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"Something Over and Beyond": Victorian Women, Marriage and Independence in Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?*

By Aleksandra Tryniecka¹

Abstract

Anthony Trollope's novel, *Can You Forgive Her?* offers a profound insight into a literary portrayal of Victorian femininity. The literary heroines in the novel (including Alice and Kate Vavasor, Arabella Greenow and Glencora Palliser) not only confront their hopes and ambitions with the principles of nineteenth-century society, but also offer an apt reflection on the universal notion of womanhood as incessantly suspended between and shaped by both social expectations and individual desires. I argue that *Can You Forgive Her?* offers a fully-fledged, multifaceted, literary vision of the Victorian woman, with her desires, dreams, fears and longings reaching beyond the nineteenth-century expectations concerning her supposedly idealised, domestic life. I also posit that the creation of Trollope's complex literary heroines was indirectly influenced by the three significant women of his life: his mother, Frances Trollope; his wife, Rose Heseltine; and his young American acquaintance, Kate Field. This influence is specifically discernible in *Can You Forgive Her?*, as Trollope's female characters strive for independence and personal fulfilment while, at the same time, they fear potential loneliness on the one hand and patriarchal tyranny on the other. The influence of Mrs. Trollope, Rose Heseltine, and Kate Field is also visible in the formation of Trollope's general views on women's placement in society: as a progressive conservative, he ardently advocated women's independence, while simultaneously believing that the ultimate female fulfilment was to be found predominantly in the traditional domestic context. Finally, while drawing on Virginia Woolf's concept of "a room of one's own," I introduce an idea of an empathetic "New Man" represented in Trollope's novel by the "victorious" male characters: John Grey and Plantagenet Palliser. Capable of reinventing themselves and becoming involved in the domestic sphere, Grey and Palliser succeed in bringing their female partners back into their lives, at the same allowing them to thrive in the metaphorical "room of their own." Eventually, through their empathetic behaviour, the "New Men" in Trollope's novel are capable of securing personal fulfilment and happiness of the female protagonists.

Keywords: Anthony Trollope, "Can You Forgive Her?," Victorian woman/womanhood, Victorian femininity, Victorian society, Marriage, Independence, Virginia Woolf, "a room of one's own," the "New Man"

Introduction

As noted by Robert Polhemus, "the heart" of Trollope's (1815-1882) novels "is not the world, but the particular men and women in it who both produce and are products of the fluctuating society and who must face change individually" (3). These are especially Trollope's female

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literary characters who courageously face the demands of society and changes which these demands introduce into their personal lives. Yet, while Anthony Trollope is predominantly sympathetic towards the female characters inhabiting his novels, it is, according to Jane Nardin, a “*sympathetic ambivalence* towards ambitious women” that governs his writing (13). Thus, on the one hand, Trollope often appears to be an ardent advocate of women’s rights—a male author carefully examining afflictions imposed on women by the nineteenth-century, masculine-oriented world—while, on the other hand, in his novels he usually constraints his literary female characters from gaining full independence, conveniently placing them within the walls of a traditional domestic context where, paradoxically, they find happiness and stability. This ambivalent attitude towards the female presence both in the public and private areas of life, as well as in the fictional world of Trollope’s novels, was significantly influenced by the three particular women: his mother, Frances M. Trollope (1779-1863), his wife, Rose Heseltine (?-1882), and his American acquaintance, Kate Field (1838-1896).

Mrs. Frances Trollope: An Industrious Mother

In her *Trollope the Feminist*, Deborah Morse observes that “Trollope approves of women who are strong mentally and physically, regardless of social class” (52). Trollope’s mother decidedly embodied such a principle of strength manifested through her endeavours to bravely manoeuvre her married and family life. She was “herself a novelist as well as a travel writer, though she published nothing before her fifty-third year,” Bohls and Duncan note:

[h]er husband, Thomas Anthony Trollope, was dogged by failure (and probably depression) all his life. He tried law and farming, and then, in 1827, invested what was left of his money to open a bazaar for the sale of fancy goods in Cincinnati. Frances and three of her children had travelled to America (December 1827) with the charismatic reformer Fanny Wright to found a utopian community in Tennessee. Appalled by conditions there, they moved to Cincinnati, where Thomas joined them. The bazaar proved a fiasco. On her return to England (July 1831), in an attempt to recoup the family’s losses, Trollope published *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. The book was an immediate and resounding success (407).

It is primarily to his mother that Trollope looked up to and devoted to her a chapter of his *Autobiography* (1883), indicating that “[t]hough [he does not] wish in these pages to go back to the origin of all the Trollopes, [he] must say a few words of [his] mother ...” because of his filial duty (21). In contrast, there is no filial attachment discernible in the brief depiction of Trollope’s father, whom he portrays in *Autobiography* as a person who,

when he started in the world, may be said to have had everything at his feet. But everything went wrong with him. The touch of his hand seemed to create failure. He embarked in one hopeless enterprise after another, spending on each all the money he could at the time command. But the worse curse to him of all was a temper so irritable that even those whom he loved the best could not endure it. We were all estranged to him, and yet I believe that he would have given his heart’s blood for any of us. His life as I knew it was one long tragedy (27).

Frances Trollope’s role in her marriage was to reinvent herself into a breadwinner and skillfully save the family from ruin. If she was a literary character, Trollope would have celebrated her on the pages of his novel and, undoubtedly, he indirectly did while creating his strong and assertive female heroines. Moreover, Frances Trollope’s preoccupation with politics visibly

corresponds with political inclinations of Alice Vavasor in *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864): "with her [Mrs Trollope] politics were always an affair of the heart," Trollope insists (*Autobiography*, 22).

In *Autobiography*, Trollope recalls that since his mother's first publication, "[b]ook followed book immediately," even though "[h]er volumes were very bitter; but they were very clever, and they saved the family from ruin" (23). Indeed, what strikes one on reading Frances Trollope's first work is her refined irony complemented by satirical skills, elegant wit and bitter, straightforward observations—all these attest to the strong character of a woman who courageously made use of her voice as a writer in order to unapologetically comment on the nineteenth-century United States and, at the same time, obtain a publishing success indispensable for her family's survival. "Trollope learned from his parents that a strong woman married to a weak man cannot practise wifely submission if she wants her family to survive," Nardin indicates:

[t]hrough his mother he learned to look beneath the conventional surface a woman presents to the world for some hidden, unfeminine talent or desire. Her character taught him to qualify, but not wholly reject, contemporary views of women—for in many ways his remarkable mother *was just a woman after all* (12-13).

