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"Reader, I Did Not Marry Him:" Marriage Proposals, Choice, and Female Desire in the
Victorian Era

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

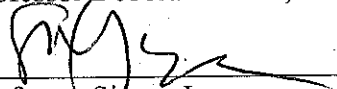
by

Elizabeth Rose Flood

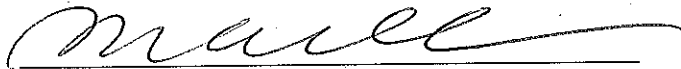
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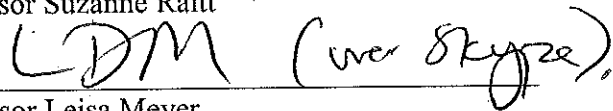
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Introduction

Our last glimpse of the heroine in a Victorian novel is often one of her poised for marriage. She has found a man who she believes can provide her with a fulfilling life—however that may be defined for her. Becoming engaged is her ultimate fate, and the last moments the reader spends with her as she prepares for marriage reassures them that she has made the right decision that will ensure her happiness for the rest of her life. In contrast to the image of bliss presented at the very end of these novels is the anxiety-inducing and crucial moment when the heroine actually makes the decision to marry. What can the proposal scene—the moment when the heroine must make her decision—show? In proposal scenes in Victorian literature, the heroine makes a choice that can and will influence the rest of her life. Every marriage proposal, then, carries an existential weight for the heroine. Her choice often goes beyond just whether or not she loves the man; she must also consider the financial, spiritual, and sexual implications of the kind of life he offers her. Proposal scenes are often where the heroine's beliefs and anxieties about love, marriage, and womanhood reach a culmination, and in providing her with the opportunity to answer such an important question, they also allow her to vocalize those feelings and ideas.

Proposals, engagements, and marriage are central features to Victorian literature, perhaps because of the fundamental changes the institution underwent during the period. Stephanie Coontz describes the Victorian era as a crucial time for a shifting perspective of marriage:

The Victorians were the first people in history to try to make marriage the pivotal experience in people's lives and married love the principal focus of their emotions, obligations, and satisfactions. Despite the stilted language of the era, Victorian marriage harbored all the hopes for romantic love, intimacy, personal fulfillment, and mutual

happiness that were to be expressed more openly and urgently during the early twentieth century. (Coontz 177)¹

While the image of marriage as the height of personal romantic achievement flourished in the Victorian era, it was also a period where women fought to achieve more autonomy within their own marriages and more freedom to be openly critical of marriage as a whole. The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, also referred to as the Divorce Act, allowed a woman to divorce her husband if he had committed adultery as well as some other offense, such as incest, bestiality, or desertion. In 1870, the Married Women's Property Act passed, allowing married women the right to earnings up to £200 so long as they came from gifts or inheritance. Though in retrospect this progress seems minimal, the changes in law meant that discussions and debates about marriage and what it meant for women were constantly in the public's mind². The literature of the time reflected these debates; not only is marriage a central plot element, it is also at the root of the heroine's journey and growth in many of the novels that compose the Victorian literary canon. Ironically, while Victorian society fixated on marriage, in terms of the day-to-day reality of the institution most young women remained in the dark. Jennifer Phegley describes that while young women received some advice about marriage from courtship manuals, the advice they offered was limited and adhered to conventional wisdom that women should remain ignorant of the workings of sex: "This admonishment to respect marriage as a duty to be performed only with a worthy man is, rather discordantly, followed by a blithe description of the honeymoon trip and the pleasures of setting up a household that would have left women readers blissfully ignorant of and unprepared for the dramatic transition from maidenhood to wifedom" (Phegley

¹ Though Coontz's evaluation of the Victorian era as a transformative time for marriage is accurate, her description of the era's language is "stilted" is an argument that other scholars deliberately contradict. Certainly in many of the proposal scenes I will discuss, much of the language is erotic.

² For more on how public views of marriage changed in the Victorian era, see Carole Pateman's chapter "Feminism and the Marriage Contract" in *The Sexual Contract*, which traces the view of marriage as a "contract" from 1825 onwards.

107). While the men around them considered them for marriage and Parliament debated their marital rights, Victorian women received few resources to help them prepare for the commitment in actuality. The proposal was the moment when women were allowed to accept and chose marriage even as they remained shielded from the true reality of what they were agreeing to.

Most scholarship on marriage's role in Victorian literature focuses on the marriage plot itself. Those critics ask and analyze why and how Victorian woman end up marrying the men they do at the end of the novel. They focus on what values are prioritized in seeking a marriage and whether Victorian heroines were looking foremost for love, desire, passion, or agency. There is no shortage of scholarship connecting Victorian marriage to a variety of topics such as spirituality, incest, money, and ambition, and most of these works mention and reference the proposal scenes as supporting evidence for their argument about a specific novel. However, the proposal as a separate, individual unit is often overlooked for the courtship as a whole. Very little scholarship focuses on the proposal as its own, independent act, rather than a perfunctory step on the way to the altar. Yet, proposal scenes in many ways can be the best indicator of whether a marriage will be happy or not. The specific obstacles standing in the way of a marriage must be dealt with in the proposal. It is the moment when the earlier tension in the novel either reaches its apex or is somehow resolved. The proposal forces the larger question of whether or not two people will marry into a scene that can be analyzed as representative, or at least indicative, of the relative happiness of the couple.

My decision to focus on marriage proposals, not the marriage plot in general, came partially from a love for Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. In asking why people love the novel, I found myself thinking of the proposal scenes. Jane's statement of "I am no bird" (Brontë 123) is one of the most iconic and most beloved moments of the book, and it does not feel like a

coincidence that it takes place within a proposal scene—Rochester’s first proposal to her. Proposal scenes focus on a moment when the hero of the novel actually needs something from the heroine: an answer. By taking the time to focus on those moments when the heroine must decide whether to say “yes” or “no” or “maybe,” the novel must focus on what she actually wants out of life. J. Hillis Miller describes how in a proposal scene, the rest of the characters’ lives hinge on what the woman says: “The proposal cannot lead to publicly acknowledged engagement and then to marriage, procreation, and the redistribution of property and, often, rank unless the woman says yes. Everything depends on that one little word” (Miller 43). What the woman says in the proposal scene and how she responds will determine how the rest of the novel proceeds. There is a paradox in how proposals allow a woman to speak and make the man dependent on her answer but also only provide her with a limited range of options of how she can respond. When the women in these novels break away from the usual script of a proposal: an enthusiastic “yes” or a polite “no,” there arise some of the most rebellious and subversive statements about what it means to be a woman in the Victorian era.

Proposal scenes play out as negotiations of women’s lives in these novels. Some suitors present a clear and fixed vision of how they imagine marriage while others leave it more open-ended, but either way, the woman must decide if she will consent to the kind of life laid out before her. How these negotiations proceed, what the woman stipulates and whether or not the man agrees, often foreshadows what kind of marriage they will have. Whether or not a proposal is even shown, where it takes place, who begins it—all of these questions highlight important aspects of the couple’s relationship and what that particular relationship might mean for the woman. The proposal is the first in a chain of events; as Miller describes, it must come before the “marriage, the procreation, and the redistribution of property.” For Victorian women, it might be

the most significant choice they get to make in their entire lives. This significance then often brings anxiety for women uncertain of what they want. Whether or not they say “yes,” marriage proposals force women to confront the fact that they exist beyond their own perspective and that those around them might be viewing them with marriage in mind. Marriage and its accompanying initiation into sexual adulthood at least comes with the waiting period of an engagement. The proposal though might appear with no warning beforehand, forcing the woman in just a few moments to confront her future. A proposal is a question that represents an entire life for a woman. To handle that kind of question in a matter of minutes makes proposal scenes some of the most emotionally charged in Victorian literature.

The weight and significance of these proposals means they are often repeated in a novel. In every novel I explore in this thesis, the suitor with whom the heroine ends up with has to propose twice before they secure their happy ending. Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, John Thornton in *North and South*, John Grey in *Can Your Forgive Her?*, and Gabriel Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd* all return to deliver a second proposal at the end of the novel. The first proposal is often a testing ground, an example of what the heroine does not want or need, or perhaps, what she thinks she does not want or need. As the heroine of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba Everdene, famously tells Gabriel Oak when she rejects him: “I want someone to tame me...and you never would be able to, I know” (Hardy 36). As the novel comes to a close, the previous suitor returns, offering an improved proposal that highlights the growth of the couple. Often, it is a moment of redemption for one or both of the two. The differences between the first and last proposal can demonstrate spiritual and emotional changes or changes in social position and class. Whatever barriers kept the couple apart at first, the final proposal scene acts as assurance that all these issues have been resolved or at least can be managed in some manner.

In order to explore all these different aspects and meanings behind proposal scenes, I decided to narrow my investigation to four novels. *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847, was a logical first choice. It is a touchstone for exploring marriage in the Victorian era, and its proposal scenes in many ways guide the novel. They also provide Jane with the opportunity to espouse some of her most rebellious statements. The first proposal with Rochester and her proposal with St. John allow her to verbally spar with men about how a woman should be treated and viewed in marriage. These proposal scenes display each individual suitor's view of marriage and how their views might be compatible or not with Jane's. In *Jane Eyre*, issues of compatibility with regard to spirituality and purpose come to a head in the proposal scenes. Rochester's final proposal presents a revised version of marriage for Jane and him, a version that appeals to her desire for both passion and a greater purpose while also conveniently avoiding mentions of the less romantic aspects of their past.

The proposal scenes in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* highlight the anxiety that accompanies reaching adulthood as a woman in the Victorian era. Just as Margaret Hale thinks she is allowed to return to childhood, a proposal thrusts the realities of middle-class Victorian womanhood on her. Throughout the novel, she struggles with how to deal with the fact that as a woman her marital status is always on the mind of those around her. The proposal scenes in *North and South*, published in 1855, demonstrate the contradictions of what it means to be a woman—constantly on display yet also always in need of coverage and protection. John Thornton's final proposal to her—the one she finally accepts—represents a compromise of Margaret's desires. She gets to have a role within society and provide Thornton with something he needs (money) while still finding the protection of marriage that society says she requires. It

also represents her acceptance of her own emotional vulnerability, an aspect of herself that Margaret was unable to reconcile with her private and reserved nature.

In *Can You Forgive Her?*, published in serial form in 1864 and 1865, Anthony Trollope places his heroine Alice Vavasor in similar states of anxiety over who to marry. In breaking off her engagement to John Grey and becoming engaged to her cousin George Vavasor, Alice seeks to find a greater purpose in her life by marrying a man willing to run for Parliament. Alice's indecision and her switching back and forth between two suitors questions what it actually means to promise to marry someone. Her narrative takes a different route from the usual marriage plot because of how many different times an engagement is made and then broken. By the end of her novel, she receives the proposal that seems to ease most of her anxieties about marriage. In presenting a heroine who breaks multiple engagements, the proposal itself becomes something less meaningful than in the other novels. The promise of getting married falters in comparison to Alice's apprehension about marriage itself and how it might not lead to an entirely active and useful life for her. In the final proposal scene, Alice's indecision is swept away by the conviction of John Grey, undermining her concerns about marriage that led most of the plot.

Far from the Madding Crowd, published in 1874, features a socially rebellious heroine in Bathsheba Everdene, who enjoys flirting but finds herself uncomfortable when faced with actual proposals. Bathsheba is accustomed to being looked at and admired, but when the men around her try to cross the line and bring up marriage, she finds she values her independence too much. While Bathsheba in many ways is the most progressive depiction of Victorian womanhood, she finds herself chastened and almost punished for it by a terrible marriage and tragedy. She still receives the requisite happy ending though when her original suitor, the steadfast shepherd Gabriel Oak, proposes again to her. Though arguably the novel in many ways disparages the idea

of marriage, Bathsheba and Oak do find happiness after much suffering. In their final proposal, Bathsheba's original flirtatious manner has been subdued into a quieter demeanor that can handle marriage to a man who sees her clearly for who she is.

