Problem Novels
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Ladies and Gentlemen, you who have so long distinguished our firm by a liberal patronage, to you I now respectfully appeal, and in showing to you a new article I beg to assure you with perfect confidence that there is nothing equal to it at the price at present on the market. The supply on hand is immense, but as a sale of unprecedented rapidity is anticipated, may I respectfully solicit your early orders? If not approved of the article shall be changed.

Ladies and gentlemen,
We have the honour to subscribe ourselves,
With every respect,
Your most obedient humble servants,
BROWN, JONES, and ROBINSON,
Per GEORGE ROBINSON.

—Anthony Trollope, The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson (1862)

Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of giving themselves away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. I was lately struck, in reading over many pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this particular. In a digression, a parenthesis or an aside, he concedes to the reader that he and this trusting friend are only “making believe.” He admits that the events he narrates have not really happened, and that he can give his narrative any turn the reader may like best. Such a betrayal of a sacred office seems to me, I confess, a terrible crime.

—Henry James, “The Art of Fiction” (1884)

Anthony Trollope is a risky investment for sensational critics. Certainly Trollope’s contemporaries were more likely to consider him the cure for sensationalism than one stricken with the disease himself. Frances Cashel Hoey, praising Trollope’s “homogeneous and
consistent pictures,” writes in an 1872 review: “The public, who eagerly swallowed the sensation poison for a time simultaneously tasted his dainty dishes with uninjured powers of appreciation; and now that the purveyors of golden-haired bigamists and gilded-saloon rascality have fallen into oblivion … the world knows where to turn for the faithful portraiture of the present which alone it loves to study” (400). Similarly, Alexander Shand writes in his 1877 essay “Mr. Anthony Trollope’s Novels”: “His talent is emphatically of the serviceable order, and wears wonderfully well. There must obviously be a good deal of the mechanical about his assiduous literary toils, since he has the habit of delivering a regular supply of his work with most methodical precision” (455). The “faithful portraiture,” “serviceable” talent, and “dainty dishes” are, of course, compliments that cut both ways. Trollope’s fiction is not dangerous, erratic, or poisonous—indeed, it is beneficial to its readers—but neither is it exactly “art.”

Critics today have echoed these assessments of Trollope’s literary production in the marketplace. Patrick Brantlinger writes in The Reading Lesson: “The equation between fiction and money, literary imagination and fiscal credit … [is] simultaneously basic to [Trollope’s] practice of narrative realism and a powerful source of [his] own resentment against that practice” (121). That is, in his attention to matters economical Trollope lays claim to faithful representation of the “real” (as opposed to the romantic, sentimental, or sensational), but at the same time he grapples uneasily with his own status as producer of commodities for the literary marketplace. With slightly more condescension, George Levine writes of Trollope in The Realistic Imagination: “The professional storyteller is at work. To be sure, there is nothing here that implies the pressure of great art. The tone is conciliatory in a way that James would have found unfortunate. There is no evidence of a struggle to find new ways to get stories told” (185). In this version of realist fiction, the economic is both the marker of verisimilitude—the cure for pathological attachments to sensationalism—and the stigma of “vulgar” concerns, both for characters within the narrative and for the authors who “produce” the narratives for consumption.

Yet I contend that Trollope and his brand of realism have provided fertile ground for sensational critics, precisely (if paradoxically) because he is so unsensational. In a way, Henry James set the tone for Trollope criticism in 1884 when he revealed Trollope’s “great crime”: not only does Trollope’s fiction not aspire to be “art,”
but it also refuses to let its readers forget that it is only a commodity, manufactured for their consumption and catering to their tastes. James deplores the narrative aside because it hampers his absorption by the text or, one might say, disrupts his unconsciousness of the artificiality of his attachments to the novel. He insists: “[Fiction] must take itself seriously for the public to take it so … The only reason for the existence of the novel is that it does compete with life” (288). But James’s characterization of Trollope’s fiction works in two directions: if it shows Trollope’s unwillingness to allow his readers to forget that they are consuming fiction, it also allows James to sensationalize his own narrative. Trollope is a tradesman, workmanlike and mechanical; James, on the other hand, is a detective, revealing a breach of a “sacred trust” and uncovering a “great crime.” As I will argue in this chapter, this construction of Trollope’s antisensational sensationalism has had two effects on contemporary criticism. First, it has enabled a “criticism marketplace” to prosper, wherein stories of the sensational commodity are sold and bought and, moreover, in which romances of the sensational realist critic abound. Second, it has elided the extent to which Trollope did, in fact, theorize his art outside the ubiquitous literary marketplace.