Being "just a woman after all" indicates that Frances Trollope still existed within the nineteenth-century social universe in which her literary skill did not absolve her from her traditionally ascribed social role. Trollope's relationship with his mother was also fraught with problems and marked by frustration. Wright points out that in his *Autobiography* Trollope:

"plunges forthwith into a most pitiable account of his early years as the neglected youngest son of an improvident father and of a mother whose absence in America during his boyhood defined, all too cruelly—though he does not say so—her capacity to survive apart from him" (13).

Polhemus argues in a similar vein, positing that Trollope "saw women needed vocational opportunity, but the exercise of such agency could hurt. They had to have their own agendas but carrying them out might mean painful traumas for boys" (Markwick, Morse, Gagnier, eds., 16). Mrs Trollope's enduring traits of character, as well as her independent spirit, are discernible in such female protagonists as Glencora Palliser or Alice Vavasor. Yet, even though strong, assertive and seemingly independent, they are eventually restored to the conventional domestic plane, which further supports the claim that Trollope, a progressive thinker, was also conservative at heart.

Rose Heseltine: A 'Domestic' Wife

Trollope's marriage in 1844 created yet another potential opportunity for rethinking his perspective on women's roles in society. Yet, on reading *Autobiography*, one is rather surprised by the passage in which he refers to his union with Rose Heseltine in a dry and laconic manner:

My marriage was like the marriage of other people, and of no special interest to anyone except my wife and me. It took place at Rotherham, in Yorkshire, where her father was the manager of a bank. We were not very rich, having about (pounds) 400 a year on which to live (49).

Such a down-to-earth treatment of marriage inclines one to doubt the happiness of this union. Yet, as Polhemus asserts, “Trollope had *what the world calls* a happy marriage” [emphasis added], while Rose Heseltine was “a loyal, devoted, good partner who gave him the emotional security and support he needed to move successfully from a miserable youth into an amazingly productive middle age” (Markwick, Morse, Gagnier, eds., 18). Thus, on marrying Trollope, Heseltine assumed a role of “the angel in the house”—a supportive caretaker on whom Trollope could fully rely in all matters of his private and professional life. She was a “domestic woman, who helped her husband in a variety of ways—from raising his sons to copying his manuscripts—but occupied a limited place in his busy life” (Nardin, 13). Offering Trollope domestic comfort, Heseltine resumed the task abandoned in his boyhood by his mother, becoming an “ideal” motherly figure herself who patiently ordered Trollope’s so far unsatisfactory life. Yet, it can be assumed that the romantic spark was missing from this practical union.

Kate Field: A Spark of Novelty

Instead, years later, a peculiar emotional and intellectual spark originated in October 1860, as a close tie was formed between Trollope and a young American woman—Mary Katherine Keemle, known otherwise as Kate Field, whom Trollope encountered in Florence while visiting his brother. “Anthony Trollope is a very delightful companion,” wrote Field in a letter to Cordelia Riddle Sanford in October 1860, “I see a great deal of him. He has promised to send me a copy of the ‘Arabian Nights’ (which I have never read) in which he intends to write ‘Kate Field, from the Author,’ and to write me a four-page letter on condition that I answer it” (Field, 23). Judging by the content of the letter, Trollope’s fascination with Field was remarkable. He generously refers to his acquaintance in *Autobiography* as well, maintaining that,

[t]here is a woman, of whom not to speak in a work purporting to be a memoir of my own life would be to omit all allusion to one of the chief pleasures which has graced my later years. In the last fifteen years she has been, out of my family, my most chosen friend. She is a ray of light to me, from which I can always strike a spark by thinking of her (181).

Field advocated fresh feminist ideas and independence which interested and enticed Trollope, gradually permeating the pages of his novels as well. “After Trollope met and fell for Kate Field, he was much more interested in creating broadly feminist, strong-minded, witty, sharp young women who want to attach themselves to the knowledge and power of older men,” Polhemus asserts (Markwick, Morse, Gagnier, eds., 19). A similar argument stems from Sanders’ observation that Field’s “vivacity, vibrancy, intelligence, and independence of mind ... were to mould many of his [Trollope’s] best-observed women characters in the novels of the 1860s and 1870s” (19). Published in 1864, *Can You Forgive Her?* features one of the most outspoken and enduring of Trollope’s female characters, Glencora Palliser, whose values and unrealized longings bring her close to the ideals represented by Field.

Trollope’s Philosophy

Undoubtedly, Trollope’s philosophy of the female role and placement in society was thus shaped and transformed by the three important women of his life: his strong and talented, yet often absent mother, his patient and compliant wife and his vivacious young American acquaintance who significantly influenced Trollope’s perception of women in the nineteenth-century society which was already undergoing a political and cultural shift. Hence, Trollope’s reality, as well as his intellectual world, were both constantly changing and, as Morse puts it in the Introduction to *The Routledge Research Companion to Anthony Trollope* while discussing

the *Palliser* series, there are “progressively flexible – and increasingly feminist – responses in his [Trollope’s] urban chronicle (1864-1880) (52). In the *Palliser* series, Trollope’s female characters are constantly balancing between domestic and public spheres: on the one hand, they are encouraged to grow as individuals and make their independent choices, yet, on the other hand, they are eventually restored to traditional roles of wives and mothers. *Can You Forgive Her?*, the first novel from the *Palliser* series, aptly portrays such female suspension between desire and duty, at the same time offering an indirect commentary on Trollope’s evolving feminist inclinations intermingled with his more conservative assumptions concerning women. Hence, I argue that the conflict at the centre of *Can You Forgive Her?* is represented by the clash between personal desires of female characters and domestic obligations conventionally imposed on women – the conflict further attesting to Trollope’s complicated perception of women’s roles aptly defined by Nardin as “sympathetic ambivalence” (13).