Chapter One

Jane Eyre and Marital Revision

Like numerous other Victorian heroines, the most impactful and greatest choice in *Jane Eyre* that Jane must make is to decide which of two suitors to marry: her dour, pious missionary cousin St. John Rivers or her imposing, mercurial employer Rochester. The choice between the two men symbolizes a choice between passion and duty. In his proposal, Rochester promises intense attraction and devotion to her. In St. John's proposal, he promises a joint life of service and dedication to a higher purpose. Even as Jane seeks action and purpose in her life, the love and affection promised by Rochester proves more enticing. Jane's final proposal from Rochester at the end of the novel is a reconciliation of purpose and passion, the two things that Jane seems to desire most throughout. The novel makes it clear that this last proposal is the most rewarding one, and it secures the traditional happy ending for Jane. Before they can reach this stage however, all of the issues apparent in Rochester's first proposal must somehow be resolved. While his first proposal presents an idealized version of marriage, deliberately ignorant of his actual obligations and responsibilities, and the second proposal from St. John presents a marriage based on greater obligation and service, the final proposal from a humbled, disabled Rochester is a kind of compromise of the two. Rochester and Jane change throughout the novel to become more suitable spouses for each other. For Rochester, this journey is more spiritual—a path to atonement. Jane undergoes a social metamorphosis, going from a poor governess to a financially independent woman. Rochester's final proposal to her reflects their new similarities in class and

in spiritual likeness. Jane's new familial connections and wealth and Rochester's newfound humility through his disability have lessened the power imbalance between the two that was so apparent in the first proposal. In presenting two wildly different marriage proposals and then allowing Rochester to revise one of them, *Jane Eyre* shows a reconciliation of the romantic fantasy of marriage and the harsher reality of the day-to-day work involved in it.

The setting of the first proposal scene in *Jane Eyre* reflects both the Romanticism of the novel as well as hinting at Rochester's darker secrets. Jane walks in a picturesque and perfect midsummer evening: "It was now the sweetest hour of the twenty-four:—'Day its fervid fires had wasted,' and dew fell cool on painting plain and scorched summit. Where the sun had gone down in simple state—pure of the pomp of clouds—spread a solemn purple" (Brontë 247). This description of the end of the day, including its reference to Thomas Campbell's *The Turkish Lady*³, paint the environment before the proposal scene as one of tranquility and peace. It is a calm that by the end of the proposal scene will be upended by a great storm. The proposal takes place specifically in the orchard of Thornfield, which is defined by its beauty and its remoteness from the rest of the gardens. It is a location that highlights both the fantasy of the first proposal and the secrecy in it: "No nook in the grounds more sheltered and more Eden-like; it was full of trees, it bloomed with flowers: a very high wall shut it out from the court on one side; on the other, a beech avenue screened it from the lawn" (Brontë 248). This biblical allusion reflects the meeting of paradise and sin within the scene. Rochester's proposal brings Jane great joy, but he also hides from her the fact that he is already married—his first wife, Bertha Mason, suffering from insanity and locked away in his attic but alive. The seclusion of the orchard is fitting for a

³ The *Turkish Lady*, an 1876 poem by Thomas Campbell, describes an evening where a British knight being held captive is saved by an Eastern woman who he then marries.

scene where Rochester both conceals his first marriage and deliberately misleads Jane into believing he intends to marry someone else.

The first proposal scene serves to demonstrate Rochester's power over Jane in both his position above her socially and in her attraction to him. Rochester dominates the conversation. He has been obsessed with performance and disguise throughout the novel, and here he acts no differently as he makes Jane believe she is destined to be sent away so he can marry the beautiful Blanche Ingram. When Rochester informs Jane of his intention to marry Blanche, he makes sure to clarify his and Jane's relationship as employer and employee: "I wish to remind you that it was you who first said to me, with that discretion I respect in you—with that foresight, prudence, and humility which befit your responsible and dependent position—that in case I married Miss Ingram, both you and little Adèle had better trot forthwith" (Brontë 250). Rochester reminds Jane of her place here, her "dependent position," taunting her with the fate that she herself predicted. The whole beginning of the proposal plays out almost as a trick to get Jane to admit her feelings and give into her emotions. Rochester places her on the verge of distress before he gives any indication of his intention to actually marry her; as Jane describes it, "The vehemence of emotion, stirred by grief and love within me, was claiming mastery, and struggling for full sway; and asserting a right to predominate: to overcome, to live, rise, and reign at last; yes,—and to speak" (Brontë 252). Jane is overcome by her emotion, but also in giving into it, she allows herself to finally assert her own voice and opinion. In Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*⁴, he dissects the idea of confession in Western culture as key to understanding how the Victorians discussed sex: "it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the

⁴ Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, a theoretical work, primarily deals with his "repressive hypothesis"—the belief that bourgeois society has repressed sexuality since the 17th century. Foucault challenges this idea especially in regards to the Victorian era, which he argues that in its regulations and rules about "proper" sexual behavior actually demonstrates an obsession with creating a new discourse around sexuality.

obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret” (Foucault 60). In many ways, the first proposal between Jane and Rochester can be read as a confession. He forces her to confess to her own attraction, which she finally does at the height of emotion by admitting how awful it would be to leave Rochester: “it strikes me with terror and anguish to feel I absolutely must be torn from you for ever” (Brontë 252). Jane’s position in life, relative to Rochester’s comparative freedom and control over her fate, heightens the tension in the proposal, already a critical life decision. The fact that Rochester is Jane’s employer and can decide her future places them on an unequal footing, even more so than a man and a woman in the Victorian era might be at already. Foucault describes confession as a process that inherently contains an imbalance of power: “It is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (Foucault 61). Rochester not only has forced Jane to admit her feelings to him but he is the one who decides what happens in the aftermath. His proposal comes as a reward for Jane’s vulnerability. After needling the confession out of her, he drops the act of pretending to marry Blanche and actually offers himself to her. In deliberately misleading Jane and forcing her to confess her feelings to him first, Rochester secures the knowledge that she will say yes before he actually proposes. He places little at risk for himself while using his own power to coerce Jane to give in entirely to her emotions.

Yet, Jane is not entirely docile in the face of Rochester’s games; she pushes back against his will, making their proposal more like a combative struggle than a love scene. Jane’s response to Rochester is not immediate acceptance; even before she fully realizes he is proposing, she defies him by explaining that she is his equal in one regard: “it is my spirit that addresses your

spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal—as we are” (Brontë 253). Once Jane has been provoked by Rochester into speaking, she is willing to assert her own beliefs about their relationship and her worth. In Erik Irving Gray's essay “Metaphors and Marriage Plots,” he focuses on a specific facet of dialogue in Victorian literature: “One of the most distinctive features of Victorian dialogue is the speakers' tendency to pick up and develop one another's metaphors” (Gray 1). Gray relates this trend of metaphor to the concept of marriage itself: “Like metaphor, marriage requires you to find someone compatible yet fundamentally different” (Gray 3). He specifically looks at the dialogue between Rochester and Jane in this first proposal scene as an example of how metaphors reflect suitability in relationships. The iconic line, “I am no bird” (Brontë 284), Gray explains, is a rejection by Jane of Rochester's metaphor. Rochester tries to compare her to a bird, she refuses to play along, and that moment is ultimately a moment of contention for them. By refusing to agree with Rochester's description of her as a “wild, frantic bird” (Brontë 253), Jane is able to steer the conversation in some way. When Rochester finally does say he wants to marry her, she pushes him into confessing his own feelings: “Are you in earnest?—Do you truly love?—Do you sincerely wish me to be your wife?” (Brontë 255). After Rochester's teasing, Jane wants an explicit confirmation of his love. She now is the one who asks for a confession but in a more straightforward manner. Jane's rejection of the more fanciful language of Rochester for the blunt truth is a pattern that repeats itself throughout their short engagement. In this proposal, the differences in how they use language highlight the disunity in their relationship even as they vow to be together for the rest of their lives.

The storm that arrives at the end of the proposal only furthers the sense of disunity. Rochester finishes the proposal by murmuring a defense of his own actions, “I know my Maker

sanctions what I do. For the world's judgment—I wash my hands thereof. For man's opinion—I defy it" (Brontë 256). The impassioned comments that Rochester makes here hint at his intended bigamy. Maria Lamonaca describes Rochester's desperation in the scene as rooted in a desire for religious justification; he "puts upon Jane's shoulders the responsibility for his moral rebirth" (Lamonaca 249). The Eden-like setting of the orchard and Rochester's defiant attitude indicates that in winning Jane he also believes he can find redemption. The manner in which the environment around them behaves after this proclamation indicates otherwise though. As soon as Rochester finishes his speech, Jane notices that the weather has changed drastically: "But what had befallen the night? The moon was not yet set, and we were all in shadow: I could scarcely see my master's face, near as I was. And what ailed the chestnut tree? It writhed and groaned; while wind roared in the laurel walk, and came sweeping over us" (Brontë 256). Not only does this passage emphasize their power imbalance in a literal sense—Jane refers to Rochester as her "master"—it also clues the reader in that something is wrong in the scene. Jane and Rochester have not achieved truly blissful love. The weather's rebellion seems to be in direct reaction to Rochester's defiance. Nature revolts at his sin, an idea supported by the news Jane wakes up to in the morning: "little Adèle came running in to tell me that the great horse-chestnut at the bottom of the orchard had been struck by lightning in the night and half of it split away" (Brontë 257). The defiling of the peaceful gardens foreshadows the destruction of Jane and Rochester's relationship when his secret comes to light. Even as Jane delights in her engagement, the setting intervenes to indicate that Rochester might not be the most suitable choice in groom.

Once Jane learns of the existence of Rochester's first wife and subsequently leaves him, she turns away from great love and passion to work and purpose, a shift that her second suitor, St. John, capitalizes on when he proposes to her. The idea of purpose and how a Victorian

woman might find it in life shapes Jane's worldview—before and after Rochester's proposal. Talia Schaffer proclaims in *Romance's Rival* that many Victorian women were preoccupied with fulfilling their life beyond just the romantic portion of it: "the real desire expressed by many Victorian middle-class females, fictional and otherwise, was for agency, not for sex" (Schaffer 31). Certainly, this is an idea echoed in Jane's own words as she finds herself restless at Thornfield in the beginning of the novel. As she describes, "women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do" (Brontë 109). Though loneliness and a desire for love play central roles in Jane's personality, she makes claims here that she also needs an outlet for her mind. St. John, intending to take Jane as both a wife and colleague with him while he serves as a missionary in India, offers Jane a "vocational marriage," as Schaffer describes it—a marriage that can fulfill Jane's desire for work. St. John's proposal is certainly free of any expectation of passion; even the location in the "wild track of the glen" (Brontë 400) emphasizes severity rather than quaintness. St. John tells Jane, "you are formed for labour, not for love" and "I claim you—not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service" (Brontë 402). A marriage to St. John could provide Jane with what she said women need: activity for her mind and a field to excel in. She rejects the idea though telling St. John, "I am not fit for it: I have no vocation" (Brontë 402). Just as he ignores the idea of romantic love, so then does Jane. She responds purely to the business side of it, claiming that she is not suited to the life of work that he proposes. When St. John presses her though, Jane turns to her real issue; she actually is willing to go to India but only as St. John's adopted sister rather than wife. "For you I have only a comrade's constancy; a fellow soldier's frankness, fidelity, fraternity, if you like" (Brontë 405), she tells him. St. John argues against her with the belief that he is acting and claiming her not as a man but as a missionary serving God's will. He is not "the insignificant

private individual” (Brontë 406) proposing to Jane but someone elevated by the highest duty to God. In comparison, Rochester by proposing directly violated the law of God in seeking to make Jane his second wife. His motivations for marriage were specifically grounded in individual desire. St. John’s proposal is the more honorable one, but Jane does not seek religious elevation in the same way he does. Her protest to St. John’s assertion that this is God’s will for them is similar to her rejection of Rochester’s declaration early on in her engagement that she is an angel (“I am not an angel...and I will not be one till I die” (Brontë 260)). She rejects the role of wife that St. John tries to place on her in order to fulfill his vision of the perfect missionary couple. Though his proposal differs from Rochester in temperament and level of affection, both men similarly present their own vision of Jane that she must dispute and fight back against.