Trollope’s *An Autobiography* has often been held up as a clue to his “criminally vulgar” attachments to writing as a profession. Indeed, as Frederic Harrison writes in 1895, the list of novels and the money earned for them, with which Trollope ends *An Autobiography*, must convince his readers that they have been swindled:

When … he let the public into the story of his method, of his mechanical writing so many words per hour, of his beginning a new tale the day after he finished the last, of his having no particular plot, and all the little trade secrets of his factory, the public felt some disgust and was almost inclined to think it had been cheated out of its £70,000. (204)

Certainly one can read the passage from *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* with which I began this chapter in that light. In the preface to this fictional memoir, Trollope’s narrator George Robinson appeals to his reading public, offering the memoir itself as the last item for sale by the bankrupt firm, thereby demanding that the novel be read as a commodity.

Yet if Trollope understood the market value of his fiction (what it was worth), he also understood its productive power (what it could
do). For example, in his 1879 essay “Novel-Reading,” Trollope writes of the role of Dickens’s fiction:

To whom has not kindness of heart been made beautiful by Tom Pinch, and hypocrisy odious by Pecksniff? The peculiar abominations of Pecksniff’s daughters are made to be abominable to the least attentive reader. Unconsciously the girl-reader declares to herself that she will not at any rate be like that. This is the mode of teaching which is in truth serviceable. Let the mind be induced to sympathize warmly with that which is good and true, or be moved to hatred against that which is vile, and then an impression will have been made, certainly serviceable, and probably ineradicable. It may be admitted in regard to Dickens’s young ladies that they lack nature ... but they have affected us as personifications of tenderness and gentle feminine gifts. We have felt each character to contain, not a woman, but something which will help to make many women. (34–35)

As Trollope suggests, the novel, if it is a commodity, contains more than its market value; it contains the “something” extra that through the emotional investments of “girl-reader[s]” will “help to make many women.” Trollope’s language of productivity doesn’t quite make sense if we imagine the novel as only consumer goods. If, however, we consider the novel as operating in an economic register of speculation and investment, then the language of Trollope’s essay adds up: a novel is not only a commodity—a “dainty [or poisonous] dish”—it is, also, an investment opportunity, offering rich dividends for the reader’s investment.

Trollope thus posits what we might call, a bit ironically, a pre-Foucauldian Foucauldian theory of productive power. In articulating the novel’s place in culture, he imagines his fiction as participating not just in the literary marketplace but in larger social discourses about marriage and economics. As such, his novels occupy an important if vexed position, producing (disciplining) subjects within a fluid social system. But even though Trollope claims that the “girl-reader” will be affected “unconsciously” by what she reads, his novels by no means suppose a willing or unconscious submission on the reader’s part. Even as they encourage sensational investments in romance, the novels perversely test the strength of those attachments. The novels in this chapter all seem to come with the implicit caveat “If you will buy this, you will buy anything.”
It is through this understanding of his narrative project that I consider three of Trollope’s problem novels. First, I discuss two domestic novels: *Can You Forgive Her?*, the first in the Palliser series, and the less well-known *Miss Mackenzie*. In these Trollope’s realism competes with itself: on the one hand, it seems to reject romance as untrue to life, but on the other hand, Trollope affirms the importance of the poetical and romantic stories—not because they are true but because they are necessary for the functioning of society. For instance, the narrator in *Miss Mackenzie* remarks: “I believe that a desire to get married is the natural state of a woman at the age of—say from twenty-five to thirty-five, and I think also that it is good for the world in general that it should be so” (136). Here the novel expresses not only belief in, but also the need for belief in, its own romance plot. To invest in a Trollope novel is to buy stock in “the love story.” But to buy into the investment opportunity is to disavow the unpoetical, and even dangerous, social realities that the novels reveal. High risk equals high yield.

At the end of this chapter I will return to the “problem” of Trollope’s very much underappreciated novel *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson*, which even James Kincaid describes as “that deformed child only [Trollope] has ever loved” (*Novels* 164). *The Struggles* not only makes it impossible to buy into the myths of romance, but it theorizes the novel’s role in the production of belief in those very myths. Although the novel is ostensibly a satire on trade, and as part of its satire represents novels as salable commodities, it does so, I argue, only to undermine the reader’s faith in the existence of those same “vulgar” things with which it was so concerned. In *The Struggles* Trollope considers the author of realist narrative not as a producer of commodities, one who caters to the tastes of his buyers, but as a producer of belief, one who creates his readers’ investments in the “real.” To understand how Trollope’s realist novels might work as investment opportunities, however, I will first consider present-day sensational investments in realism and then turn to a discussion of Victorian speculative investments, both financial and literary.

