’s] hand” (*Wings* 563) her words lose none of their force: both Kate and Densher confess that they know what the letter contains even if they cannot read it; his imaginative reconstruction of these lost last words spur Densher’s growing disharmony with Kate and adoration of Milly’s memory. In writing her will, by contrast, Milly assumes the authority of courtship plot novelist herself, smoothing the obstacles impeding Kate and Densher’s marriage, an wholly literary act intended to bring about a union. In spreading her wing over the lovers, as Kate imagines it, she writes words of lasting consequence, consequence that both outlasts her own position as player in the plot and insists on her continuing presence after her death.

Milly’s writing is both the most and least powerful act of matchmaking in the novel. Burning her letter unread, Kate destroys her victim, friend, and rival’s unique expression of self—the particularities of her mode of expression, the explanation of her motives and intents, the revelation or confirmation of sentiments and expressions.
Shielding her own, Densher’s, and the reader’s eyes from the sight of Milly’s exposed literary self, Kate, the matchmaker, becomes the annihilator of women’s writing, a figure of anti-feminine creation. In burning Milly’s writing, Kate attempts to sever the connection of female agency, female authorship, and marriage plotting that the matchmaker represents throughout the nineteenth century. Silencing Milly’s final words for her own benefit, Kate tries to distance the parting gesture of its particular emotion source, fitting it as just another clockwork piece in her own construction. And yet, as Sharon Cameron observes, even unread Milly’s last expression of will exerts a force beyond the mere fact of a bequest or the beauty of a salutation. “Milly, in her correct assumption that she can will what she thinks, can make Densher the beneficiary of her will (which in this context means she can bequeath to Densher not simply her riches but also her image of him as it dictates what he is, as if involuntarily, to do) performs the novel’s ultimate manipulation” (Cameron 124). Whether Milly the dove spreads her wings over the lovers, Milly the spirit certainly comes between them. Whichever course they choose, Milly’s memory must exist as an adulterous third in their union or party to their separation. Here Henry James echoes Byron as he transforms matchmaking from meddling into adultery. But where Byron’s Lady Adeline presents a mind (and poet) divided against herself, drawn toward and terrified of extramarital dalliance, James deliberately unifies illicit sexuality and matrimonial management in his villainous matchmakers’ own persons. Matchmaking for Adeline (as for Emma) is a blind or a ruse, a distraction from truer, more essential feelings, a digression from a plot of either delight or disaster. For Kate Croy and Madame Merle, it is the persistent assertion of their bodily
presence in an external marital or pseudo-marital tie; for Milly Theale, it is the spiritual usurpation of the privileges of a spousal intimacy she could never claim.

While James banishes Madame Merle well before he concludes *The Portrait of a Lady* in complete fixation on Isabel’s struggles, he ends *The Wings of the Dove* with Kate’s quandary. Trapped by the belated plotting of her partners in the matchmaking triad, Kate finishes in despair at her inability to execute her plots as neatly as she could envision them. As much as the sacrifice of Milly Theale, Kate’s disappointment, her inability to write the courtship plot to satisfy her longings, stand as the culminating tragedy of the novel. Rather than authoring the narrative, she finds herself sacrificed to it as James finally, fittingly, punishes the matchmaker whose power has enthralled him throughout his decades of writing. With Henry James, matchmaking ends the courtship plot’s quest for union, for synthesis, and for amelioration. James resolves his experiments with courtship plotting, his resistance and attraction to female literary models, by relying most profoundly on the matchmaker’s art to structure his narrative and by making her, in the end, the victim of his plot. Yet in his final summation, even James agrees that he and Kate Croy both tried to bring two unequal halves together and felt profoundly dissatisfied with the results.

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143 See Clara Tuite’s *Romantic Austen* for an elaboration on the use of the marriage plot to reconcile the disparate allegiances to the maintenance of paternal, landed aristocratic culture and the furtherance upward social mobility for landless gentry and bourgeois women in Austen’s fiction. Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* also proposes a model through which marriage plots resolve social and class conflicts in favor of a bourgeois domestic harmony that models the national ideal.
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