The final proposal in the novel is Rochester’s renewed suit where he offers an entirely new and different kind of marriage to a man who has lost his home, his sight, and one of his hands in a fire. In comparison to his first proposal, which was filled with verbal wordplay and metaphor, Rochester takes on a more somber and straightforward manner this time. Jane returns to him after the transformational and spiritual experience of hearing his voice call out for her while she was miles away at the home of St. John and her other cousins. When reunited, Jane and Rochester have a long, drawn-out conversation about everything that occurred after she left, but the actual proposal is short, taking place in only a few lines rather than multiple pages. Rochester admits to wanting a wife and when Jane instructs him to choose the one who he loves best, he asks her simply and plainly in a way he neglected to do in the first proposal: “Jane, will you marry me?” (Brontë 445). Uttering that phrase in plain language demonstrates the change in Rochester. Compared to his misleading statements in the first proposal scene, in this second chance he makes it as clear as possible to Jane what marriage to him means. He questions her

desire to marry “a poor blind man, whom you will have to lead about by the hand” and “a crippled man, twenty years older than you, whom you will have to wait on” (Brontë 445). This kind of critical self-awareness and openness emphasizes the changes in Rochester. He echoes Jane’s earnestness and honesty from their first proposal. Just as she questioned him, “Do you sincerely wish me to be your wife?” (Brontë 255), he questions her true desire to be joined to a man who she will have to “lead” and “wait on.” This time around he wants Jane to understand the full implications of their marriage. By casting aside symbolic language for directness, Rochester demonstrates growth and that, perhaps, he has taken on some of Jane’s bluntness. Their final proposal takes a more realistic stance, one that embraces spirituality (Rochester afterwards reveals to Jane that he also heard her voice on the same night she heard his calls) but also the physical and daily reality of Jane marrying someone disabled and much older than she is.⁵

Rochester’s new proposal also surprisingly provides Jane with the opportunity for vocation just as St. John’s did. Schaffer argues that Rochester’s disability in the end actually offers Jane a profession: “Helping Rochester is her new career” (Schaffer 35). At the end of the proposal, Rochester describes how he will now come to rely on Jane for his care: “I preferred utter loneliness to the constant attendance of servants; but Jane’s soft ministry will be a perpetual joy” (Brontë 445). The use of the word “ministry” here harkens back to St. John’s proposal; marriage to Rochester also provides Jane with the opportunity for charity work but on a much smaller scale. She will be attendant to one man rather than groups of people in India. Schaffer upholds that the promise of work in her marriage to Rochester preserves the best aspects of St. John’s proposal: “The romantic marriage with Rochester must be flattened and filed and notched

⁵ Esther Godfrey writes at length about relationships with a large age gap in her work *The January-May Marriage in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*; she mentions Jane and Rochester as a relationship where the power dynamics are skewed both by age and by Jane’s initial position as a governess within Rochester’s home.

until it resembles the supposedly counterfeit model of marriage that St. John had originally offered” (Schaffer 36). Rather than positing the two proposals as total opposites, Schaffer argues that Rochester’s idea of marriage actually needed to transform into something more closely related to St. John’s idea of marriage. While they differ in the amount of romantic love they offer, both proposals offer a form of employment to accompany marriage. Schaffer describes Jane and Rochester’s marriage as a form of “disability marriage,” one that provides Jane meaning in her life by allowing her to be a caretaker. For Jane, Rochester’s disability is a positive sign for their future. It allows her to have more control over their relationship, as she tells him: “I love you better now, when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector” (Brontë 445). Jane understands that two partners often play specific roles in marriage. Rochester’s needs mean that he cannot always be the provider in the relationship; his blindness makes it so he must be reliant on her at times. It is an important shift for a couple who began their relationship as employer and employee. Jane’s new role as caretaker means that she might still be working for Rochester in a manner, but it also means that she now will be given the opportunity to guide him. The two phrases that Rochester uses to describe how Jane must help him are “lead about by the hand” and “wait on” (Brontë 445). These two descriptions exemplify how Rochester’s disability makes him more dependent on Jane while also indicating that Jane must act in service to him. Though Jane is the one pledging to take care of him for the rest of their lives, Rochester’s new weakness will also give her the unfamiliar opportunity of being the decision-maker in their relationship.

While Jane and Rochester’s marriage provides a fulfilling vocation for Jane, it also coincides with her shift into a higher class. Penny Boumelha describes the purpose of St. John

and his sisters in the novel is to prove how Jane belongs to a higher social class than she initially seems destined for. It is with them that she learns of her concealed inheritance and finds respectable family as they are revealed to be her cousins. When she returns to Rochester, it is as a woman with her own money and connections. Boumelha views Jane's journey as a fulfillment of her right to the life of a lady: "With this confirmation of kindred as relationship behind her, Jane is empowered to make the choice of kinship as likeness in her marriage; and her choice of the gentleman Rochester serves its turn to confirm the status of 'lady' which was clearly always in some sense hers" (Boumelha 69). It is the inheritance and her acceptance by the Rivers that enables Jane to approach Rochester as more of an equal in the end. Boumelha argues that Jane's natural character is most suited for life as a lady. Though Rochester has lost much of his strength and Thornfield, marriage to an aristocrat will still be entirely different from life as a missionary's wife. St. John's proposal offers a harsh version of life, one that Jane feels would lead to her death: "But I feel mine is not the existence to be long protracted under an Indian sun" (Brontë 404). The implication of sun here connects to class ideas; the idea of roasting outside as a worker stands in direct contrast to the sheltered life of the land-owning class. When Jane does go back to Rochester, she talks of civilizing him and combs his "shaggy black mane" that makes him "more like a brownie" (Brontë 438). Their marriage in the end signals a return to upper-class civility, leaving behind the prospect of India or anything not English. Though Rochester's disability means Jane must serve him in a manner, their marriage also elevates Jane socially. Boumelha believes this status is Jane's ultimate fate: "marriage to Mr. Rochester, then, is the culmination of Jane's installation in the social space Divine Providence and natural character have alike designed for her, and in this way she comes, in the fullest range of senses, to know her place" (Boumelha 73). Boumelha's words echo St. John's when he insists Jane's place is with him:

“God and nature intended you for a missionary’s wife” (Brontë 402). There is a conception in the novel that Jane is naturally shaped and destined for one specific kind of marriage.⁶ Jane herself in the end tells Rochester that their marriage suits her, “To the finest fibre of my nature” (Brontë 445). The ending proposal seems to highlight that there is a fundamental element within Jane that makes her the perfect bride for Rochester. Her natural inclination to be a caretaker and a nurturer is as great an influence on her destiny as wealth is. Marriage to Rochester also appears to be her fulfillment in regards to spirituality; critic J. Jeffrey Franklin describes that Jane in the end becomes “a missionary of her own, rejuvenated, spirituality” (Franklin 480) in contrast to a missionary formed in St. John’s vision. The ending proposal can be read as a comingling of Jane’s destiny to join the aristocracy and her destiny to find fulfilling, purposeful work. She does marry the upper-class Rochester but only now when his needs provide her with an outlet for meaningful work.

Ultimately though, the final proposal in *Jane Eyre* ignores the reason why the first engagement collapsed. While in the first proposal there are hints to Bertha Mason, Rochester’s first wife, and her existence, she is noticeably absent in the last one. Jane learns about her death from an older servant, not from Rochester himself. Kelly Hager in her book *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* conceptualizes the idea of a “monstrous marriage,” marriages that “function as warning to other characters, especially those about to enter into the institution of marriage” (Hager 56). These monstrous marriages are often mysterious in the novel, says Hager; yet, they can anticipate the problems and the issues that a developing couple might experience. *Jane Eyre* has a clear example of this: Rochester’s first marriage literally haunts his home and Jane, trying to prevent her from marrying him. This monstrous marriage marks the first proposal. Just as Jane

⁶ Many scholars, such as Sandra Gilbert, liken Jane’s journey throughout the novel to pilgrimage and, more specifically, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim Progress*. Barry Qualls in *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction: The Novel as Book of Life* also explores this comparison at length.

accepts him, Rochester asks for forgiveness: “‘God, pardon me!’ he subjoined ere long; ‘and man, meddle not with me: I have her, and will hold her’” (Brontë 255). Just as they have agreed to join together, the threat of something that could tear them apart hovers over them. It is only once Bertha has died that the possibility for a happy marriage opens up. Jane and Rochester do not discuss or mention her death at all in their promise to marry again. For Hager, Bertha’s presence still lurks in the happy ending of *Jane Eyre*. She analyzes the iconic “Reader, I married him” (Brontë 448) line as equivalent to asking the reader to look the other way: “Jane’s brazen advertisement of her marriage draws attention to all it leaves out and everything it asks us to overlook” (Hager 189). If the novel had ended with the final proposal scene, our last image of Jane and Rochester would be her leading him through the woods: “I took that dear hand, held it a moment to my lips, then let it pass round my shoulder: being so much lower of stature than he, I served both for his prop and guide. We entered the wood, and wended homeward” (Brontë 448). This ending emphasizes Rochester’s reliance on Jane and their connection that makes them function more like one person than two. The novel continues though, describing in the final chapter their quiet marriage and how Rochester eventually regains his sight. The final lines of the novel focus not on their marital bliss but on a brief description of St. John’s eventual death.⁷ While the end of the proposal displays their unity, the final chapter has a much darker tone, and while much of Jane and Rochester’s promised happiness seems connected to his disabilities and need of her, the ending also relieves him of his blindness, which is arguably more debilitating than the loss of his hand. In that sense, Hager is right about having to overlook certain aspects for the happy ending to happen. The final proposal scene provides us with reassurance that Jane and Rochester are meant to be, but the next chapter hints at many of the issues that their proposal

⁷ Carolyn Williams discusses the ending lines and their relation to Scripture as a final rebellious act by Jane to close the novel in a manner that contradicts the expected ending for a romantic *bildungsroman*.

overlooks. The proposal can be read as the romantic ending and the final chapter as the more realistic version. Though solemn in its own way, the final proposal scene allows the narrative to present one last moment of romantic fantasy for two people who overcome multiple, harrowing obstacles to be together.

Chapter Two

Anxiety and Womanhood in *North and South*

North and South depicts its heroine, Margaret Hale, as permanently stuck in a state of premarital anxiety that begins with her first proposal and only ends with the last one. Margaret is a stoic and private woman, motivated by love for her family and a desire to help her community. Marriage is not her priority, and in many ways, she seems to have a genuine fear of it. The idea of being viewed or on display and the accompanying anxiety she experiences influences Margaret's decisions about marriage, causing her to reject both her cousin's brother-in-law Henry Lennox and the mill owner John Thornton. In a vein similar to Jane's rejection of Rochester and St. John's visions of herself as an angel or as a missionary's wife, Margaret is most repulsed by the idea that Henry Lennox and John Thornton could have an image of her that differs from her own conception of herself. This division of self haunts Margaret in the proposals she receives from both men. Most important to Margaret is not finding a romantic union but preserving her own point of view about her actions, a goal that could be even more difficult than finding a husband in the Victorian era for a middle-class woman in the public eye. Margaret is a heroine whose greatest desire may be to remain hidden even as she carves an identity based on goodwill and public works, a crisis of self that is exacerbated by her move from the agrarian South to the industrious North. Her struggle to preserve her own identity and remain within the

confines dictated for a Victorian woman is a central focus in the proposal scenes of the novel. Only at the end when she has figured out how reconcile what it means to be a woman in Victorian society with her own ideas of self is Margaret able to accept Thornton.

The novel opens immediately on the topic of marriage. Margaret and her cousin Edith have been talking about “wedding dresses, and wedding ceremonies” (Gaskell 5) and all the impending changes of Edith’s life that will occur after her wedding. Their conversation ends though when Edith drifts off to sleep. While she dozes, Margaret imagines her own “plans and visions which she entertained as to her former country parsonage, where her father and mother lived” (Gaskell 6). As Edith plans her removal from her family to live in Corfu with her husband, Margaret daydreams about a return to her original family. From the beginning, Margaret demonstrates a desire to remain a daughter above all else. In juxtaposition to her cousin who is on the verge of married womanhood, Margaret begins the novel poised to return to the sanctuary of her girlhood—home with her parents as a daughter rather than anyone’s wife. In Jenny Uglow’s *Elizabeth Gaskell*, she mentions this scene as key for Margaret’s identity and that it speaks to a fundamental difference in Margaret from her cousin: “In the end her place, like her cousin’s, will be determined by whom she marries. But when she chooses, she will be awake not asleep” (Uglow 369). In the meantime, Margaret pushes the possibility of marriage out of her mind altogether. Her mental state in the beginning of the novel is of one almost akin to fantasy. When she does arrive home, she is “full of dimples, and glances that spoke of childish gladness, and boundless hope in the future” (Gaskell 17). Her return to Helstone and her parents allows Margaret to indulge in ideas of an endless childhood. Her destiny seems rooted in family and home in comparison to her cousin who is about to embark on a marriage that promises a new life and new experiences.