**THE SENSATIONAL COMMODITY**

The commodity in Victorian culture is as good as a fingerprint in wet paint to the forensic investigator, building a sensational story out of
real things. As a theoretical framework for literary analysis, it has paid rich dividends to Victorian scholars, offering a vocabulary at once reassuringly materialistic—grounded in Marx’s own theory of Capital, a language of things—and tantalizingly symbolic, evocative of appetites, desires, needs, and wants. Christoph Lindner writes in his 2003 Fictions of Commodity Culture: “The commodity figures throughout the fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a living object of consumer fetish that excites desire yet strangely denies satisfaction” (3). Certainly part of the desire elicited by the commodity is the desire of critics to delineate its form and function in culture. Indeed, in her 1999 essay “Production, Reproduction, and Pleasure in Victorian Aesthetics and Economics,” Regina Gagnier describes the shift in critical attention from production/reproduction to commodity culture in recent decades as “the feminist, gay, and multicultural … defense of desire, especially the desire of the forgotten peoples of modernity for the goods and services of the world (including sexual goods and services)” (128). Thus, the commodity has assumed subversive weight in critical discourse. Critical accounts of the novel-as-commodity, however, have often emphasized the regulatory effects of consumer culture. Laurie Langbauer sums up this outlook in Novels of Everyday Life (1999): “The serial [novel]’s most important ideological work was to produce and determine an audience for itself” (9). Consequently, the Victorian realist-novel-as-commodity has operated as a tool of both disciplinary power (for the Victorians) and political resistance (for Victorianists).

Attention to the economic in Victorian literature and culture becomes a brand of “realist” criticism, as opposed to the ahistorical (and therefore “romantic”) criticism offered by, for example, psychoanalysis or deconstruction. Yet in uncovering the Victorians’ preoccupation with “vulgar” commerce, critics offer sensational secrets to their readers. In other words, through its paradoxically privileged and stigmatized position in Victorian culture, the economic offers for scholars both the mark of verisimilitude and the sensationally dirty secret of realist fiction. For example, Elsie Michie, in “Buying Brains: Trollope, Oliphant, and Vulgar Victorian Commerce” (2001), claims on the one hand that the novels in her study (The Last Chronicle of Barsetshire and Phoebe Junior) “function in a quasi-anthropological sense, evoking, through the drama of individual characters’ financial problems, an entire culture’s response to dramatic changes in economic practices and theory taking place in the last third of the nineteenth century” (78). And, on the other hand, she describes this
cultural response to the economic, as represented by the novels’ characters, as “the peculiar amalgam of pain, shame, and pleasure [they] feel as they become implicated in the credit economy” (78). Hence, Michie produces both a scientific (anthropological) account of Victorian commercial culture and, simultaneously, a sensational account of the “seductions of the material world” (79) hidden within the prosaic fiction of those least sensational of authors, Trollope and Oliphant.

More recently, some critics have shifted attention away from the consideration of novels as commodities to the analysis of texts (fictional and otherwise) participating in the production of meaning within the Victorian financial system. Thus, the 2002 special issue of *Victorian Studies* on “Victorian Investments” presented essays focusing on “the quotidian experiences of Victorian investors—what they read, wrote, knew, and felt about their investments and about the transformations of language, literary form, corporate organization, and political legislation within their culture that accompanied transformations in investment practices” (Schmitt et al. 7). In paying attention to investment practices, these essays reveal the extent to which Victorian accounts of economic practices and relationships must be understood as participating in a symbolic economy as well as a material one.

Most evocatively, “Writing About Finance in Victorian England,” Mary Poovey’s essay in the aforementioned *Victorian Studies* special issue, offers a theoretical framework through which to view the “exchanges and crossovers at the level of themes and formal features that drew financial journalism and realist novels into a relationship of generic proximity” (19). For Poovey both literary realism and financial writing are about exploring the question of how the value of the subject is constituted in the constructions “‘What I am’ and ‘What I am worth’” (32). Poovey’s analysis offers a very useful complication of the pervasive metaphor of the “literary marketplace” by showing how both financial journalism and literary realism are concerned with telling stories to their publics, the value of which depends on their believability, but the generic functioning of which, conversely, depends on their “secrecy,” or at least on their selective disclosure.

But, like commodity-centered analyses, Poovey’s account constructs the financial as the sensational secret of realist fiction. Her view of the incorporation of “economic entanglements as deter-
mining factors in the novel’s action” in *The Mill on the Floss* is this: “[Eliot] explores the emotional response that many contemporaries must have had to that half-visible, half-hidden financial system that was simultaneously inescapable and elusive” (36). Consequently, the financial system becomes Victorian Britain’s unconscious—constitutive of quotidian experience, yet beyond conscious cognition. Naturally enough, therefore, the twenty-first-century critic’s task is like the psychoanalyst’s—uncovering the hidden truth of the Victorians’ investments. Poovey demonstrates this in the final lines of the introduction to her anthology of Victorian financial texts:

> With the advantage of hindsight, we can know more about the nineteenth-century financial system than most of its participants could, but much valuable information is still lost to us forever because records were imperfectly collected and the desire for secrecy or drama too often influenced those who wrote about the system. This unavoidable mix of clarity and obscurity … makes representations of the financial system all the more intriguing, for it encourages us to read selections like the ones collected here as generically ambiguous—as gestures toward accuracy that nevertheless draw many of their most effective conventions from some of the literary forms that flourished in the nineteenth-century: melodrama, romance, the detective story, and sensationalism. (*The Financial System* 33)

This conclusion to Poovey’s introductory essay operates as a sensational twist ending. The “real” of financial writing has become the romantic, the mysterious, and the melodramatic. Not only does she describe explicitly the Victorians’ desire for secrecy and drama, but she also implicitly encourages a similarly sensational desire in her readers to see secrets revealed.