***Can You Forgive Her?* – Between Obligations and Personal Dreams**

“On the one level, *Can You Forgive Her?* is a case-study in knowing your limitations, settling if not for second-best than for security and comfort rather than the lure of tantalising unknown,” acknowledges D. J. Taylor in the *Preface* to Trollope’s novel (*Can You Forgive Her?*, x). Trollope’s work, initially published as a series (1864-1865), abounds in thought-provoking and universal questions, one of them being the titular: “can you forgive her?”. It haunts the reader through forty chapters of a lengthy narrative relating the story of a twenty-four-year-old Alice Vavasor. Throughout the narrative, she epitomises the conflict between the female innermost desires and the expected conventions of life in the Victorian era. Moreover, Trollope’s work aptly discusses one’s ability to adjust to social expectations and, at the same time, use these adjustments for one’s benefit. The questions that arise upon reading the novel are: does the nineteenth-century society pose a threat to one’s integrity and individual contentment or, paradoxically, are the restrictive social rules beneficial for one’s future happiness? Are the nineteenth-century social expectations working as a manipulative force which guides an individual through the respective stages of life without his or her consent or, perhaps, do they carefully guard those who are at risk of going astray? Are one’s individual choices a guarantee of personal happiness, or do they have to be verified and approved by society? These questions draw the reader’s attention to the title of the novel. The reader is asked to “forgive” Alice’s presumably unfortunate, independent choices and not to judge too harshly her autonomous mind—a further indication of Trollope’s suspension between his conservative and progressive views.

Within the course of the novel, Alice’s unquenched longing for independence puts her at risk of not only hurting herself but also those around her: fearing to lose her individuality after marriage, she abruptly ends her engagement with a noble-hearted but seemingly dull John Grey only to become a victim of a ruthless cousin, George Vavasor. Is there an agreeable choice for the nineteenth-century woman or is she to remain invariably torn between equally disturbing options? What are the female limitations and possibilities in the patriarchally-constructed, Victorian world? The questions posed above are even more striking when one realises how universal and timeless the topic of an inwardly conflicted female character is, undoubtedly connecting the notions of Victorian and modern literary womanhood.

Trollope’s Female Characters: Between Conservative and Progressive Perspectives

The central question Alice asks is: “[w]hat should a woman do with her life?” (Trollope, 101). As the theme of women’s supposed “obligations” towards society echoes throughout Trollope’s novel, the title, *Can You Forgive Her?*, indicates that the potentially unpardoned individual is essentially a female. Apart from Alice, the novel hosts a number of vivid female characters who

are emotionally suspended between their social roles and private desires and, thus, require “forgiveness.” Alice Vavasor, Glencora Palliser, Arabella Greenow and Kate Vavasor represent contrasting portrayals of femininity in terms of differing social statuses, personalities, and age groups. Each female character in the novel possesses a unique sensibility and worldview, yet the four female characters are united in their endeavours to skilfully navigate between the nineteenth-century social requirements and their individual needs. As much as diverse and dissimilar, the female voices resounding in Trollope’s text create a multifaceted vision of the Victorian woman who, regardless of her age and status, possesses a universal desire: it is not only a proper environment to live in that she needs – the proverbial “room of one’s own,” but also and primarily – an understanding man who would allow her to thrive in it if she is to successfully reconcile her desires and obligations. Such reconciliation appears to be the “golden mean” of Trollope’s philosophy.

Therefore, this article seeks to explore the literary portraits of the Victorian female characters in *Can You Forgive Her?*, drawing on Deborah Morse’s claim that Trollope, even though partially conservative in his approach, “approves of women who are strong mentally and physically” (52) and Virginia Woolf’s remodelled concept of “a room of one’s own,” with a view to constructing a fully-fledged textual image of the nineteenth-century female character emerging from Trollope’s narrative and attesting to his “ambivalent” sympathy (Nardin, 13) towards women.

Trollope’s Empathetic “New Man”

In her renowned work, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf states that in order to write and create, “a woman must have money and a room of [her] own” (6). Forty-eight years later, Elaine Showalter asserts in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) that “the ultimate room of one’s own is the grave” (xiii) which removes female agency from the actual world of literary and political influence. Instead of locking themselves out, Showalter posits, women should “take strength in their independence to act in the world” (xiii). Although Woolf and Showalter concentrate on the relevance of female participation in the literary world, their claims adhering to female independence are applicable in other spheres of life as well, including those of professional career and marriage. In Trollope’s novel, the nineteenth-century female independence thrives only when supported by the men with whom the heroines’ fates eventually intertwine. Therefore, I believe that Trollope’s nineteenth-century, literary woman not only needs “a room of her own” but, primarily, as the plot of *Can You Forgive Her?* implies, an empathetic man capable of respect and understanding of his female companion, as well as of acknowledgment of the female individuality. As MacDonald posits,

Trollope’s works contain male characters that emphasise companionate marriage models and are presented as figures of healing rather than aggression. In fact, Margaret Markwick’s *New Men in Trollope’s Novels: Rewriting the Victorian Male* (2007) offers a reading of Trollope’s male figures as early New Men (11).

Can You Forgive Her? features such “figures of healing” who, as it will be further demonstrated, positively reconstruct the lives of their female counterparts, offering them reassurance and domestic peace, but also the freedom of “the room of one’s own” while not turning this specifically female space into Showalter’s metaphorical “grave” (xiii). Markwick compares Trollope’s male characters to those appearing in Nick Hornby’s modern novels which invite “non-oppressive, life-affirming ways of being men” (13). As she demonstrates,

Trollope, writing in the 1860s and 1870s, constructs masculinity based on an almost identical premise There is indeed a veneer of masculinist behaviour in the novels, of men relating to men in their workplaces, in their clubs, in their vestries and on their estates However, beneath the veneer, Trollope's masculinity is explicitly grounded in a man being in touch with his nurturing side. Men need to learn the language which puts feelings into words. The pleasure of physical expression of married love will be immeasurably deepened by a relationship founded on equality and respect (13).

Yet, at the same time, Trollope's literary heroines are asked to make conscious choices themselves in order to fully invite these "early New Men" into their lives.

Alice Vavasor: A Longing for Independence

In Trollope's novel, Alice Vavasor occupies "a room of her own" in the house cohabited with her father at Queen Anne Street in London, yet it is not fully "hers," as the room is initially designed for Mr Vavasor:

[h]er father had had the care of furnishing the house, and he had entrusted the duty to a tradesman who had chosen green paper, a green carpet, green curtains, and green damask chairs. There was a green damask sofa, and two green armchairs opposite to each other at the two sides of the fireplace. The room was altogether green and was not enticing. This had been fitted up as a 'study' for Mr Vavasor and was very rarely used for any purpose. Alice knew that it was ugly, and she would greatly have liked to banish the green sofa, to have repapered the wall, and to have hung up curtains with a dash of pink through them. With the green carpet she would have been contented. But her father was an extravagant man and from the day on which she had come of age she had determined that it was her special duty to avoid extravagance (Trollope, 10-11).