It is Henry Lennox's arrival in Helstone and his proposal that first disrupts Margaret's vision of childhood and familial contentment. When he mentions marriage, her first response to him is complete honesty: "I was startled" (Gaskell 29), she tells him. Henry's proposal is a disturbance to Margaret, and her immediate aversion to it stems from how it conflicts with her own views. She explains to him, "I have always thought of you as a friend; and please, I would rather go on thinking of you so" (Gaskell 29). Her emphasis on how she prefers to think of Henry indicates a clinging to a world where men are friends, not potential lovers. She makes a plea for things to continue on as they were, emphasizing that it is her own thoughts and perspective that she would most like to preserve. What most disturbs Margaret about Henry's proposal is the idea that he views her differently than she has viewed him. After rejecting him, she feels "guilty and ashamed of having grown so much into a woman to be thought of in marriage" (Gaskell 32-33). Her anguish is not just at receiving an unwanted proposal but also at the realization that she could even be considered for marriage. Terence Wright describes this moment as connected to a loss of innocence: "Initiation, with its loss of self-sufficiency, seems to be, for the woman, a source of guilt, like the loss of virginity which is its physical counterpart" (Wright 114). Margaret's transition into womanhood is one that occurs abruptly and brings "guilt," rather than pride. Up until Henry's proposal, Margaret viewed her identity as one of daughter, cousin, and friend. As Pearl L. Brown describes, her reaction to his proposal is that of "a child-woman who has given no thought to leaving the safety of her family and the duties of a daughter rather than from a maturing young woman capable of passion or discernment" (Brown 348). Now the reality that someone could think of Margaret as a wife and that she might possibly have to marry to be seen as "sufficient" in society has arrived. Her uncomfortableness with being considered for marriage indicates fear of both marriage as a loss of independence and as a loss of

innocence. That she has “grown so much into a woman” is the true tragedy to Margaret. She attaches her grief at the proposal to the fact that she is in the eyes of society no longer a child. The whole ordeal reminds her that her thoughts are not the only reality; she has no actual control over how others in society might perceive her. Becoming a woman in Victorian society means entering a more public sphere outside of one’s original family and home. Just as she appears to have achieved a full return to childhood, the obligations and expectations of being a young woman come to taunt Margaret in the form of Henry’s proposal.

Complicating Margaret’s feelings about marriage is her deep attachment to the idea of home, not just in terms of family but also in terms of actual geographic location. When Henry proposes to Margaret, he laments how happy she seems to be in her home of Helstone: “Margaret, I wish you did not like Helstone so much—did not seem so perfectly calm and happy here. I have been hoping for these three months past to find you regretting London—and London friends, a little—enough to make you listen more quietly” (Gaskell 30). Here locations act as substitutes for romantic feelings. Helstone represents Margaret’s contentment as a single woman within her place in her original family. A desire for London, Henry indicates, would mean that she has a desire to leave that life. Even this early on in the novel, geography and marriage meld together. Helstone comes to represent Margaret’s original life—her life as a young girl with almost all of its meaning rooted in her family. Her move to the northern Milton uproots her from this original family life even before she agrees to marriage. What stands out about the marriage plot in *North and South* is how much changes in Margaret’s life before she even meets the man she will eventually marry, John Thornton. Shortly after rejecting Henry, Margaret moves and must confront a brand new environment in Milton, echoing the changes a newly married woman would undergo. Of all the changes that would occur for a Victorian woman getting married, one

of the most significant and upending is the removal of herself from her original home to her husband's. In *North and South*, this move appears to take place pre-marriage as Margaret enters a society that Thornton wields a large influence over. In Helena Michie's *Victorian Honeymoons*, she explores the different roles that geographic location can take on for a newly married couple; the location of the honeymoon "can serve as a testing ground, a reminder of a previous way of life, an object of aesthetic inquiry or debate, a site of terror or challenge, or a place of gender definition" (Michie 77). All of these different definitions for a honeymoon location can also work for the location of a courtship. Margaret must navigate the industrial North of Milton and find how she fits in with Thornton's society before the two even develop feelings for each other. Geographic location comes to play a significant role in the last proposal scene as well.

The next proposal Margaret receives—the first one from John Thornton—cannot be understood without the context of the riot scene, a preceding moment that exemplifies the conflict between the public and private life of a Victorian woman. Margaret defends Thornton from an angry mob of his mill workers, going out to confront them and placing herself in front of him. In an action based on impulse, Margaret physically encompasses Thornton: "She only thought of how she could save him. She threw her arms around him; she made her body into a shield from the fierce people beyond" (Gaskell 179) and tries to appeal to the crowd, "You do not know what you are doing" (Gaskell 179)—a moment that likens her to Christ on the cross. Thornton tries to push her away but to no avail. In the action, a stone strikes Margaret, and she faints into Thornton's arms. It is not until they see Margaret bleeding that the crowd backs down, chastened by the sight of her "pale, upturned face, with closed eyes, still and sad as marble, though the tears welled out of the long entanglement of eyelashes, and dropped down; and

heavier, slower splash than even tears, came the drip of blood from her wound” (Gaskell 180).

Barbara Leah Harman addresses the scene as hinting at sexual violence and as an exploration of the Victorian woman’s relation to the public sphere. Harman describes how Margaret’s jumping in front of the crowd can be read in two ways:

on one reading she reverses the conventional understanding of gender relations (in which men take public stands on behalf of women, not women on behalf of men) and on the other hand it reinstates it (women convert even political events into romantic ones, public events into private ones). (Harman 368)

By throwing herself in front of the crowd, Margaret physically defends Thornton and puts herself in an unusual position for women in the time period: the protector, rather than the protected. Yet, the events that follow seem to recast the event in the second light that Harman talks about, making it more about romantic emotion than a public stance. After she has defended Thornton, Margaret is shocked at her own behavior: “I, who hate scenes—I, who have despised people for showing emotion—who have thought them wanting in self-control—I went down and must needs throw myself into the *mêlée*, like a romantic fool!” (Gaskell 190). What most concerns Margaret is not her injury but how she allowed her emotions to be put on display. Up until this point in the novel, Margaret has always been careful about presenting a certain face to the outside world. Her goal has to been avoid appearing as “a romantic fool,” a role that Harman implies women find themselves too often being cast in. Margaret despairs at the fact that everyone will now think she is in love with Thornton; when she considers Milton’s gossip about it, she laments, “Oh how low I am fallen that they should say that of me!” (Gaskell 190). Margaret worries about being “fallen,” the biggest fear for a Victorian woman in the public eye. The riot scene has made Margaret as vulnerable as a fallen woman by making her the subject of

gossip and discussion. Her horror at how she has exposed herself in some way to Milton directly influences how she handles Thornton's proposal.

Margaret's worst fears then come true when Thornton proposes because it proves that he did interpret her actions as a sign of private emotion. In his proposal and her rejection, their argument centers around the different implications of her rescue of him. Thornton calls upon Margaret at her home and even before he speaks, Margaret stands tensely and defiantly: "Altogether she looked like some prisoner, falsely accused of a crime that she loathed and despised, and from which she was too indignant to justify herself" (Gaskell 193). Once again, Margaret's behavior within a proposal scene connects to emotions of guilt. Sally Shuttleworth writes in her introduction to the novel that throughout, "Margaret is constantly associated with the workings of shame" (Shuttleworth xiii) and that her "one public gesture" (Shuttleworth xiii) at the riot "also instantly becomes a source of shame to her" (Shuttleworth xii). Rather than offering Margaret absolution, Thornton's arrival only exacerbates Margaret's ashamedness. He mentions being ungrateful the day of the riot, and Margaret immediately interrupts to assert that he owes her nothing, explaining her actions as "only a natural instinct; any woman would have done just the same. We all feel the sanctity of our sex as a high privilege when we see danger" (Gaskell 194). She paints her defense of him as an impersonal act of mercy. Thornton persists though in telling Margaret he owes his life to her and that this debt only makes his love for her more powerful, that it "doubles the gladness, it makes the pride glow, it sharpens the sense of existence till I hardly know if it is pain or pleasure" (Gaskell 194). For Thornton, the idea that he owes Margaret something only heightens his joy in loving her. He takes pleasure in his belief that she would commit such a brave, public act for him. Margaret though experiences repulsion at Thornton's insinuation that her defense of him was "a personal act" (Gaskell 195) between the

two, rather than an action that any woman would have done. She informs him, “any woman, worthy of the name of woman, would come forward to shield, with her revered helplessness, a man in danger from the violence of numbers” (Gaskell 195). She paints her actions as representative of all women’s courage, that using their “helplessness” to defend men is a simple, inevitable act rather than a mark of sentiment. She tries to utilize the view of Victorian woman as helpless and therefore indefensible to harm. Thornton most offends Margaret, it seems, in trying to laud her as different from other women and her action as a signal of personal romantic interest. Margaret denies the “personal” and any sort of private feelings. Her protests are so vehement that Thornton never even gets to fully propose; he mentions deep love but his plan to actually ask for her hand is thwarted.

Not only does the romantic interpretation Thornton has taken of her actions horrify Margaret, even more devastating is the unspoken sexual implications that occur in their conversation. John Kucich writes that Margaret defended Thornton with no thought to the consequence: “What she does not foresee—and this lack of foresight will later chasten her from such impulsiveness—is the sexual interpretation that will be attached to her action” (Kucich 194). Harman writes it is not just the fact that Margaret defended Thornton but that any public appearance for a Victorian woman “virtually always had sexual implications unless special steps were taken to ‘cover’ and thus block her from regard” (Harman 369). Thornton’s offer of marriage then can also be viewed as an offer to ‘cover’ Margaret. When Thornton arrives in the room, even before Margaret enters, he cannot control his physical reaction: “His heart beat thick at the thought of her coming. He could not forget the touch of her arms around his neck, impatiently as it had been at the time” (Gaskell 193). He envisions her physical reaction to his proposal: “She might droop, and flush, and flutter to his arms, as to her natural home and resting-

place” (Gaskell 193). Thornton imagines his arms as her rightful place after he has held her in public and carried her away. He protests her claim that he only confesses his feelings out of gratitude, but there is something in his manner and desires that indicate a feeling of ownership over Margaret after the riot. Margaret though rejects the idea that her actions and collapse require her to need protection from Thornton. She tells him, “Why, there was not a man—not a poor desperate man in all that crowd—for whom I had not more sympathy—for whom I should not have done what little I could more heartily” (Gaskell 195). Margaret once again tries to define her actions as grounded in human kindness, rather than any kind of symbol of her own desires. By depicting her actions as something any woman would have done for any man, Margaret defends herself as still acting within the appropriate social guidelines. She is not in need of a proposal or any protection from Thornton, she argues, because she in no way exposed herself, either in feelings or in a sexual sense any more so than any other women would have also done. Thornton tries to convince her that his feelings stem from love more so than obligation to protect her, but Margaret cannot separate the proposal from her rescue. She rejects the romantic and sexual implications of her actions, viewing Thornton’s profession of love as something that taints behavior that she wants to view as born out of a sense of public duty.

While she is initially insulted and afraid of Thornton’s feelings, by the end of the novel Margaret not only agrees to marry him but is the one to approach him, an action that signals a small progress in her willingness to display emotion now. In an ironic twist of fate, Margaret becomes Thornton’s landlord when she inherits from her father’s friend, Mr. Bell. When she hears of Thornton’s intention to end his lease, she comes to him with the offer of an investment. Anne Longmuir explains that because Margaret is able to give Thornton the money the novel “succeeds in imagining a proposal scene in which a woman is the giver, rather than the gift”

(Longmuir 249). Despite the reversal of the usual power dynamic, Margaret is nervous, rather than confident. Even now, she is careful to conceal her true feelings and make it seem like an appropriate transaction, one she even tries to make public by bringing Henry, now her lawyer, along: “she was most anxious to have it all looked upon in the light of a mere business arrangement, in which the principal advantage would be on her side” (Gaskell 424). As soon as she makes the offer however, Thornton sees through to her feelings. He repeats her name as she tries to hide behind her hands. Margaret, physically hiding her face, clearly still struggles with open expression of emotion. Thornton is safe though in assuming her intentions are romantic in nature this time. He warns her, “Take care.—If you do not speak—I shall claim you as my own in some strange presumptuous way.—Send me away at once, if I must go” (Gaskell 435). He offers the chance for her to reject him, allowing her the opportunity to interrupt him as she did previously. She responds by approaching him and placing her head on his shoulder, something that is even better to him than being able to “see either deep blushes or loving eyes” (Gaskell 435). Margaret in many ways is as shy as ever. Yet, Thornton is able to see that in offering financial help to him, she is finally indicating her preference for him. Rather than let him tear away their last and only connection by ending his lease, she intervenes, and her doing so is proof enough for Thornton that she cares.