Poovey’s language here—which casts the Victorianist scholar as the skeptical reader uncovering the hidden desires (for secrecy and drama) of financial authors—is reminiscent of Freud’s language in discussing the analyst’s role in uncovering the causes of hysteria. As Freud advises the analyst:

> Imagine that an explorer arrives in a little-known region where his interest is roused by an expanse of ruins … He may content himself with inspecting what lies exposed to view, with questioning the inhabitants—perhaps semi-barbaric people who live in the vicinity,
about what tradition tells them of the history and meaning of these archaeological remains ... But he may act differently. He may have brought picks, shovels, and spades with him, and he may set the inhabitants to work with these implements. Together with them he may start upon the ruins, clear away the rubbish, and, beginning with the visible remains, uncover what is buried. (“Aetiology” 97–98)

For Freud the work of the analyst is the archaeological excavation of repressed experience of which the patient is unaware, whereas for Poovey the Victorianist is privileged to see the “mix of clarity and obscurity” that would itself have been hidden from the Victorians themselves. Both passages rely on two mutually enforcing binary oppositions: The first establishes the “subject” (the Victorian participant in the financial system or the psychoanalytic “patient”) as possessed of a split consciousness, with some fundamental information not available for conscious review. The second places the researcher/analyst in possession of the “hindsight,” which can penetrate the obscurities of that split subject and, as a result, “know more.”

Yet, as I will show in the next section, although the Victorians certainly did sensationalize the economic realm, they also understood well their own desires for mystery and romance in that realm. Indeed, it was precisely this sensationalizing of money matters that enabled the financial system to operate.

SPECULATIVE INVESTMENTS IN THE STOCK MARKET AND IN THE ROMANCE

The parable of the talent in the napkin applies as forcibly to commercial and financial Europe in the nineteenth century as to agricultural Syria in the beginning of the first. The rayah of Hindustan who builds his rupees into the mud walls of his hovel, the French peasant who invests his five-franc pieces in the thatch of his cottage or among the roots of his cabbage-beds, may live on rice or maize, as the case may be, and go jogging along from the cradle to the grave as mildly useful members of society. But what would become of the movement of the world if everybody were to imitate their passive prudence?
—Alexander I. Shand, “Speculative Investments” (1876)

If I were to make my way into the house of any one of you as a chance visitor, and begin to teach your sons and daughters how to make love and how to receive love-making, you would think me to be a very dangerous and impertinent fellow ... But when I, or some greater professor, come on the same errand with Mr. Mudie's ticket
It is not surprising that the economic realm was sensationalized by Victorians and, in Victorian realism, for as the British economic system came more and more to depend on the stock market, and more and more individuals invested their personal capital in the system, the rise and fall of the market came increasingly to seem tied to individual interests. Moreover, the precipitous rise in the number of joint stock companies brought about a similarly spectacular rise in the circulation of advertisements and articles touting investment opportunities and cautioning against reckless speculation. In his attack on the system of selling the national debt, “The National Debt and the Stock Exchange” (1849), W. E. Aytoun tells a story that sounds very much like a sensation novel or melodrama. He describes speculation in the national debt as “the spirit of public gambling, which … has manifested itself periodically in this country—the fever-fits which seem to possess the middle classes of the community, and, by conjuring up visions of unbounded and unbased wealth, without the necessary preliminary of labour, to extinguish their wonted prudence.” Moreover, he says of the “eldest offspring” of the national debt, the Stock Exchange:

Marvellous indeed are the scenes to which we are introduced, whether we read its history as in the time of William of Orange, enter it at the period when the South Sea bubble had reached its utmost width of distension, or tread its precincts at a more recent date, when railway speculation was at its height … No stranger, indeed, may enter the secret place where its prime mysteries are enacted. (668)

In this system, which “has been pregnant with social and moral evils which have extended to the whole community” and in which “all sorts of deep-laid schemes [are] hatched” (667–68), everyday middle-class folks have been afflicted with secret crimes and insanity, the dangerous progeny of dissolute parents have come home to wreak havoc, and it is the author’s job to reveal those lurid mysteries.
Indeed, Aytoun begins his essay by assuring his readers of the sensational qualities of the stock exchange: “We dare say, that no inconsiderable portion of those who derive their literary nutriment from Maga, may be at a loss to understand what element of romance can lie in the history of the Stock Exchange” (655). The “romance” of the stock exchange rests with the public who invest stories of lucrative financial opportunities with personal desires and attachments, but it also rests with a different public who, at a remove from the “infuriated and infatuated gambling” (670), read the exposé accounts of the market from authors like Aytoun.