Apparently, Alice's decisions concerning the room are heavily influenced by the perception of her father's behaviour. Also beyond the "Woolfian room," when it comes to Showalter's "acting in the world," Alice remains only partially in control of her life and decisions. Yet, at the same time, she "had by degrees filled herself with a vague idea that there was a something to be done; *a something over and beyond*, perhaps altogether beside that marrying and having two children; – if she only knew what it was" [emphasis added] (101-102). That "something over and beyond" manifests itself through the heroine's restlessness and inner turmoil. Apparently, there is a missing puzzle in Miss Vavasor's life which she tries to project through a relationship with her imagined suitor:

[w]hen she did contrive to find any answer to that question as to what she should do with her life, – or rather what she would wish to do with it *if she were a free agent*, it was generally of a political nature. She was *not so far advanced as to think that women should be lawyers and doctors*, or to wish that she might have the privilege of the franchise for herself; but she had undoubtedly a hankering after some second-hand political manoeuvring. She would have liked, I think, to have been the wife of a leader of a Radical opposition, in the time when such men were put into prison, and to have kept up for him his seditious correspondence while he lay in the Tower [emphasis added] (102).

Whether inside or outside of the green drawing room, Alice is unable to view herself as an individual fully in charge of her own life. What remains for the heroine is a vague idea that her

plans and desires may be acted out by her potential future partner. Hence, Alice hopes that her prospective spouse might share her values and undertake the same actions she would commence *if she were* a decisive agent [emphasis added]. Apparently, a seeming financial independence has no liberating value for the heroine: Alice represents the society in which the most desired female roles embrace those of wives and mothers, hence she finds herself unable to escape the conventional expectations of the era.

“A Victorian middle-class woman who had not married was expected to be the companion and nurse of her parents,” reminds one Liza Picard: “After they died, the best she could hope for was the life of a useful maiden aunt Marriage, even to a tight-fisted autocrat, was probably preferable” (326).

According to Joan Perkin, the nineteenth-century female independence was a theoretical, illusionary state:

[t]he subjection of women was enshrined in English law and custom for nine hundred years. Down to the eighteenth century and beyond women were subjected to the domination of the unfair sex. The law undoubtedly regarded every woman as under tutelage to some man, usually father or husband (1).

Despite her economic freedom and significant autonomy of mind, Alice does not relish independence, constructing her life around the father figure and expectations of marriage. This is a “common” path for Victorian women, Perkin indicates:

[a] woman normally passed, either before or soon after the age of majority, from the protection of her father to that of her husband. In short, she became a *femme covert*, a hidden person, sunk into and merged with the personality of her husband (1-2).

Alice seems to be aware of the fact that upon marriage her individuality will be sacrificed and “merged” with that of her spouse and the realisation results in her inner struggle. Unable to turn into a politician herself, she seeks a communion of minds with a male counterpart who would become her spiritual doppelgänger – a performer of her unrealised dreams.

Alice Vavasor: Conflicting Desires and Choices

Trollope’s novel features two suitors who represent the contrasting sides of Alice’s personality, thus her potential male doppelgängers: John Grey and George Vavasor. These dissimilar figures aptly epitomise Alice’s conflicting desires, ambitions and insecurities: on the one hand, she longs for a domestic comfort embodied by Grey but, on the other, she is driven by a consuming desire for a career and individual freedom seemingly offered by Vavasor. In Alice’s conflicting desires one can see Trollope’s “ambivalent sympathy” (Nardin, 13) for women who long for a free agency and yet fully profit only from a domestic comfort offered by the Trollopian “New Men.” Initially, Alice is engaged to Mr Grey – a courteous but seemingly dull, overbearing man:

[n]o man could be more gracious in a word and manner than John Grey; no man could be more chivalrous in his carriage towards a woman; but he always spoke and acted as though there could be no question that his manner of life was to be adopted, without a word or thought of doubting, by his wife (Trollope, 32).

Alice gradually tries to reconcile herself to the prospects of a quiet, secure yet uneventful life in Cambridgeshire, away from the bustling London. Still, her engagement signifies imprisonment, as "[s]he told herself that she feared to be taken into the desolate calmness of Cambridgeshire" (102). She strives to:

"tell Mr Grey that she [is] not fit to be his wife – and she would beg him to pardon her and to leave her. ... She felt quite sure that she would be *free* as soon as she had spoken the word which she intended to speak' [emphasis added] (104).

Trollope's heroine balances between the fear of a pending confinement on the one hand and her ambitious desires on the other, both contained, paradoxically, in the very act of marriage. As already indicated, John Grey and George Vavasor are not only treated by Alice as her potential suitors but, primarily, as the agents through whom she may realise her potential. It is not the need of "marry[ing] the man, hav[ing] two children and liv[ing] happily ever afterwards" (101) that propels Alice's actions but, instead, a vague feeling that for the nineteenth-century woman, regarded as an individual, there must be "something over and beyond" (101) – a conviction that "[a] woman's life is important to her" (101) and reaches beyond domestic occupations and wifely duties. Alice "would like to have around her ardent spirits, male or female, who would have talked of 'the cause,' and have kept alive in her some flame of political fire" (102). Hence, spiritual connection and mutual understanding constitute the basis for any union considered by the heroine. Trollope revolutionises his female protagonist endowing her with modern arguments, as she openly argues that love is not enough in order to obtain personal fulfilment:

[t]hat a girl should really love the man she intends to marry, – that, at any rate, may be admitted. But love generally comes easily enough. With all her doubts Alice never doubted her love for Mr Grey. Nor did she doubt his character, nor his temper, nor his means. But she had gone on thinking of the matter till her mind had become filled with some undefined idea of *the importance to her of her own life* [emphasis added] (101).

This profound, yet almost pernicious self-awareness results in Alice's decision to separate herself from Mr. Grey and, simultaneously, from that part of her personality which longs for a peaceful, domestic life. At this stage, Trollope poses a question whether, for the nineteenth-century woman, it is possible to obtain both love and personal fulfilment in life or are these two dimensions completely discordant? After her separation from Mr. Grey, Alice turns to her cousin and a former lover – George Vavasor, who treats the renewal of their acquaintance as an opportunity to regain financial stability and political influence. According to D. J. Taylor, "George Vavasor is a terrific creation – a man prepared to stop at absolutely nothing, consumed with spite and jealousy, but with an odd, whimsical side" (*Can You Forgive Her?*, x). Vavasor's treacherous and unpredictable personality initially entices Alice, allowing her to project herself in a new, altered, independent role of an intrepid, risk-taking partner. She readily offers Vavasor her financial resources, which are meant to gain him a seat in Parliament. Hence, Alice strives to control his political career and projects herself as a political activist. Yet, fascinated by this illusory independence and absorbed by her political plans for George, Alice forgets that,

she had been mistaken in her first love. He [George Vavasor] whom she had worshipped had been an idol of clay He had not only been untrue to her, but worse than that, had been false in excusing his untruth. He had not only promised falsely, but had made such promises with a deliberate, premeditated falsehood. And he had been

selfish, coldly selfish, weighing the value of his own low lusts against that of her holy love. She had known this and had parted from him with an oath to herself that no promised contrition on his part should ever bring them again together. But she had *pardoned him as a man, though never as a lover She had again become very anxious as to his career* [emphasis added] (Trollope, 24).