Though Margaret is the one offering money, the final proposal also demonstrates that in seeking marriage Margaret is returning to the safety and comfort of having someone to rely on. She physically leans on Thornton: “she turned her face, still covered with her small white hands, towards him, and laid it on his shoulder, hiding it even there” (Gaskell 435). Her pose is one of submission and blocks out the rest of the world. The only words she manages are to cry out, “Oh Mr. Thornton, I am not good enough!” (Gaskell 435). Rather than maintaining her role as the

giver in their relationship, she turns into his shoulder and seeks reassurance. Margaret has not completely disconnected from the shame she is so prone to feel. Pearl L. Brown describes how the end of the novel actually indicates that Margaret must relinquish some amount of control over her life in order to move forward: “Adam Bell’s money and Thornton’s second marriage proposal come to re-affirm Margaret’s dependency before she must independently formulate plans for her future” (Brown 349). Though her business offer might be a demonstration of financial power, Margaret immediately displays herself as vulnerable and in need of Thornton to proceed with her life. Brown describes how after the death of her parents, Margaret is shockingly stagnant, shadowing her cousin’s family around London. By presenting herself to Thornton, she seeks her own life, independent of her cousins, but one that will be also inextricably tied to Thornton’s will. After her acceptance, Thornton presents to Margaret roses from Helstone that he saved after visiting it in secret, telling her, “I wanted to see the place where Margaret grew to what she is, even at the worst time of all, when I had no hope of ever calling her mine” (Gaskell 436). The reveal and presence of the roses in this scene demonstrates Thornton’s respect for her original home while also indicating that Margaret has come full circle in a manner. Though now an orphan and financially independent, Margaret is starting a new family with Thornton, one where it seems she will once again be under someone’s protection. The comfort and delight she took in the beginning of the novel at getting to be at home and a daughter again are repeated here in a different form. Rather than daughter, she now becomes wife, an identity that once again ties her to someone who in many ways will have authority over her.

Before they can move on, Thornton and Margaret must also reconcile with how they both behaved during his first proposal. As Thornton realizes Margaret’s true feelings, he helps her put her shame at being romantic away: “he gently disengaged her hands from her face, and laid her

arms as they had once before been placed to protect him from the rioters” (Gaskell 435). Even now, the riot still marks their relationship. By placing her again in that position she assumed during it, Thornton encourages her to accept the role that emotion plays in her life. Margaret tells him, “I remember how wrongly I spoke to you” (Gaskell 436) about his first proposal, indicating that she has come to view her own actions during the riot differently. Just as she seems willing to admit that they were at least partly born out of affection, Thornton admits his own mistake in confessing his love so abruptly to her. He asks if she remembers, “how I requited you with my insolence the next day?” (Gaskell 436). Rather than one being completely right and the other being wrong, they both admit to regretting their words. In comparison to the first proposal where Margaret tried to paint what looked to be an action of romance as something impersonal, here she allows Thornton to view her business offer as a sign of love. In contrast to the Margaret who denied being viewed as wife for anyone, here she finally submits to Thornton. The protection that marriage offers comes to replace her desire for childhood, finally quieting to some extent her anxiety about what role she will play as a woman in Victorian society and her shame at the romantic side of her nature.

Chapter Three

Eventual Surrender in *Can You Forgive Her?*

In *Can You Forgive Her?* by Anthony Trollope, the making and breaking of Alice Vavasor’s engagements in the novel reflect her desire to find purpose in her life. Alice begins the novel already engaged to John Grey, described by her Aunt Macleod as “the worthy man” (Trollope 21). She breaks it off with him to become engaged to her previous fiancée, her cousin George Vavasor, Grey’s opposite as “the wild man” (Trollope 21). She loves Grey consistently throughout, but for her, love does not feel like enough to overcome her worry of being unfit to

marry a man considered so perfect. Insecure and hoping to find a marriage where she can have a purpose outside just that of “wife,” Alice agrees to marry George so long as he runs for Parliament. She offers to fund his campaign so that when they marry, she might be an active participant in his career. Eventually this engagement falls apart, and after much deliberation, Alice finally consents to marry John Grey again. Alice is simultaneously anxious and ambitious about marriage, and both feelings cause her constantly to question her decisions. Her switching back and forth between two suitors questions the nature of what it means to be engaged and what it means to promise to marry someone. The marriage proposals that Alice agrees to and then reneges on reflect her journey to find a marriage that will allow for her own identity, an endeavor not supported by her family or the society around her.

More so than any other heroine, Alice—because of all of the rearranging in her romantic life—receives much public criticism and speculation on her choice of who to marry. J. Hillis Miller talks about the importance that marriage plays for women and their place in society in Trollope’s novels. An unmarried woman is often a problem to be solved: “Until she marries, her selfhood, insofar as it depends on her subject position as the wife of so-and-so, has not yet been settled. She is a wild card, without a fixed value, unpredictable” (Miller 45). After Alice jilts her fiancée John Grey, she spends the rest of the novel hearing relatives and friends comment on her decision. In comparison to the other three novels, the engagements in *Can You Forgive Her?* are much more public and a source of discussion for other characters. Alice’s aunt, Lady Macleod, describes her engagement as one of the most crucial periods of her life: “Yes, you are, Alice; in the most special crisis of a girl’s life. You are still a girl, but you are the promised wife of a very worthy man, who will look to you for all his domestic happiness” (Trollope 21). Her position as an engaged woman places Alice between the pillars of childhood and adulthood. She is “still a

girl” but also most prepare herself to provide all the “domestic happiness” for one man. John Grey’s proposal takes place before the beginning of the novel, but throughout the early chapters, Alice’s decision is continuously questioned and defended by various characters. Randall Craig views the title of the work as playing with the idea of questions themselves, especially the question of marriage. A marriage proposal is “simultaneously question and statement” (Craig 220). In proposing to Alice, both Grey and her other suitor George Vavasor state that they believe they are worthy of her while also questioning if she herself believes so. For Craig, part of the complications then of Alice’s engagements result from the contradictions of this question: “engagement entails a complexity belied by a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Its significance is clearly social and conventional, yet it should also be personal and figurative” (Craig 220). An engagement is both public and personal, representative of both the engaged couple’s desires but also the desires society has for them. What Alice struggles with in the beginning of the novel is the idea that her desires might not completely line up with Grey’s or society’s. She loves him and never doubts this love in the novel, but what she calls into question is whether she can live up to the expectations society dictates for a wife.

For Grey, the question of whether or not Alice is worthy of marrying him is irrelevant because in his eyes, she already is his wife. When she tells him she is ultimately “unfit” (Trollope 97) to become his wife, Grey responds that he considers her to be his wife already: “You are my wife, my own, my dearest, my chosen one” (Trollope 97). Their differing points of view demonstrate that an engagement can take on separate meanings for each individual within the couple. In Grey’s eyes, engagement is as good as marriage while to Alice it is more like a testing ground. Grey’s perspective holds that the promise is as good as the act. This question of what a proposal and engagement actually mean in relation to marriage is one that Alice struggles

with throughout the novel. Early on in their engagement, she reflects on the reality that Grey treats their relationship differently than she does: “She had no husband;—not as yet. He spoke of their engagement as though it were a betrothal, as betrothals used to be of yore; as though they were already in some sort married” (Trollope 24). Grey’s view of marriage feels outdated to Alice, a woman who has her own modest wealth and already has been engaged before. Alice believes that engagement is not the final, permanent step—an understanding that makes her journey to marriage a series of beginning and endings rather than a linear path.

The beginning of the novel traces the anxiety that accompanies having agreed to marry someone. In the first chapter, the narrator builds to the knowledge that Alice is engaged, not mentioning it until the last two sentences: “And now for my fact. At the time of which I am writing she was already engaged to be married” (Trollope 12). Alice is defined by her engagement, and it alters others’ and her own perception of herself. It is on her trip to Switzerland with her cousins, George Vavasor and his sister Kate, that Alice doubts the worthiness of herself in providing John Grey all the expected happiness of marriage that her Aunt Macleod mentioned. At George Vavasor’s prodding, she asks herself, “Was she not telling herself daily, —hourly,—always,—in every thought of her life, that in accepting Mr. Grey she had assumed herself to be mistress of virtues which she did not possess?” (Trollope 48). In looking back at her acceptance, Alice views it as a kind of claim of her own moral superiority. Accepting a proposal does not just reflect who a woman wants to marry, it also reflects her own belief in her character. Deborah Morse in *Women in Trollope’s Palliser Novels* analyzes Alice’s choice between John Grey and George Vavasor according to Jean Kennard’s critical analysis of the “convention of the two suitors”: “The heroine’s choice of the ‘good’ suitor defines her acceptance of the qualities embodied in him and her rejection of the qualities embodied in the

‘wrong’ suitor. The two lovers are thus touchstones of the heroine’s developing maturity” (Morse 10). Part of Alice’s process to form her own identity as a woman includes deciding who to marry. In her case, the “good” suitor overwhelms her with his perfection, causing her to doubt her own self: “Would that he had some faults! Would that he had! Would that he had! How could she, full of faults as she knew herself to be—how could she hope to make happy a man as perfect as he was!” (Trollope 24). Alice’s doubts about her engagement do not stem from any doubts about Grey’s character but rather her own. There seems to be something vain about saying she could possibly make a “man as perfect as he” happy with her own arsenal of flaws. Grey’s goodness, rather than being a blessing, makes Alice feel that she should not have accepted his proposal knowing herself to be not as good. This anxiety that Alice experiences post-engagement is something not usually seen in the Victorian novel, which typically ends with the woman finally getting engaged to the good and worthy man. By beginning the novel with Alice already engaged, the novel departs from the typical marriage plot. As Morse describes, “Alice’s shuttling back and forth between her two suitors breaks the usual pattern in which the woman is courted by both suitors, eventually choosing the ‘worthy’ man” (Morse 25). Through this deviation, *Can You Forgive Her?* shows how the anxiety over who to marry can still exist post-proposal. Even though Alice’s future might seem firm and decided to the outside world, in her own mind having assented to a proposal is a source of personal anxiety on whether or not she can live up to the implications of that promise.

When Alice has broken it off with John Grey, George proposes again to her by letter, a gesture that extends their proposal into a long affair where he focuses on the practical side of their connection. The act of writing the letter itself is done on an impulse for George; he sits down to write it and tells himself: “I needn’t send it when it’s written...and the chances are that I

won't" (Trollope 253). George's motivation at this point is grounded in his ambition and his desire for Alice's money to help that ambition, a fact that he is completely honest about with himself. When deciding to mail it, he is actually scornful about the idea that Alice would accept him: "I'll bet two to one that she gives way,' he said to himself as he put the sheet of paper back into the envelope. 'Women are such out-and-out fools'" (Trollope 256). From George's perspective, his proposal by letter is viewed almost as a trick, something that Alice would have to be foolish to give into. Perhaps in a different suitor, a proposal by letter would be viewed as an opportunity to be especially careful while asking for marriage. With George though, this proposal seems more influenced by the idea of chance. It is a gamble for George, not in the sense that it is risky, but that it would be a stroke of luck for Alice to agree to marry him again. It is the fact that they were already engaged once before that allows George to focus on the practical motivations for their engagement. He mentions that he still loves her, perhaps even more than before, but also writes to her, "we both have reached that time of life, when it is probable that in any proposition of marriage we should think more of our adaptability to each other than we did before" (Trollope 254). The focus on "adaptability" here is George's way of bringing up his desire to run for Parliament. His proposal focuses much less on the idea of romantic passion and more on social suitability; they have known each other for a long time, and they would be able to benefit each other. George paints Alice as someone who is on the same level as himself or perhaps even above, describing her as his "counsellor" (Trollope 255) and appealing to her own goals: "I should say that it must be essential to your ambition that you should join your lot to that of some man the nature of whose aspirations would be like to your own" (Trollope 255). George's proposal is one that appeals to Alice's "ambition," rather than the idea of them being a perfect match romantically. Though he believes that Alice might be "fool" enough to accept, his

proposal also hinges on the idea that she is smart enough to see the practical side of their re-engagement. In appealing to her ambitious side, George presents a new kind of proposal that steers away from the romantic in favor of a mutually beneficial partnership.