Alexander Shand, in his 1876 essay “Speculative Investments,” theorizes the necessity of sensationalism in the financial world, although, like Aytoun, he begins by bemoaning the dangerous “fever” that it produces:

So the fever flame of an agitation in Egyptians or Peruvians is always being fanned by fresh announcements, each of them apparently authenticated by pieces of circumstantial evidence. Half-a-dozen times in a day, a bellow and roar in the Stock Exchange may greet the arrival of some new sensation, to be followed by a rush of sales or purchases; and the property that is liable to be blown about with each breath, naturally comes to be more doubtfully regarded. (196)

According to Shand, the appetite for rumors, scandals, and agitating stories of hot new investment opportunities amounts to a weakness for sensational narrative. As he says: “What seems to us more serious [than corruption] as a habitual danger, is the increasing tendency to sensational writing” (196). Thus, as Poovey suggests, the economic realm underwent no imaginative transformation to become sensationalized within the plots of novels. Rather, the melodramatic highs and lows, the sinister mysteries and lightning reversals of fortune, were already fully imagined within economic discourse.

However, the reliance of the stock market on selling “on spec” meant that the circulation of economic capital depended on the ability of stock companies to accrue symbolic capital. As the establishment of the spurious joint stock company, the South Central and Mexican Railway, in Trollope’s The Way We Live Now shows, money is not necessarily made in the building of a real railroad, but in presenting the appearance of a legitimate corporation that might build a railroad. In other words, the investment economy cannot function without investors who are willing to “buy” what the companies
are selling. This means, essentially, that stock frauds, scandals, and bubbles aside, the system must have investors to function; therefore, the sensational appeal is not to be disparaged. As Shand’s retelling of the parable of the talent in the napkin illustrates, prudence carries its own risks.

Shand creates his own parable to illustrate for his readers the dangers of “passive prudence”: a widow left with £5,000 has the choice of protecting her little bit of capital by investing conservatively and eking out an existence for herself and her “growing family” on the modest yearly interest, or of having “recourse to some of those more highly-priced stocks which are the refuge of the widow, the clergyman, and the reckless” (175). In the first case,

she finds that with her £150 to £220 [yearly interest], she is not only embarrassed as to providing food, clothing and houseroom for her growing family, but that she is compromising their future beyond remedy, from better fortunes. She is falling out of the circle of family acquaintances where her boys would be likely to find helpful friends and her girls to make happy marriages.

But, in the second case, “the clouds that hang over the future begin to dissipate, as the shadows are lifted from her everyday life” (175). Shand’s explicit linking of the widow’s investment of her of £5,000 to the “happy marriages” of her daughters in the future suggests that the persuasive appeal of the romance plot is one that informs the economic realm as much as economics infiltrates the plots of realist novels. His illustration also highlights the problem of female agency within both the economic and the emotional realm. The widow is both the steward of her children’s futures and an agent in the financial realm. In a sense, her emotional investments in happy endings for her children inform her financial investments in risky stocks. She must believe in the happy endings, despite her knowledge of the dangers, or to put it another way, she must forget what she knows of the dangers so that she may invest. Shand’s article places his readers in a similar position of knowledge and disavowal in regard to the “seductive lottery of the Stock Exchange” (176), cognizant of the perilous realities of speculative investments, which he describes in detail, but assured nonetheless that “people must invest” (177).

It is this imperative—people must invest—that Trollope ponders in his fiction and criticism. The productive work that Trollope undertakes, however, is by no means a straightforward sell. Rather, he
imagines a skeptical audience, reading decidedly unromantic fiction. In “On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement,” he reassures his audience that readers are not too susceptible to the dangerous influences of fiction:

As to that pernicious way of looking at the affairs of life which is attributed to novel-reading,—that Lydia Languish determination, for instance, not to be married without the aid of a rope ladder,—I do not think that such result comes from the novels of our period … The manner of looking at life engendered by the novels of the day is realistic, practical, and, though upon the whole serviceable, upon the whole also unpoetical, rather than romantic. (112)

The problem, rather, as Trollope sees it, is that readers may not be susceptible enough. “The love-making of our world,” we have already seen him state, “is an essential necessity of our existence” (109). What happens, then, if people refuse to participate? What if people are not attached to romance? Or what if something else is more attractive? These are the questions that Trollope asks in Can You Forgive Her? and Miss Mackenzie. The answer: then the task of “professors” like Trollope—to teach the “love-making of the world”—is that much more imperative and that much more vexed.