Miss Vavasor admits that even though “loving and marrying” her cousin would be impossible, “she felt that if she could do so without impropriety, she would like to stick close to him like another sister, to spend her money in aiding his career in Parliament” (103). Eventually, the relationship proves disastrous for yet another time, as George, encouraged by Alice’s thoughtless generosity, becomes more reckless, demanding and violent, revealing himself as an unmannerly tyrant. Paradoxically, while trying to escape a conventional role of a submissive wife, Trollope’s heroine finds herself in the company of the man who would not hesitate to ruin her for his own benefit. It seems that Alice’s financial independence turns into a trap that works against her, as it eventually lures back into her life a calculated man.

Social Position, Resources and Personal Freedom

Yet, in the nineteenth century, the women who possessed substantial financial resources were often able to lead more unconstrained and secure lives than the less affluent ones. “A wife could often ‘call the tune’ in a marriage if she held the purse-strings,” Perkin observes, offering an example of an affluent Lady Shelley:

Frances, Lady Shelley, said that in 1807 she married a gambler and spendthrift whom she nevertheless loved; he had long before that parted with his family estate to pay his debts, but in 1814 inherited from an uncle another estate Lady Shelley spent £70,000 of her own fortune in improving the place. ‘It was a great pleasure that I spent this enormous sum on Sir John’s new property,’ she wrote later, ‘for it gave him a good position in the country and consoled him for his early errors which he never ceased to deplore.’ Clearly, Lady Shelley felt totally in control of her own money, and was in a position both to pay the piper and call the tune. (76-77)

There is a slight similarity between Lady Shelley’s attitude and Alice’s mindset, as the latter also finds pleasure in offering her suitor extravagant sums of money. Yet, in contrast to Lady Shelley, Alice apparently does not love her partner: “[s]he was as firmly sure as ever that she could never love him more. He had insulted her love ...” (Trollope, 103). The reasoning behind her splendid offering is different from Lady Shelley’s disinterested impulse to please her prodigal lover: it is Alice’s ambition and unquenched longing for the vague “something over and beyond” that encourages her to accept George as her new suitor. With a yearly income of “four hundred a year” (4), it is beyond Alice’s capabilities to exercise such a control over George as, for instance, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aristocratic women would be able to do. An affluent Lady Holland, for instance, Perkin indicates,

was able to buy herself out of a marriage in 1797 because her first husband (Sir Godfrey Webster) agreed to a divorce on condition that she hand over to him all her fortune of £ 7,000 a year less £ 800 a year for her own use. (76)

In Trollope’s novel, it seems that Alice overestimates her social position and thus the chances of escaping a traditional marriage prospect. Is she also incapable of properly decoding others’ intentions? One may suppose so, especially after it is revealed that the rejected John Grey is the

one secretly paying off George's exorbitant debts in order to preserve Alice's fortune and dignity. In the light of this discovery, the question from the title – *Can you Forgive Her?* – appears to be straightforwardly pointed at Alice. Moreover, one begins to wonder that it is, paradoxically, that confining society and its secretive and manipulative ways (Grey paying off Vavasor's bills and Alice's relatives openly disapproving of her new suitor, exhorting her to right the wrongs) that actually has a redeeming influence on the heroine's life. Yet, her desire to obtain an indirect political influence through the male agency (George Vavasor) encapsulates the position in which numerous women found themselves in the nineteenth-century England: '[w]hen Lord Palmerston died,' Perkin quotes Airlie,

Caroline Norton [a social reformer and a writer] wrote [to Lady Palmerston], 'It was my dream when I thought to marry and *live among the men who influenced their time*, to be what I think you were, in this, *the only reasonable ambition of women...*to have so far added to the happiness and security of a career of public usefulness and public elevation... (Airlie, 1922) [emphasis added] (87).

"The only reasonable ambition of women" appears to be detrimental to Alice's happiness, as the union with George brings about distress and further social exclusion. Within the course of the novel, Trollope gradually reveals the innermost personalities of George Vavasor and John Grey, hence warning one not to judge rashly by appearances: as George by degrees sinks into the darkness of wounded ambition and hate, Mr. Grey eventually discloses himself not only as a worthy partner but also as the one who applauds Alice's political aspirations – hence, the Trollopian "New Man" ready to restore the heroine's sense of dignity and offer her domestic safety while still acknowledging her separateness and independence. The question: *Can You Forgive Her?* can be thus applied to Alice's misreading of Mr. Grey's nature which, beyond the layer of a supposed dullness, contains the zeal of a disinterested lover and friend.

Marriage in Trollope's Literary World

As already indicated, it is primarily the fear of losing her individuality upon marriage that triggers Alice's chaotic decisions. As observed by D. J. Taylor, Trollope's novel resounds with "hankering for psychological realism, of letting people be themselves in so far as it is consistent with the ultimate sanctions of taste ..." (*Can You Forgive Her?*, xi). In her explanatory letter to Mr Grey, Alice endeavours to map her fears, stating that

[m]arriage is a great change in life, – much greater to me than to you, who will remain in your old house, will keep your old pursuits, *will still be your own master*, and will change in nothing, – except in this, that you will have a companion who probably may not be all that you expect. *But I must change everything. It will be to me as though I were passing through a grave to a new world.* I shall see nothing that I have been accustomed to see, and must abandon all the ways of life that I have hitherto adopted [emphasis added]. (Trollope, 97)

In Trollope's novel, marriage is a central, powerful and almost almighty force which shapes not only Alice's prospects, but also those of the secondary female characters: Glencora Palliser, Arabella Greenow and Kate Vavasor. These female protagonists, representing disparate stages of life and differing attitudes towards their fates, impact the process of Alice's personal growth and significantly enrich the overall portrayal of Victorian femininity in Trollope's narrative. In effect, *Can You Forgive Her?*, a story built upon several parallel stories with the central

question eventually applicable to all the female characters, comprises a multi-layered study in the complex individuality of a middle- and upper-class Victorian woman.