In accepting George, Alice decides that she does want a husband with a political career to provide her with the chance to be actively helpful. She accepts him also by letter⁸, a move that Juliet McMaster identifies as the only way she could possibly consent:

It is significant that George's proposal to Alice, and her acceptance of it, are both in the form of letters, for clearly it is only because the offer is made in this way, at a distance, in words alone, and with no physical presence to enforce a direct and personal reaction, that she is able to accept it. She can do in written words what she cannot do in deed—give herself to a man she does not love. (McMaster 610)

By being physically apart from George when she responds, Alice considers only the intellectual and social implications of their engagement. Like him, she focuses on the practical. In her responding letter, she expresses the hope that he will pursue a career in Parliament, “the grandest” of “all positions which a man may attain” (Trollope 274) and that she will be able to finance his political career. Alice asks for the “honor and glory of marrying a man who has gained a seat in the Parliament of Great Britain!” (Trollope 274). With George, Alice believes that she could be worthy of him by helping him to pursue such a career as Parliament. Talia Schaffer describes that much of Alice's decisions about marriage in the novel are influenced by her wish to have some involvement in a career: “Alice's marriage plans are indeed motivated by desire—not erotic desire, but vocational desire” (Schaffer 1). In the novel, Alice asks herself the essential question of “What should a woman do with her life?” (Trollope 92). Schaffer believes

⁸ Letter-writing and mail were central aspects of Trollope's life. He worked for the General Post Office for most of his life and was a prolific letter-writer. See Victoria Glendinning's *Anthony Trollope*, pps. 366-368.

this question for Victorian women becomes complicated by the fact that women felt ashamed of their desire to work. Trollope does not allow Alice to outright wish for her own career, rather the desire for work—for something to do with her life—becomes subverted into her decision over who to marry. As Schaffer puts it, “Alice feels romantic desire for John Grey and vocational desire for George Vavasor” (Schaffer 27). She consistently maintains that she loves Grey, yet the idea of purpose is what convinces her to break their engagement. She dreams of finding something outside of just marriage and motherhood: “[she] had by degrees filled herself with a vague idea that there was a something to be done; a something over and beyond, or perhaps altogether beside that marrying and having two children” (Trollope 92). Alice believes she can find this “something” in marrying a man with a career. She goes back to George on the promise of his run for Parliament, an endeavor that she hopes will allow her to become useful and give her a purpose beyond that of just mother and wife.

Once she is engaged to George, Alice struggles again with how serious a commitment an engagement can be. Though George and John Grey are dissimilar in multiple ways, George shares with Grey the notion that engagement is as good as marriage. Early on in their engagement, he visits Alice and tells her, “Alice, you are my wife now” (Trollope 292). In this moment, George is trying to goad her into admitting to some amount of romantic love for him and that their connection does go beyond a financial agreement. He tries to claim them as already married at this point. Alice denies the right to refer to George as her husband however, saying it “must be still distant” (Trollope 292). For Alice, that greater next step into marriage is too important to pretend to skip. Now faced with the physical presence of George, Alice has a harder time reconciling herself to the reality of their marriage. McMaster describes Trollope as playing with the line between “theory and fact” (McMaster 607) and how Alice’s main problem in the

novel is the discrepancy between actual reality and her construction of it in her mind. As McMaster describes, within the novel, “promises are far from performance, and profession from conduct” (McMaster 607). In this debate of whether or not an engagement is as good as being married, the importance of words becomes a focal point. What significance does the fact that Alice and George have promised each other that they will be married have? George, during the same visit, tries to convince Alice to physically embrace him, criticizing her distant greeting to him; he tells her, “I wanted you to put your hand in mine, to kiss me, and to tell me that you are once more my own” (Trollope 296). Alice’s reaction to this request is a shudder, an action George notices. In trying to get her to “perform” as if they were already married, he runs into resistance. The narrative as a whole highlights engagement as a transitional state. Though she receives criticism for it, Alice is able to break off three different engagements overall and preserve some of her independence during the engagement period. She does feel she owes George her financial support but the right for them to refer to each other as husband and wife and be physically affectionate she withholds. George asks for more from Alice than John Grey did, and in her financial obligation to him, Alice has more at risk in their engagement. Yet, that line of “performing” as husband and wife she still refuses to cross.

As the novel progresses, it builds to Alice’s final proposal, the re-engagement to John Grey that will secure her happiness. However, the novel also gradually focuses less and less on Alice and more on her cousin Lady Glencora. As Alice struggles with a decision between Grey and George, her cousin similarly finds herself torn between two very different men. In some ways, Lady Glencora’s function in the novel is to be a foil for Alice. Many critics have noted though that Glencora becomes the more fascinating character by the end. George Levine describes her as the more emotionally open and honest of the two and that she “entirely steals the

show” (Levine 10) from Alice’s fickleness. Glencora is entirely frank and honest with Alice that although she is married Plantagenet Palliser, she suffers because she still loves her past suitor, Burgo Fitzgerald, a man that her family convinced her not to marry. In the beginning of the novel, Lady Glencora’s marriage acts as Hager’s “monstrous marriage,” just as Bertha Mason and Rochester’s marriage functioned in *Jane Eyre*. It serves as a kind of warning to Alice of what an unhappy marriage might look like. Yet, Glencora’s role goes beyond just that of a cautionary tale. Levine describes how Trollope’s interest and sympathies shift from Alice to her. After Glencora reappears, “Alice, whose problem began as a genuinely complicated one, becomes less and less attractive, less and less substantial. The tension soon goes out of her story, and its resolution in her marriage to Grey seems almost a formality” (Levine 9). In comparison to Alice who anxiously questions what marriage might be like for her, Lady Glencora must actively confront the daily trials of her marriage. Ultimately, Glencora’s largest disappointment is in how Palliser finds his contentment in work and not in her. Palliser tells her work is his greatest pleasure, and Glencora finds herself jealous: “there were others, Lady Glencora thought, who could love to lie in the sun, and could look up into the eyes of women, and seek their happiness there. She was sure, at any rate, that she knew one such” (Trollope 356). Her conception of this ideal husband echoes Lady Macleod’s words to Alice, that a husband must look to his wife “for all his domestic happiness.” Although Alice expresses a desire for purpose in her life, she becomes more and more passive in the novel. Glencora, in contrast, only seeks romantic happiness, but she actively seeks it. In another novel, Glencora might be a static minor character whose only function would be to make Alice even more wary of marriage. Alice’s comparative passivity and indecision however diverts the spotlight away from herself.⁹ At the end of the

⁹ Trollope will later return to the story of Plantagenet Palliser in his later novels. In his autobiography, he wrote, “that which endears [*Can You Forgive Her?*] is the first presentation which I made in it of Plantagenet Palliser with

novel, Alice, Grey, Glencora, and Palliser are all on vacation together, and the fate of Alice and Grey seems secure and second-place to Glencora and Palliser's drama.

With most of the ending's attention reserved for Glencora, Grey's final proposal to Alice is relatively understated. It resolves their previous issues: Alice's desire for Grey to have a career and her feelings of inadequacy in comparison to him, without much fanfare. On their vacation with the Pallisers, Plantagenet convinces Grey that he might enjoy a position in Parliament. Schaffer views Palliser's encouragement as a significant promise and agreement, almost like a marriage. Their agreement to work together is the "vocational equivalent of the wedding scene" (Schaffer 30) and allows Alice to get what she originally wanted without having to convince Grey herself. This promise of a career means she will get to marry a man in Parliament, allowing her to find love and vocational purpose in the same man. When Grey formally proposes marriage again though, Alice still finds reason to protest. He leads her through the cloisters of a church in Lucerne, and their conversation turns to a disagreement about where it is best to live. Alice says "a pretty country" (Trollope 622), and Grey confesses to her, "I want you to come live in a very ugly country" (Trollope 622), referring to his native Cambridgeshire. Location becomes representative of romantic feelings, just as it did in *North and South*. Alice tells Grey that where he lives ultimately does not signify for her; rather, Alice begins to deny him because she is struggling to overcome the shame she feels at having jilted him. "Because I cannot forgive myself what I have done, and because you ought not to forgive me" (Trollope 623), she tells him when he asks why they cannot marry. Once again, it becomes a question of how worthy she is of him. Ultimately, Grey convinces her by asserting that her marrying him would be for his own good. "Am I to be punished then, because of your fault?" (Trollope 622), he asks her. He continues, "If you love me, Alice, I tell you that you dare not refuse me. If you do so, you will

his wife, Lady Glencora" (Trollope, *Autobiography*, 165).

fail hereafter to reconcile it to your conscience before God” (Trollope 624). He asks her to be his “counsellor” (Trollope 622), using the same word that George did. Grey finally seems to understand how to overcome Alice’s apprehensions. He paints it as her moral duty to marry him, suggesting to her that she will have power and a role to play in their relationship while also playing on her feelings of guilt over breaking their engagement.

Alice ultimately gives in to Grey’s proposal—a move that promises love and purpose while also painting her as docile and submissive to Grey’s will. Grey’s domineering proposal is described as a conquering of Alice: “Of course she had no choice but to yield. He possessed of power and force infinitely greater than hers, had left her no alternative but to be happy” (Trollope 625). Levine describes the scene as one of “surrender in self in sexual surrender” (Levine 16). Alice has not even muttered a yes when Grey presses her close and tells her, “the battle is over now, and I have won it” (Trollope 625). The use of the word “battle” to describe their final proposal indicates that Alice finally will submit to marriage. She does so now in the face of Grey’s utter assurance that to marry him would be the right action to take. While throughout the novel Alice struggled with the decision over who was the right man to marry and when, the ending seems to take the decision away from her. Although Grey has conceded to one of her desires in a sense by taking on a career, the final proposal shows that Alice has also lost the privilege of decision in their relationship. After her indecision and jilting, it seems Grey believes that the only way possible for Alice to actually go through with marriage is if she has no choice. Her final engagement is both punishment and reward. Margaret Marwick comments on the duality of the scene and how it depicts “all the conventions of male supremacy in the imagery of Alice’s final submission” (Marwick 89) but also provides Alice with “romantic fulfillment” (Marwick 89) that hints at a sexually satisfying marriage with Grey’s line: “Come to me Alice,

and comfort me, come to me for I want you sorely” (Trollope 623). The eroticism of the line indicates that Trollope is willing to assure the reader that Alice will find sexual fulfillment in addition to her vocational fulfillment. She does submit to Grey, but in such a way, that she also receives great rewards. The last lines of the novel close on the claim by Trollope that, “Probably my readers may agree with Alice, that in the final adjustment of her affairs she had received more than she had deserved” (Trollope 675). While we are asked to forgive Alice by the narrator, it is also implied that Grey is right to take away her choice in the end and simply insist on marriage. Some critics have pointed to the possibility though that Trollope’s narrator is a device to present readers with a critique of their own bias; as Morse puts it, “the conflict between Trollope’s story itself and the narrator’s apparent view of that story may be a deliberate strategy Trollope uses to force his readers to confront their own prejudices” (Morse 33). By the end of the novel however, Alice’s right to decide who to marry does appear to lose much of its importance. It is a power taken away from her—and taken away from her for possibly the sake of her own best interest, the narrator says. The narrator might, as Morse suggests, be echoing society’s opinion more so than Trollope’s, but the narrative does end on the image of Alice still in need of our forgiveness, rather than displaying her as a woman completely justified in her actions. Despite the unconventional beginning, the novel ends on a presentation of the conservative idea that Alice in some way deserves punishment for her being unable to commit to marriage the way she is expected to as a young Victorian woman.

Chapter Four

Far from the Madding Crowd and Atonement

In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Thomas Hardy plays with conventional Victorian gender roles, most notably with his heroine, Bathsheba Everdene, but also with her male suitors. Lively and independent, Bathsheba is often labeled by the men around her as vain and flirtatious. When her first suitor, the shepherd Gabriel Oak, proposes, she seems to consider it only to playfully deny him. Her next proposal comes from her neighbor, the intense William Boldwood. She draws him out of his reserve by sending him a mock valentine but comes to regret her flirtation as he becomes more and more fixated on her. Unlike the other heroines, Bathsheba does actually go through with one marriage. She elopes with Sergeant Troy, an impulsive move marked by a lack of a proposal scene. It is a decision that she comes to regret deeply and that takes away most of her spirit and playfulness, especially when the marriage ends in tragedy as Boldwood kills Troy. In the end, Bathsheba becomes engaged to Oak, a marriage that symbolizes her newfound humility. Her final proposal is a paradoxical act, an occasion that is both marked by her past mistakes and provides her with an opportunity to recapture some of her youthful, romantic tendencies.