In An Autobiography, Trollope comments on Miss Mackenzie:

[It] was written with a desire to prove that a novel may be produced without any love; but even in this attempt it breaks down before the conclusion. In order that I might be strong in my purpose, I took for my heroine a very unattractive old maid, who was overwhelmed with money troubles; but even she was in love before the end of the book, and made a romantic marriage with an old man. (172)

As critics have noted, Trollope’s insistence on comic resolution is a position that is constantly assaulted from within his own writing. But we might read his account of the novel’s inexorable drift into romance, as if against his will, as a kind of advertising copy—establishing credit in the inevitability of romance. As the character George Robinson says, in The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson, “Get credit, and capital will follow” (4). Like George, both Can You Forgive Her? and Miss Mackenzie undertake to “sell” belief in romance to readers increasingly skeptical of its charms and its necessity, so that the “real thing” might follow.
As I have discussed previously, the “Woman Question” debates at the midcentury were highlighting both woman’s victimization under the current marriage laws and the lack of any alternative for most women. But as Alexander Shand’s “Speculative Investments” shows, the stock market provided single women appealing, if dangerous, opportunities for exercising their agency and achieving financial independence. If in speculative investments a woman risked losing all her capital, in marriage she was sure to. Frances Power Cobbe famously illustrates in her 1868 essay “Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors” that married women were the same under the law as convicted murderers, children, and the mentally incompetent. She begins the essay with the parable of the alien visitor who comes to England and observes a marriage: “Pardon me; I must seem so stupid! Why is the property of the woman who commits Murder and the property of the woman who commits Matrimony, dealt with alike by your law?” (109). Activists like Cobbe, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, and Caroline Norton argued (and in Norton’s case illustrated) that marriage was a risky speculation. The debates surrounding the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, and Caroline Norton’s highly publicized custody and divorce cases that preceded it, kept the “not-so-happily-ever-after” of marriage in the public eye in the 1850s and 1860s.14

Even further, these public discussions of the Act raised the question of whether it would not be better for a woman to remain single and self-sufficient than to be forced by financial exigencies into marriage. Cobbe observes in “What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?”:

If, then, we seek to promote the happiness and virtue of the community, our efforts must be directed to encouraging only marriages which are the sort to produce them—namely, marriages founded on love ... Where now, have we reached? Is it not to the conclusion that to make it a woman’s interest to marry, to force her, by barring out every means of self-support and all fairly remunerative labour, to look to marriage as her sole chance of competency, is precisely to drive her into one of those sinful and unhappy marriages [of convenience]? It is quite clear we can never drive her into love. That is a sentiment which poverty, friendlessness, and helplessness can by no means call out. (87)15

Cobbe’s argument cleverly makes financial independence the prerequisite for romance; while seemingly a contradiction, only by being
independent will women be able to give themselves up to romantic alliances.

But if Cobbe claims that a woman cannot be made to love a husband because he saves her from “poverty, friendlessness, and helplessness,” Trollope’s novels appear to respond to Cobbe’s challenge. In fact, if we are to believe Trollope’s dictums in “Novel-Reading” that “unconsciously the girl-reader declares to herself that she will not at any rate be like [Pecksniff’s daughters]” and that “this is the mode of teaching which is in truth serviceable” (35), then Woman can indeed be “driven into love” if she can be persuaded to sympathize with the romances that she reads. To be sure, the “driving into love” is precisely the plot of both Can You Forgive Her? and Miss Mackenzie.\(^\text{16}\)

In both novels the tension that Trollope describes as operating in Miss Mackenzie—romantic “in spite of” money troubles—is complicated ultimately not because the money troubles are subsumed by the dictates of romance at the novel’s conclusion, but because the money itself is romantic, in two competing ways. First, the trouble with money is that it confers a freedom on women that blocks their easy entrance into the system of sexual exchange. To marry a woman with money is certainly a good thing, as the Phineas novels make clear, but a woman with money may find the romance of marriage less compelling. As Miss Todd, the “confirmed spinster,” explains in Miss Mackenzie: “Now for me, I’m so fond of my own money and my own independence, that I’ve never had a fancy that way—not since I was a girl” (174).\(^\text{17}\) And, indeed, although Miss Mackenzie does find the romance plot compelling, she is also envious of Miss Todd’s independence. The narrator reminds us: “Miss Mackenzie, who was at present desirous of marrying a very strict evangelical clergyman, thought with envy of the social advantages and pleasant iniquities of her wicked neighbour” (174). But, second, money troubles make single life harrowing, frightening, and desolate. Counter to Cobbe’s claim that love cannot be fostered by “poverty, friendlessness, and helplessness,” in Can You Forgive Her? and Miss Mackenzie the heroines’ financial dealings jeopardize their safety, thereby authorizing their rescue and reinvestment in romantic marriage resolutions. Given these intertwined investments (financial and romantic), the reader must, like the heroines, either be “rescued” and reclaimed by the domestic plot or, should she resist the novel’s resolution, forfeit the payoff for her investment in the narrative.
**CANT YOU FORGIVE HER?: “OF COURSE SHE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO YIELD”**

Of Can You Forgive Her? I cannot speak with too great affection, though I do not know that of itself it did very much to increase my reputation. As regards the story, it was formed chiefly on that of the play which my friend Mr. Bartley had rejected long since ... The play had been called The Noble Jilt; but I was afraid of the name for a novel, lest the critics might throw a doubt on the nobility. There was more of tentative humility in that which I at last adopted. The character of the girl is carried through with considerable strength, but is not attractive.

—Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (1883)

Mr. Bartley’s earlier rejection of *The Noble Jilt* had, in fact, been based on how unattractive he found the heroine. In *An Autobiography* Trollope quotes his friend’s letter, which he describes as “a blow in the face”:

“As to the character of your heroine,” [Bartley writes], “I felt at a loss how to describe it, but you have done it for me in the last speech of Madame Brudo.” ... “Margaret, my child, never play the jilt again; ’tis a most unbecoming character. Play it with what skill you will, it meets but little sympathy.’ And this, be assured, would be its effect upon an audience. So that I must reluctantly add that, had I been still a manager, *The Noble Jilt* is not a play I could have recommended for production.” (78–79)

The story fails, according to Mr. Bartley, because the audience can’t sympathize with the “unbecoming character” of the heroine. This position is echoed by reviewers of *Can You Forgive Her?*. Henry James, for instance, offers a grumpy question and answer in his review in *The Nation*: “Can we forgive Miss Vavasor? Of course we can, and forget her, too, for that matter” (249). Similarly the critic in the *Spectator* opens his or her review with “Can we forgive her? asks Mr. Trollope. Certainly, if it were worth while, but we scarcely care enough about her for either a forgiving or unforgiving spirit” (247).18 Thus, Alice Vavasor seems to oppose Trollope’s claim that fiction “works” only inasmuch as “the mind be induced to sympathize warmly with that which is good and true, or be moved to hatred against that which is vile, and then an impression will have been made, certainly serviceable, and probably ineradicable”
Yet even if the reader does sympathize with Alice, then the novel presents other problems. To wit, Alice Vavasor is perverse. At the opening of the novel she is twenty-four years old and has been in command of her own fortune since she turned twenty-one (7–8, vol. 1, chap. 1). And she is engaged to marry a man whose main fault seems to be that he is “too perfect” (24, vol. 1, chap. 3). She rejects her excellent fiancé and attaches herself instead to a man she doesn’t love, because “she had gone on thinking of it till she had filled herself with a cloud of doubts which even the sunshine of love was unable to drive from her heavens … [S]he had gone on thinking of the matter till her mind had become filled with some undefined idea of the importance to her of her own life” (109–10, vol. 1, chap. 11). And, of course, she violently regrets the decision once it is made: “She had done very wrong. She knew that she had done wrong. She knew that she had sinned with that sin that specially disgraces a woman … She understood it now, and knew that she could not forgive herself” (383–84, vol. 1, chap. 37). But even when she is rescued from her folly and restored to her worthy lover’s arms, she seems in part to regret her happiness too: “Alice was happy, very happy; but she was still disposed to regard … her happiness as an enforced necessity” (361, vol. 2, chap. 75). Alice’s vacillations refuse the novel’s resolution even to the very end, suggesting that if the reader were to find her attractive rather than perverse, she would likewise have to feel ambivalently about the satisfactions offered by the “enforced necessity” of the happy ending.

However, Alice’s perversity also has a strong narrative logic to it. Her desire to do something with her life manifests in ambitions that are both political and romantically novelistic:

She would have liked, I think, to have been the wife of a leader of a Radical opposition, in the time when such men were put into prison, and to have kept up for him his seditious correspondence while he lay in the Tower. She would have carried the answers to him inside her stays,—and have made long journeys down into northern parts without any money, if the cause required it. She would have liked to have around her ardent spirits, male or female, who would have talked of ‘the cause,’ and have kept alive in her some flame of political fire. As it was she had no cause. (111, vol. 1, chap. 11)

Alice’s ambitions and their source are interesting: in her desire to
tramp around the country with no money, she sounds very much like she has been influenced by the example of Sir Walter Scott’s heroine Jeanie Deans. Trollope, however, in “On English Prose Fiction,” assures readers that Scott can exercise no dangerous influence on readers: “But no woman became forward, and no man a villain under [Scott’s] teaching. Nor has he helped to produce domestic tragedies. No wife has left husband or child, stirred to mischief and vagabond propensities,—to what we, in the cant of the day, call Bohemianism,—through his influence” (115). Of course, Alice has been stirred precisely to those vagabond propensities that Trollope discounts.

John Grey is adamantly opposed to a career in politics, and so he will not offer Alice a “cause” in which to invest her energies. And although she loves him—indeed because she loves him—he represents a frightening loss of autonomy. As the narrator says of the political question:

He had never argued ... with her. He had never asked her to argue with him. He had not condescended so far as that. Had he done so, she thought that she would have brought herself to think as he thought ... But she could not become unambitious, tranquil, fond of retirement, and philosophic, without an argument on the matter,—without being allowed even the poor grace of owning herself to be convinced. If a man takes a dog with him from the country up to town, the dog must live a town life without knowing the reason why;—must live a town life or die a town death. But a woman should not be treated like a dog. (233, vol. 2, chap. 63)

To submit to the man she loves, then, is to give up the autonomy she has enjoyed since she came into her fortune three years before the novel begins. Moreover, the analogy of the dog and its master does not encourage us to view John Grey as sympathetic or Alice as particularly misguided in her rejection of him.