Although Trollope maintains in his *Autobiography* that he “cannot speak with too great affection” of his novel, “that which endears the book to [him] is the first presentation which [he] made in it of Plantagenet Palliser and his wife, Lady Glencora” (108-109). While Alice resigns herself to a loveless union with George, her younger cousin, Glencora, is forced to marry an aristocratic, ambitious politician – Plantagenet Palliser, who neglects his family life due to an overwhelming number of professional duties. In contrast to Alice, Glencora criticises her husband’s excessive political involvement and his mental disconnection from domestic affairs: “[s]he had said how indifferent he [Mr Palliser] was to her pleasures, and how vainly she strove to interest herself in his pursuits” (Trollope, 212). Lady Glencora’s marriage is a forced union carefully arranged by her concerned relatives, who previously witnessed the young girl dangerously falling in love with Burgo Fitzgerald – a spendthrift “whose Byronic good looks mysteriously endure however much cherry brandy he sinks” (Taylor, *Can You Forgive Her?*, ix), similar in his conduct to Alice’s unfortunate suitor. Paradoxically, it is Alice who denies supporting Glencora and Burgo in their elopement plans. Instead, she “counsel[s] her cousin to be true to her love if her love was in itself true” (174) and wishes her “joy” (175). Although sceptical about the chances of Glencora and Burgo’s happiness, Alice remains enticed by her cousin’s self-will and outspokenness: “[w]hat a strange, weird nature she was ! And how she talked! What things she said, and what terrible forebodings she uttered of stranger things that she meant to say!” (211). Glencora embodies the qualities which Alice espouses and fears at the same time: she is straightforward, courageous, strong-minded and ready to oppose social conventions. Yet, Alice cuts short her cousin’s rebellious plot of elopement in the same manner in which she suppresses her own autonomous ambitions and desires. Lady Glencora offers an insight into what Alice would have been if she possessed unparalleled courage, disregard for the worldly expectations, unbeaten outspokenness and, primarily, if she regarded herself as a “free agent” (102). Alice envies and admires her cousin’s self-granted mental independence yet does not find enough courage to follow into her footsteps. Glencora is Alice’s mirror reflection – her more courageous and less restrained alter ego: she perfectly epitomises Alice’s fears of traditional, unsatisfactory marriage and passionately criticises her forced union with Mr Palliser. In this light, Alice’s behaviour appears hypocritical and self-sabotaging when she states that “[i]f Glencora’s lot in life has not satisfied her, there is so much the reason why she should not mention it” (211). On the one hand, in theory, it seems that Alice longs for an almost modern independence of the “New Woman” but, on the other hand, in practice, she acts according to the conventional, patriarchal expectations, not finding enough courage to “stamp her foot.” Hence, she is a character in transition, not fully ready to voice her concerns or raise a rebellion.

Society: An Authoritative or Protective Force?

Glencora, on the contrary, is openly at odds with the aristocratic society in which she is made to live with Mr Palliser. As Polhemus puts it, “[i]n her, Trollope expresses carefully and fully, not only the frustration, flightiness, passion, and courage of a single high-spirited Victorian woman in all her complexity, but also a kind of universal feminine plight” (104). In his *Autobiography* Trollope reflects upon Glencora in the following manner:

[s]he had very heavy troubles, but they did not overcome her. As to the heaviest of these troubles, I will say a word in vindication of myself and of the way I handled it in my work. In the pages of *Can You Forgive Her?* the girl’s first love is introduced, – beautiful, well-born, and utterly worthless. To save a girl from wasting herself, and an

heir from wasting her property on such a scamp, was certainly the duty of the girl's friends. (109-110)

Acknowledging his heroine's suffering, Trollope nevertheless insists that the control that society administers over Glencora is necessary for the sake of her future and honour – undoubtedly, the interference of her relatives saved Glencora from a decision which would ruin her life. On the one hand, in accordance with his conservative approach, Trollope maintains that society can serve as a force which, although authoritative, guides safely such women as Glencora through the intricate paths of life. On the other hand, Trollope "the feminist" indicates that "it must ever be wrong to force a girl into a marriage with a man she does not love, – and certainly the more so when there is another whom she does love" (*Autobiography*, 110). Hence, Trollope's equivocal attitude towards women is discernible once again: while he endeavours to justify and defend his heroine's longings, he also strives to prevent her from ruin while safely yet firmly placing her in a domestic context as a wife of the partner who gradually reinvents himself into the empathetic "New Man."

During her marriage, Glencora is continuously drawn to her former lover, Burgo, almost succumbing to his elopement plans. However, she remains faithful to her husband, while Mr. Palliser eventually saves his marriage and, in return, obtains Glencora's love. Lady Glencora thus remains as Plantagenet's wife "with all the propriety in the world, instead of becoming wife to poor Burgo, with all *imaginable impropriety*" [emphasis added] (Trollope, 174). Blind passion, Trollope suggests, is not a proper basis for a mutually satisfying marriage. In the novel, the "proper" union is invariably encouraged by society which, after depriving the heroines of their free will and the possibility to act on their emotions, paradoxically paves the way for their secure, reasonable and safe future. "[H]aving acknowledged that his audience will never permit him to detach Lady Glencora from Mr Palliser, or allow Alice to marry scar-faced, stick-at-nothing George, Trollope is careful to allow nearly every one of his major characters the means of defying our expectations of them," D. J. Taylor attests:

[t]he modern reader is quite likely to emerge from *Can you Forgive Her?* with a sneaking suspicion that, however *morally satisfying* the outcome, one, if not two, of its female characters have had their emotional life *quietly manipulated* to achieve it [emphasis added]. (xii) ... It would be perfectly possible, 150 years later, to construct a kind of alternative naturalistic version of it in which a socially ostracised Lady Glencora decamps with Burgo to the Mediterranean olive groves to watch her beloved drink himself to death, while Alice marries George and sits miserably by as he squanders her fortune before trading her in for a younger model. But this, understandably, is a book that Trollope could never have written. (*Can You Forgive Her?*, x)

Arabella Greenow: A Liberating Widowhood

These are also the resolutions which could have never been accepted by probably the most vivid, industrious and unconventional female character in the novel – Arabella Greenow. An aunt to Alice, George and Kate, Greenow is a forty-year-old widow with a reputation of a beauty and flirt (Trollope, 61). On marrying a much older man, she inherited a fortune and won the favour of her family. Shortly after the marriage, "Mr Greenow died; and the widow, having proved the will, came up to London and claimed the commiseration of her nieces" (62). Arabella's life – her misfortunes and victories – revolves, obviously, around the immortal theme of Victorian marriage: initially rejected by her patriarchal family ("she had offended her father and brothers by declining to comply with their advice at certain periods of her career" [61]),

she is happily readmitted into the circles of her relatives after the triumphant union with a genuinely devoted and, importantly, affluent merchant:

Arabella had long been a thorn in their side, never having really done anything which they could pronounce to be absolutely wrong, but always giving them cause for fear. *Now they feared no longer.* Her husband was a retired merchant, *very rich, not very strong in health,* and devoted to his bride. “Your aunt Arabella has shown herself *a very sensible woman,*” the old squire had written [to Kate]; “*much more sensible than anybody thought her before her marriage*” [emphasis added]. (62)

The striking irony of the passage is that the propriety of Arabella's choice is measured by her elderly husband's wealth and his declining health. Aunt Greenow is the “sensible woman” who chooses *marriage de convenance*: there is no threat of losing her independence, as in Alice's case, and no danger of a consuming passion, as in Glencora and Burgo's affair. In contrast to a married lady,

“[a] widow has all the freedom of a girl, combined with the liberty of a married woman. She has the secure social position of a matron without the drawback of a husband. She is nearer absolute independence than other women are ever known to be,” Reed argues. (Phegley, 159-160)

Moreover, “[n]ot only could she anticipate what men wanted but she knew how to provide it” (Phegley, 160) and this characteristic can be readily applied to Mrs. Greenow: not only does she know how to entertain herself with the presence of the two new awkward suitors, Captain Bellfield and Mr Cheesacre, but also caters for her nieces' needs while trying to favourably marry them off. As calculated as she appears to be, Mrs Greenow is a character who easily gains the reader's sympathy, as well as that of other female characters in the novel: “Mrs Greenow was good-natured, liberal, and not selfish” (Trollope, 64). In the course of the novel, she readily applies her matrimonial experience to arrange a successful marriage between her former suitor – Mr. Cheesacre and a local girl – Charlie Fairstairs. Eventually, after a chain of comical events, Mrs. Greenow marries a ruined Captain Bellfield, knowing that he will have to fully rely on her financial means and thus not cause trouble in her peaceful, well-ordered life. It is a fully independent decision of a liberated, affluent, nineteenth-century widow. In this respect, Mrs. Greenow resembles the aforementioned Lady Shelley who, endowed with resources and generosity, delights in supporting her husband:

[Captain Bellfield], at any rate, had been in luck. If any possible stroke of fortune could do him good, he had found that stroke. He had found a wife who had money enough for all his wants, and kindness enough to gratify them and strength enough to keep from him the power of ruining them both. (755)

A self-aware woman, Mrs. Greenow defies social conventions and yet, she realises that the social world is a theatre where she is expected to perform in accordance with the rules. Hence, she dramatically performs an act of mourning for her late husband, continuously shedding invisible tears and thus revealing her theatrical nature:

It was beautiful to see how Mrs Greenow went to church in *all the glory of widowhood* She turned over all her wardrobe of mourning, showing the richness of each article, the stiffness of the crape, the fineness of the cambric, the breadth of the frills, - telling the

price of each to a shilling This she did with all the pride of a young bride [emphasis added]. (65)

Fashionably dressed and perfectly in mourning at the same time, Arabella Greenow performs simultaneously as a temptress and a widow. "Dear Mr Greenow! Sweet lamb! Oh, Kate, if you'd only know that man!" she exclaims while "sitting in the best of Mrs Jones' sitting rooms, waiting to have dinner announced" (64). Mrs. Greenow's theatrical nature and her apparent hypocrisy is double-edged, as not only does it offer a comical effect, but also unmasks the dynamics of Victorian social life. As the narrator observes, "[t]he charm of the woman [Mrs Greenow] was in this, – that she was not the least ashamed of anything she did" (65) – perhaps this is also why she simultaneously appears to be the most hypocritical and the most genuine female character in the novel. Mrs Greenow "performs herself" so unaffectedly and makes her performance so apparent and natural, that her behaviour becomes veritable and accepted by the reader in its straightforwardness.

Aunt Arabella's traits of character: her astonishing assertiveness, openness, admirable self-control and self-assurance, essentially validated by her distinguished social status, constitute yet another piece of the puzzle in a complex jigsaw of the nineteenth-century womanhood as portrayed by Trollope. Although presumably not the choice dictated by genuine feelings, the initially confining act of marriage eventually dignifies Arabella and absolves her from the past – it paves the way for her thriving as a generous member of society and a liberated woman who may eventually act accordingly to her own desires. The resourcefulness of Arabella Greenow can be likened to that of Trollope's mother who bravely faced the trials and tribulations of her complicated life. As one reads in Trollope's *Autobiography*, after her husband's death, his mother "moved to England, and took and furnished a small house at Hadley, near Barnet" (27). Furthermore, Trollope recalls,

how gay she made the place with little dinners, little dances, and little picnics, while she herself was at work every morning long before others had left their beds. But she did not stay at Hadley much above a year. She went up to London, where she again took and furnished a house, from which [his] remaining sister was married and carried away into Cumberland. My mother soon followed her, and on this occasion did more than take a house. She bought a bit of land, – a field of three acres near the town, – and built a residence for herself. ... She was an *unselfish, affectionate and most industrious woman, with great capacity for enjoyment and high physical gift. She was endowed too, with much creative power, with considerable humour, and genuine feeling for romance.* [emphasis added] (27-28)

It seems that Mrs. Trollope's personality traits closely correspond with those of Arabella Greenow's: they both appear to be unaffected yet ambitious, innocently genuine in their actions yet straightforwardly aim-oriented, industrious but not calculated and, finally, strong-minded yet not radically obstinate.