The first scene in the novel establishes the dynamic between Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak that will last throughout the entire novel: Oak as critic of Bathsheba. Before we see her, Hardy introduces us to Oak and comments on his unmarried state. The first description of Oak emphasizes his position as not yet married but no longer a boy: "He was at the brightest period of masculine growth, for his intellect and his emotions were clearly separated; he had passed the time during which the influence of youth indiscriminately mingles them in the character of impulse, and he had not yet arrived at the stage wherein they become united again, in the character of prejudice, by the influence of a wife and family" (Hardy 10). This depiction is a reversal of the usual fixation on the woman's unmarried state at the beginning of the novel, a

convention *North and South* and *Can You Forgive Her?* both follow. In this way, the novel opens more on the question of when will Oak get married, rather than when will Bathsheba. Following this description, Bathsheba arrives on a wagon. Without realizing that anyone is watching, she pulls out a mirror, “in which she proceeded to survey herself attentively” (Hardy 12). Oak immediately interprets the gesture as a sign of vanity: “A cynical inference was irresistible by Gabriel Oak as he regarded the scene, generous though he fain would have been. There was no necessity whatever for her looking in the glass” (Hardy 12). Oak imagines that Bathsheba is picturing “far-off though likely dramas in which men would play a part—vistas of probable triumphs—the smiles being of a phase suggesting that hearts were imagined as lost and won” (Hardy 12). He immediately associates Bathsheba with romance and projects onto her the typical romantic fantasies women are often believed to have. Rosemarie Morgan describes how when *Far from the Madding Crowd* was published, many critics viewed Oak as the sensible counterpoint to Bathsheba’s fickleness and sided with his point of view. Morgan believes Hardy had a different intention though with the character—that Hardy deliberately chose Oak to exercise a more conservative judgement than the novel does: “It is critical to the success of the novel that the ‘conventional’ hero should carry both unconventional heroine and unconventional author into the respectable Victorian drawing-room. Hardy assists the process, not by invoking a proprietary narrator but by transferring the role of censor to Oak” (Morgan 35). This first scene helps establish Oak in that role. Without officially meeting or speaking to Bathsheba, he imagines an interiority for her that revolves around romantic endeavors and vanity. Acknowledging this dynamic between the two characters is vital in understanding the implications of their two proposal scenes.

When Oak calls upon Bathsheba to propose, he finds himself insulted by what he perceives as her teasing him. He goes to ask her aunt if he might propose but decides to leave after hearing of her multiple suitors. Bathsheba runs after him to correct this, but once he does mention marriage, she taunts him: “I never said I was going to marry you” (Hardy 33). For Oak, the fact that she chased after him makes her rejection inconceivable. He admonishes her, “To run after anybody like this—and then say you don’t want him!” (Hardy 33). Oak once again critiques her actions as indicative of romantic intent. Barbara A. Schapiro reads Bathsheba running after Oak as having an entirely different motive, describing Bathsheba as a character who needs others’ recognition to affirm her own identity. She is independent, yes, but it masks a deeper insecurity: “Her fiercely held independence...may defend against a more desperate neediness and deficiency. Bathsheba needs Gabriel to love her even if she cannot return his love and has no desire to marry him” (Schapiro 14). Schapiro describes this urge in Bathsheba as the “need to feel herself reflected” (Schapiro 14). However, Bathsheba explains to Oak that she only ran after him in order to “correct a piece of false news” (Hardy 33)—her aunt’s assertion that she has many suitors. She tells Oak, “I *hate* to be thought of men’s property in that way” (Hardy 33). Schapiro’s assessment that she needs Oak to love her does not seem to hold, but the idea that Bathsheba wants to “feel herself reflected” accurately captures her concern about her image. In forming her identity as a young woman, Bathsheba is both self-indulgent (staring in the mirror) and protective (wishing to correct her aunt’s gossip). Regardless of her motive though, Oak takes his own interpretation.

Bathsheba does allow herself to fully imagine life with Oak before giving him a definitive no, ultimately rejecting his visioning of herself and the kind of life they could have together. Oak describes to Bathsheba what her life would be like as a shepherd’s wife,

mentioning pianos and birds and babies, the standard issues of a pastoral marriage. Bathsheba actually responds positively, telling him, “Yes; I should like that” and “I should like it very much” (Hardy 34). Despite agreeing with all of Oak’s imaginings, she ultimately rejects the proposal, saying that a husband would be objectionable on the grounds that whenever she would look up, “there he’d be” (Hardy 35). She also, she confesses, does not love him. Though her manner in the scene is light, she seems to genuinely regret that Oak should be so in love with her. “How I wish I hadn’t run after you” (35), she eventually says. Oak’s deep insistence that they belong together—he tells her he would marry her despite her not loving him—makes Bathsheba uncomfortable enough that she decides to cut the scene short with a dramatic claim. She tells Oak, “I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know” (Hardy 36). Critics disagree on how seriously Bathsheba believes this line. Before she says it, the narrator tells us “she seemed to have a short cut for getting back to cheerfulness, and set her face to signify archness” (Hardy 36). The fact that Bathsheba must “set her face” before she says the line indicates some amount of acting. Morgan describes the moment as one of “bitter irony” (Morgan 44) in that she maneuvers her way out of marrying a domineering man by claiming to need a marriage where she will be completely submissive. Joanna Devereux does not view Bathsheba’s words as sarcastic: “she has internalized the discourse about women which informs the narrator’s view of them” (Devereux 23) (unlike Morgan, Devereux argues that the narrator does subscribe to a harsh view of women’s nature). Perhaps, Bathsheba does believe that marriage is an institution that works best when the man is able to “tame” the woman. Yet, the scene also shows that she is adamant in not marrying at the moment, displaying an aversion to the idea of a life where a man would always be there whenever she “looked up” (Hardy 35).

Though she has deep reservations about marriage, Bathsheba herself is the one who “proposes” to Boldwood in a manner, an impulsive move that causes much more trouble than she intended. She sends Boldwood a valentine that reads “MARRY ME” (Hardy 97) on the seal. She does so after a subtle rejection by him. Bathsheba, noted for her looks, finds herself admired wherever she goes, a sensation that she describes while at the market of being like marriage: “this morning it was as bad as being married: eyes everywhere!” (Hardy 93). Yet, Boldwood ignores her, first in the market and then in church. Her servant Liddy interprets his ignorance as connected to his upper-class status. She tells Bathsheba, “But everyone else was noticing you—and it was odd he didn’t. There, ‘tis like him. Rich and gentlemanly, what does he care?” (Hardy 96). When Liddy mistakenly believes the valentine she is writing is for Boldwood, Bathsheba starts to consider sending it to him; she tosses a hymn book in the air like a coin to decide for certain. Her decision is based on impulse and the slight committed by Boldwood, who unlike everyone else, has not paid her any attention. Her sending the valentine is an action that prompts the narrator to say, “Of love as a spectacle Bathsheba had a fair knowledge; but of love subjectively she knew nothing” (Hardy 98). Bathsheba gives little thought to the consequences, just as when she chased after Oak. Some part of her appears to crave affirmation from men. She needed to correct Oak’s view of her, and here she needs Boldwood to notice her. Once again though, her actions take on a meaning that she could not anticipate. Boldwood takes her seriously, and in his hands, “the letter and its dictum changed their tenor from the thoughtlessness of their origin to a deep solemnity, imbibed from their accessories now” (Hardy 99). Boldwood, a man whose demeanor matches his “quiet” and “grave” (Hardy 99) home, cannot conceive of or view the valentine as anything other than a genuine symbol of passion. As the valentine rests on his mantle, he stares at it compulsively: “Here the bachelor’s gaze was

continually fastening itself, till the large red seal became as a blot of blood on the retina of his eye” (Hardy 99). The valentine alters Boldwood’s whole existence. It ignites in him an obsession that makes the valentine’s role in the novel perhaps more impactful and destructive than any other proposal.

When Boldwood goes and formally proposes to Bathsheba, his manner demonstrates how much he has idealized her. Bathsheba admits to having sent the valentine in “thoughtlessness” (Hardy 128), and he is horrified by the prospect. He tells her, “You torture me to say it was done in thoughtlessness—I never thought of it in that light, and I can’t endure it” (Hardy 128).

Boldwood cannot reconcile the actual intentions of Bathsheba with the intentions he imagined for her. He, similar to Oak, tries to convince her by painting a picture of what their life would be like. He claims that she “shall have no cares” (Hardy 128) and that she “shall never have so much as to look out of doors at haymaking time” (Hardy 129). Just like Oak, Boldwood’s anger arises from the fact that Bathsheba has shown interest without actually intending to marry him, and he tries to convince her with an idealized and romanticized picture of their life. In the proposal from Oak, Bathsheba was able to maintain her playful tone while she analyzed how to best end the conversation. Here she more openly laments her actions: “‘The valentine again! O that valentine!’ she said to herself” (Hardy 128). She did not anticipate Boldwood actually containing feelings of this magnitude and is unable to deal with the inequality of feeling between them: “I cannot bear you to feel so much, and me to feel nothing” (Hardy 129). She feels sympathetic but also “frightened as well as agitated at his vehemence” (Hardy 129). Mixed with Bathsheba’s regret at her flirtation is genuine fear. The great emotion that Boldwood displays seems to be punishment for her carelessness. William Mistichelli describes Boldwood as using his gentlemanly manner and his generous description of their life together as a kind of facade:

“Boldwood’s proposal thinly disguises the aggression that controls his pursuit of a mate” (Mistichelli 59). As the narrator himself declares about the proposal, “Farmer Boldwood...did not exercise kindness here. The rarest offerings of the purest loves are but a self-indulgence, and no generosity at all” (Hardy 130). Though Bathsheba is the regretful one in the scene, she also can be viewed as a victim, helpless in the face of Boldwood’s conviction that they are meant to be together.

Bathsheba eventually does consent to consider marrying Boldwood in the future, a surrender that occurs after Boldwood loses his dignified mask. During his first proposal, she tells him she must refuse because he is “too dignified” (Hardy 128) for her. Boldwood is almost opposite in nature in comparison to Bathsheba. He is a man of great passion inwardly but one who also maintains a dignified front, a projection of civility and gentlemanly stoicism. Bathsheba lacks the intensity of his feelings, but she often acts or takes on the appearance of someone who is romantic. It is only when Boldwood sheds some of this dignity that Bathsheba tells him she will consider marrying him. He comes to eat dinner with her and her shepherds, and after everyone has left he kneels before her and moves “restlessly” (Hardy 159). These actions demonstrate his loss of his self-possessed nature: “This unwonted abstraction by love of all dignity from a man of whom it had ever seemed the chief component, was, in its distressing incongruity, a pain to her which quenched much of the pleasure she derived from the proof that she was idolized” (Hardy 159). The loss of Boldwood’s “chief component,” his dignity, actually eclipses any of the pleasure Bathsheba might have felt from being loved. Yet, it is only after this loss that she agrees to consider the marriage. She describes Boldwood as a having the “sorry look of a grand bird without the feathers that make it grand” (Hardy 159). This metaphor, which could allude to castration as many birds use their feathers to attract a mate, indicates how

Boldwood has fallen in stature. Rather than alienating Bathsheba further from him, this loss of his dignity convinces her that she should attempt to “make amends” (Hardy 129). At the root of her decision to try and love him is some measure of guilt and responsibility. In repayment for Boldwood’s loss of stoic masculinity, Bathsheba agrees to consider giving in to marriage.

The suitor that Bathsheba actually does marry is Sergeant Troy however, a man defined by showmanship and spectacle. Troy struggles with commitment but is often capable of being dazzling on the spot: “Hence whilst he sometimes reached the brilliant in speech, because that was spontaneous, he fell below the commonplace in action, from inability to guide incipient effort” (Hardy 167). From the moment, Troy and Bathsheba meet, their romance appears as a fantasy for her. She first encounters Troy when the two accidentally collide while walking home at night and find themselves stuck together, “hitched together” (Hardy 161) as Troy describes, by a prickly spur. Troy takes full advantage of the forced intimacy of the moment and describes her as the most beautiful woman he has ever seen, an action that at first insults Bathsheba but then later flatters her and seals the doom of Boldwood’s suit: “It was a fatal omission of Boldwood’s that he had never once told her she was beautiful” (Hardy 165). Troy’s method of seduction is flattery; if Oak is the critic of Bathsheba, Troy’s courtship is marked by his showering of her with praise and open affection, even if it might not be fully genuine. He impulsively gifts Bathsheba his father’s gold watch, a present she denies. This almost-gifting takes place during the famous swordplay scene in which Troy performs a series of different moves and cuts all incredibly close to Bathsheba. The effect is mesmerizing on her; as the blade dances around her, “she was enclosed in a firmament of light, and of sharp hisses, resembling resembling a sky-full of meteors close at hand” (Hardy 183). The scene has sexual implications—once Troy is done, he kisses her for the first time, an action that leaves Bathsheba “stinging as if aflame to the very

hollows of her feet” (Hardy 185)—as well as being representative of Troy’s theatrical personality. Bathsheba is helpless to the force of Troy’s pursuit. Katharine Rogers summarizes Troy’s seduction efforts: “though Bathsheba is an unusually strong and intelligent woman, she cannot resist Troy’s alternation of cajolery and sexual domination (Rogers 253). At this point in her development, Bathsheba is unable to see that perhaps falling for someone who can also only conceive of love as a spectacle may not be the way to find security and stability in marriage.

The decision to marry Troy is made in haste and is a mistake that Bathsheba consequently comes to regret deeply. The pair receives no marriage proposal scene; rather, we only see Bathsheba leave her farm at night and eventually learn that they elope. Later on though, Bathsheba describes to Oak that her decision to marry Troy came after finding herself stranded with him in Bath, where Troy decides to taunt her by saying he has finally seen a woman more beautiful than her. “Between jealousy and distraction,” (Hardy 249), she marries him. Later when reflecting by herself on the occasion, she acknowledges it as a mistake: “In the turmoil of her anxiety for her lover she had agreed to marry him, but the perception that had accompanied her happiest hours on this account was rather that of self-sacrifice than of promotion and honor” (Hardy 268). The anxiety that influenced Bathsheba was over the possibility of Boldwood confronting Troy as he intended to do. In both of her previous proposals from Oak and Boldwood, Bathsheba thought at length about her compatibility with each man and what marriage with him might offer. The proposal she did accept is the one made in haste—one she went through with even as she felt a sense of “self-sacrifice.” The fact that Troy was able to lure her into marriage by describing seeing another beautiful woman shows that jealousy and insecurity also had a role to play. Bathsheba pays gravely for her acceptance. After a short period

of marriage, Troy and the distance he places between them when he encounters his former lover, Fanny Robin, causes her to lament her status as wife and long to be independent again:

That she had never by look, word or sign seriously encouraged a man to approach her, that she had felt herself sufficient to herself, and had in the independence of her girlish heart fancied there was a certain degradation in renouncing the simplicity of a maiden existence to become the humbler half of an indifferent matrimonial whole, were facts now bitterly remembered. (Hardy 268)

This passage confirms that Bathsheba's reluctance to marry was a point of pride for herself. By remaining unmarried, she preserved the "simplicity" inherent in the life of a single woman. Her previous interactions with Oak and Boldwood were done playfully, not "seriously." Now that she actually has entered marriage, she finds her existence tainted and "conquered" (Hardy 268). Her marriage to Troy has tamed her as she claimed to desire.

The failure of her marriage to Troy subdues Bathsheba, and after her husband has disappeared, she once again promises Boldwood that she will eventually marry him. Within just a short time of marriage, Troy eventually grows to loathe Bathsheba because their marriage keeps him away from who he now views as his true wife, the poor Fanny Robin who he previously abandoned. When Troy learns of the death of Fanny and their newborn child, he lashes out at Bathsheba, "You are nothing to me—nothing...A ceremony before a priest doesn't make a marriage. I am not morally yours" (Hardy 293). The spiritual dissolution of their marriage chastens Bathsheba and the subsequent disappearance of Troy, who is carried away by a current while bathing, further alienates her from her younger self: "Her original vigorous pride of youth had sickened" (Hardy 317). It is with this frame of mind that Bathsheba finds herself being convinced by Boldwood to agree to eventually marry him. Boldwood is still passionately

ruled by his desire for her, and at his prodding, Bathsheba consents to promise at Christmas that she will marry him after six years, a timeline she conceives of to prove that Troy is actually dead rather than missing. She submits to Boldwood's request in the face of his fervor: "His tone was so excited that she almost feared him at this moment even whilst she sympathized. It was a simple physical fear—the weak of the strong: there was no emotional aversion or inner repugnance" (Hardy 343). Greatly weakened by her marriage, Bathsheba relents, even as she confesses to Boldwood that she does not and cannot love him. Her meek promise to agree at Christmas satisfies him, and when Troy reappears on Christmas Eve, Boldwood shoots him in a fit of passion. Boldwood's obsession with Bathsheba never fades throughout the novel; after his arrest, it is discovered that he kept a closet filled with presents and clothes, all labeled with the name "Bathsheba Boldwood" (Hardy 373). Boldwood's murder of Troy is the culmination of years of manic fixation and serves to fundamentally alter Bathsheba even further.

Though Bathsheba suffers greatly in marriage and through the horrible tragedy of Troy's death, she surprisingly seeks marriage again with Oak. She is even the one who initiates the proposal. After Oak sends her a letter explaining he will not renew his employment, she visits his living quarters and signals her interest in him subtly and timidly. Oak mentions that there have been rumors that the two might marry, and she protests, "Such a thing as that is too absurd—too soon—to think of by far" (Hardy 382). Oak agrees it is too absurd, but then Bathsheba corrects him: "Too s-s-soon were the words I used" (Hardy 382). She encourages him to ask her about her feelings again. Both are delighted at finally being in agreement, and the narrator describes their love as the kind that has developed "first by knowing the rougher sides of each other's character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the intersices of a mass of hard prosaic reality" (Hardy 383). Their marriage, the narrator continues, is a "*camaraderie*"

(Hardy 383), a “love which is strong as death—that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam” (Hardy 384). While their love seems sturdy and unbreachable according to the narrator, critics take conflicting views on Bathsheba and Oak’s “happy ending.” Some view Oak as the man who was right for Bathsheba all along, a man far above Boldwood and Troy. Schapiro theorizes that Oak is Bathsheba’s best suitor because he manages to do what Boldwood and Troy struggle to do: “Of all of Hardy's characters, Gabriel Oak most successfully maintains that dialectical tension between subjectivity and objectivity, between idealized fantasy and recognition of reality” (Schapiro 17). Mistichelli views Oak’s lower class status but ability to advise Bathsheba as making their marriage one where “roles and identities are intermingled and exchanged” (Mistichelli 63), the kind of marriage that defies typical gender roles. Other scholars view the ending as essentially a pyrrhic victory, the requisite happy marriage masking the destruction of Bathsheba’s essential nature. Morgan describes it as Oak’s achievement in shaping her to be the woman he wants, the “vibrant, self-delighting, energetic heroine” being replaced with a woman “who will neither rebel nor challenge his authority” (Morgan 57). Devereux writes that Bathsheba and Gabriel at this point “end their story as comrades, but scarcely as equals” (Devereux 32). These critics all attempt to answer why Bathsheba would choose to marry again and whether or not her final marriage is her punishment or her redemption.

Perhaps Bathsheba agreeing to marry Oak is a compromise of some of her independence, but the effect it has on her indicates a return to the characteristic playfulness she lost in her marriage. Though she is serious and nervous when she first arrives and speaks to Oak, once the ordeal is settled she seems to relax. As she leaves she tells Oak, “it seems exactly as if I had come courting you—how dreadful” (Hardy 383) with a “slight laugh” (Hardy 383). This

comment and her accompanying laughter indicates there is still some of the old Bathsheba present. She is still forward but is also able to acknowledge her flirtatious nature now. Though chastened, Bathsheba still remains the initiator in their relationship. Compared to the coercion she experiences when deciding to marry Troy, this proposal is marked by the fact that she begins the conversation. When they do marry, her appearance demonstrates that the marriage is an opportunity to start over: “Yet though so plainly dressed there was a certain rejuvenated appearance about her: ‘As though a rose should shut and be a bud again’” (Hardy 388).¹⁰ It is in marrying Oak that Bathsheba seems to recover some of her initial spirit. She is older and wiser, but in returning to her first love, she also is “rejuvenated,” a promising description that allows for the possibility that the Bathsheba who Oak first proposed to still exists. She asks for the “most private, secret, plainest wedding” (Hardy 385), but Gabriel also tells a shepherd that the “great hush” is not “what either of us would have wished if it hadn’t been for certain things that would make a gay wedding seem hardly the thing” (Hardy 386). They both believe that their engagement should be kept quiet in light of the earlier tragedy, but Oak’s confiding words also indicate that deep down there is still some amount of spectacle present in Bathsheba. Her final engagement seems to have found the balance that was wanting earlier in the novel between love as a spectacle and love as a private matter. An engagement and wedding that are outwardly sober but inwardly joyful reflect the new Bathsheba—a woman who has been drastically changed by one marriage but still hopeful about another one. She might not fully recover her “girlish heart,” but she can take some comfort in a relationship with a man who loved her both then and now.

¹⁰ This line comes from “The Eve of St. Agnes” by John Keats.

Conclusion

In all four of these novels, proposals intertwine with the heroine's journey into Victorian womanhood. In each proposal scene, more is at stake for the heroine than whether she will choose to remain single or get married. Her beliefs about love, her relationship to the greater world, the daily reality of her life—all of these must be settled for a woman—and marriage was often viewed as the solution. Ultimately, to marry triumphs over not to marry in all four of these novels, a commonality that reflects the real-life trend of the Victorian era—Jennifer Phegley shares the statistic that “In 1871, nearly 90 percent of women between the ages of 45 and 49 were or had been married” (Phegley 14). Each heroine ends her story having accepted a final proposal and securing the traditional happy ending. Yet, by looking back at her previous proposal scenes we can examine the compromises of her identity and desires that have taken place. Though Bathsheba is the only heroine who actually goes through with a marriage, each heroine similarly finds herself confronting the reality of Victorian womanhood in these proposals, often to the detriment of their “girlish heart.”

Each of the four novels allows for the existence of “monstrous marriages”—either real ones or ones visualized within the proposal scene. Though not every “monstrous marriage” is as poisonous or as frightening as Hager describes, these other marriages that are presented to the heroine still function to show her what she decidedly does not want. In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester's marriage to Bertha and St. John's picture of missionary life in India both threaten Jane's very existence. Margaret Hale's self-consciousness in *North and South* at both Henry Lennox and John Thornton's proposals demonstrate a reserve unable to bear the intimacy and emotional weight of marriage. In *Can You Forgive Her?* when George Vavasor declares Alice is already his wife and tries to claim a right over her affection, Alice's repulsion predicts a marriage

lacking in respect and physical attraction. Bathsheba's monstrous marriage in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is actually her own, which saps her of the previous pleasure she had taken in her womanhood. By introducing these monstrous marriages first, the authors are able to critique marriage without jeopardizing those final moments of the novel where the heroine finally chooses the right suitor, and by making the heroine confront her worst fears about marriage, the novels also allow for much of the anxiety that accompanies matrimony to be mollified before the final proposal. Within the Victorian era, women received little information about the practical reality of marriage. In learning more about herself and from the examples set by these "monstrous marriages," the heroine may be able to glean a clearer idea of what marriage should be like. With the proposal scene as the last or second-to-last scene in each, these novels seem to be a recording of her preparation for marriage—a process that involves a reevaluation of the heroine's opinions, wants, and desires.

The transformation that the heroines undergo in these novels often lead them to seek more than just one thing out of their marriage. Romance may fall or rise in importance. Usually though, it is the day-to-day reality of marriage that becomes the deciding factor for the heroines. As Schaffer writes, "through much of the nineteenth century, marriage was not necessarily an act of seeking a new, positive pleasure, but rather of guaranteeing, as much as possible, the minimally necessary conditions for a decent life" (Schaffer 13). The reality for Victorian women is that little opportunities existed outside of marriage. The proposal was at once unable to represent every aspect or element of a marriage but was also the main opportunity for a woman to try and conceptualize what marriage would be like to a specific man. Her financial security, where she will live, what she will have to do everyday—all of these concerns may come to eclipse her original beliefs about love. Each heroine faces a confrontation between her idea of

marriage and the reality of marriage as it intrudes upon them in a proposal. Sometimes, it may be that the proposed marriage is actually too romantic or too idealized for them. The romance in Rochester's first proposal in *Jane Eyre* masks how in actuality he is not free to marry at all. In *North and South*, Thornton's view of Margaret as in need of rescue and of himself as her hero actually alienates her entirely from his feelings. Though romance might triumph in the end in the sense that each heroine ends up engaged, the proposal scenes also show that other factors play as great a role in convincing the heroines to say "yes" or "no" as the traditional idea of love does.

The proposal scenes in all of these novels allow for a visualization of marriage, an institution that for Victorian women was paradoxically painted as the ultimate goal for them while also shrouded in mystery. Marriage was what Victorian women's lives built up to while they also needed to remain mostly ignorant of men and of sex. The proposal is a pause on the race to marriage for Victorian women—a moment when a man actually does ask them what they want. For the heroines in these novels what they want is a range of desires that might or might not agree with marriage. Though they all conform in the end, the proposal scenes allow them to comment on and critique marriage. In deeming one kind of marriage right and others wrong by their "yes"s and "no"s, the heroines get to slightly edit and alter their fate. They still must return to and marry an old suitor, but by delaying the marriage or finding an alternative proposal, they can voice some amount of support for their own values and beliefs. By examining these marriage proposals today, we can see how women navigated protecting their own desires in the face of a society that deemed marriage as the only socially acceptable desire for them.

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