Kate Vavator: Escaping Social Expectations

It is only Kate Vavator, Alice's older cousin, who escapes the trials and tribulations of courtship and married life. However, at first, Trollope portrays Kate as exceptionally devoted to her brother, George Vavator, Alice's suitor and a powerful male figure whose overbearing authority over Kate's life may be likened to that of a husband. Within the course of the novel, Kate acts as an active observer and a matchmaker rather than a passive figure, instigating the plot of bringing her brother and Alice back together. Kate's initial perception of George differs

from the experiences of other characters, and it is, to a large extent, a self-created, idealised image. The brother-sister relationship plays a paramount role in the development of Kate's character, initially showing her as easily manipulated, but gradually obtaining intellectual independence: "she was willing to sacrifice so much on [George's] behalf" and yet, Kate gradually found that "she feared her brother" (Trollope, 514). Motivated by a blind and unreciprocated affection, Kate also resolves to sacrifice her own fortune to benefit George, only to learn in due time that he mistreats Alice. "[T]o risk herself for her brother was noble. But when she used her cunning in inducing her cousin to share that risk was ignoble," Kate finally decides (521). Her affection for George is gone as soon as he performs an act of violence and breaks her arm upon learning about his disinheritance. It is Kate who inherits the fortune, repents and reconciles with Alice. She realises that brotherhood and sisterhood signify more profound concepts than conventional family ties – thus, she finally receives Alice as a "sister," even without her marriage to George. The developing relationship between Kate and Alice, as delineated in the novel, seems to support Sharon Marcus's observation that Victorian society "did not suppress bonds between women but actively promoted them" (26). Eventually, Kate rejects her obtrusive suitor, Mr. Cheesacre (also the suitor of Mrs. Greenow and Charlie Fairstairs) and opts for personal freedom. Although not a distinctly powerful character in terms of personal assertiveness, her liberation is slightly reminiscent of Kate Field's choice to pursue an independent path of life. At the same time, as in the previous cases, the pending question – *Can You Forgive Her?* – may be applied to this heroine as well, as she initially blindly supported her villainous brother.

Conclusion

The narratives intertwined in Trollope's novel are happily resolved for these female protagonists and male characters who ultimately prove their nobility of mind and heart. Ultimately, Trollope's female characters are invariably depicted as "winners" who, after asserting their individuality, are finally restored to the domestic plane as fully-fledged partners of the budding "New Men": Alice marries Mr. Grey who becomes the Member of Parliament and, essentially, a loving husband; Lady Glencora reconciles with Mr. Palliser and gives birth to their son, while Arabella Greenow manages to successfully combine independence with a satisfactory married life. Kate Vavasor eventually frees herself from the calamitous influence of her brother and, in contrast to other female characters, chooses personal independence. D. J. Taylor acknowledges that Trollope is not interested in "social outcasts but in people whose success in life rests on their ability to calibrate their behaviour to the demands of the society of which they are a part" (*Can You Forgive Her?*, x). Trollope's novel is astonishingly modern and insightful in its portrayal of the Victorian women who need to be "forgiven" for their unquenched desires which, although legitimate, more than once lead them astray towards destruction and misery. Trollope's shrewd text carries a universal message concerning the timeless struggle between the female dependence on and independence from social conventions. The message taps into the modern consciousness as well, posing a question whether it is possible to reconcile one's individuality and independence with a married life. Trollope gradually exposes his female characters in order to reveal their innermost natures and thus offer the unobvious answers – significantly differing in each character's case. Yet, on the whole, the reader is left with the literary portrait of a fully-fledged, multifaceted, nineteenth-century woman partly represented by each of the heroines: Alice, Glencora, Arabella, and Kate. When joined together, they reveal the vision of a woman who cherishes her independence, longs for a genuine affection and yet fears intellectual encroachment, emotional starvation and domestic routine.

With the varying age and changing status of the presented women, Trollope highlights diverse aspects of the female mind. On the one hand, Alice, Glencora and Kate are in the initial stages of life, making weighty choices and struggling with social expectations. On the other hand, Mrs Greenow has already gone through her social struggle and emerges victorious as a fully autonomous individual. The question that arises is whether for the nineteenth-century women the social struggle and, thus, the suspension between public expectations and personal desires, is an unavoidable part of moulding themselves into individuals? In the case of the majority of Trollope's heroines in *Can You Forgive Her?*, the female "self" is invariably gained in the process of going through the stages of struggle, marriage and reconciliation. Finally, Trollope's heroines gain their metaphorical "room of their own" through the presence and involvement of their understanding and loving partners – the prototypes of the "New Men." Markwick believes that "to survive in the world, men need a shield of toughness, but they have also to learn to drop that shield to make deep and significant relationships with women, in order to experience the fulfilment of that primal bond" (12). In the end of the novel, John Grey and Plantagenet Palliser emerge victorious as content and fulfilled husbands just because they are able to "drop that shield" (Markwick, 12) and acknowledge their female partners' individuality as well as their personal needs, desires and fears connected with married life. Grey and Palliser are Trollopien characters who pave the way for the future "New Men" – male protagonists who predominantly act as partners and friends. Even though the notion of the "New Man" appeared in 1890s in opposition to the popularised idea of the "New Woman," Markwick posits that "[t]he New Man, so heralded by our generation, is *alive and well in Trollope's novels*, changing the nappies, making the gravy, pushing the pram, hugging his sons and his daughters" [emphasis added] (13). In Trollope's novel, the concept of the "New Man" is represented by those characters who are able to compromise and reinvent themselves, so that their female partners can consciously invite them back into their lives while not resigning from their own individuality.

The ending of the novel confirms Trollope's belief in progressive conservatism marked by the impulse to liberate his literary heroines from the clutches of conventional social expectations but also defined by a strong inclination to still securely guide them through a risky and dangerous maze of available choices, making sure that their independence may not "lead them astray" and that, eventually, they will be transformed into fulfilled wives and mothers. Hence, the reader witnesses a happy finale of Alice Vavasor and John Grey's turbulent story, as well as the onset of Glencora and Mr Palliser's budding affection.

As mentioned before, the three women of Trollope's life: Frances Trollope, Rose Heseltine, and Kate Field significantly influenced his perception of the female roles and presence in society. *Can You Forgive Her?* is a literary testimony to this complex influence, featuring women striving for independence while also longing for domestic comfort, women torn between the prospects of loneliness and patriarchal authority, a woman securing her social position while controlling her married life, and, eventually, a woman entirely turning her back on the idea of marriage. Yet, what Trollope ultimately advocates is the female happiness secured by an understanding man – an intellectual partner capable of stepping outside of his authoritative comfort zone while, at the same time, allowing his female partner to freely venture into "the room of her own." Moreover, through their active engagement with domestic life, male characters such as Plantagenet Palliser regain their validity as fully-fledged, mature, empathetic men for whom family life is no longer a selfish convenience but a priceless gift.

"What should a woman do with her life?" (Trollope, 101) – this surprisingly modern question, posed by Alice Vavasor, the protagonist of the nineteenth-century novel written, significantly, by the male author, may invite the contemporary readers to further reflect on the value of female emotional and intellectual life, both in the past and in the present. On reading the novel, the

reader is also invited to reflect on the women in Trollope's life who indirectly contributed to the creation of painfully complex, yet universally appealing literary female characters.

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