Whereas loving John Grey counts as a negative in Alice’s calculations, not loving her cousin George allows her to fantasize about participating as a free agent in a purely financial investment. George Vavasor is a stockbroker and would-be radical politician whose financial and political successes are by no means assured. But his appeal is precisely because he offers a risky investment. Alice imagines that investing in George will give her life the excitement that she longs for:
She envied Kate. Kate could, as his sister, attach herself to George’s political career, and obtain from it all that excitement of life which Alice desired for herself. Alice could not love her cousin and marry him; but she felt that if she could do so without impropriety she would like to stick close to him like another sister, to spend her money in aiding his career in Parliament as Kate would do. (112, vol. 1, chap. 11)

When Alice agrees to become George’s wife, she pictures it as a kind of business relationship. She writes an “acceptance” letter to him in which she claims: “We could not stand up together as man and wife with any hope of a happy marriage, unless we had both agreed that such happiness might be had without passionate love,” even as she assures him of her willingness to invest in his political aspirations, avowing that she takes “a livelier interest in [his] career than in any of the other matters around [her]” (338, vol. 1, chap. 32). Dreading the prospect of a marriage to George even as she accepts his proposal, Alice postpones the wedding for one year, but offers a very businesslike arrangement in the interim: “I know ... that your need of assistance from my means is immediate rather than prospective. My money may be absolutely necessary to you within this year, during which, as I tell you most truly, I cannot bring myself to become a married woman” (339, vol. 1, chap. 32). In this way Alice builds a fantasy in which she can negotiate the terms of her relationship with George based on his financial need, her willingness to part with her money, and her unwillingness to invest herself emotionally or physically along with her money.

The horror of Alice’s predicament, as it comes to be revealed, is that because she is a woman, there is no investing her capital without investing her person also. Her idea that she could marry George as a business relationship is undone when he demands access to her physical self, which is his right as her future husband:

Was she to give herself bodily,—body and soul, as she said aloud in her solitary agony,—to a man whom she did not love? Must she submit to his caresses,—lie on his bosom,—turn herself warmly to his kisses? “No,” she said, “no,”—speaking audibly, as she walked about the room; “no;—it was not in my bargain; I never meant it.” But if so what had she meant;—what had been her dream? (382–83, vol. 1, chap. 37)
The world that Alice lives in has no room for a single woman to conduct business that is not the business of falling in love and getting married. It is not that Alice learns that her fantasy of autonomy is unattractive, but rather that, learning it is unfeasible, she is forced to resort to a “lesser of two evils” option. Significantly, this scene of Alice’s repentance is one of the most sensational moments in the novel, followed by George’s assault on Kate, in which he breaks her arm on the windswept moor and threatens to murder both Alice and her if he doesn’t get what he wants, and his assault on John Grey, in which he shoots at him and misses. And the more sensationally villainous George becomes, the more “romantic” John Grey appears.19

What allows John Grey to win Alice back is that she gives George access to almost all of her money and, to protect her from being swindled, Grey substitutes his own money for Alice’s. By stepping into the financial contract with which Alice has attempted to engage George, Grey rescues her from “poverty, friendlessness, and helplessness” (Cobbe, “What Shall We Do” 87). Alice’s position is rendered one of material exigency: Grey offers her, first, financial security, which would have been destroyed when George took the money, and, second, physical safety, when he stands between George and her, preventing, we might infer, an attack similar to the one on Kate. The narrator asks: “Would it not have been well for her to have a master who by his wisdom and strength could have saved her from such wretched doubtings as these?” (358, vol. 1, chap. 34). And the reader is given the opportunity to answer in the affirmative that, yes, it would be better for Alice to be married to a good man who will be “civilly responsible for her acts” and under whose “protection of cover” she can live (Bodichon 6).

Given that some man must be her master, John Grey is clearly a better choice, but Can Your Forgive Her? resists making the resolution triumphant:

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. But there still clung to her what I fear we must call a perverseness of obstinacy … And it may be that there was still left within her bosom some remnant of that feeling of rebellion which his masterful spirit had ever produced in her … She shrank from him, back against the stonework of the embrasure, but she could not shrink away from his grasp. She put her hand up to impede his, but his hand, like his
character and his words, was full of power. It would not be impeded.
“Alice,” he said, as he pressed her close with his arm, “the battle is
over now, and I have won it.”
“You win everything,—always,” she said, whispering to him, as
she still shrank from his embrace. (355, vol. 2, chap. 74)

This happy resolution, such as it is, clearly shows that Alice’s near-
 hysterical aversion to giving herself emotionally and physically to
her fiancé has not abated and that she has been conquered rather
than persuaded. The question of the novel’s title, therefore, seems to
operate on a couple of different registers, asking not only whether
the reader can forgive Alice for doing rash, perverse things that
jeopardize herself and her fortune, but also whether the reader can
forgive the novel itself for making it hard to buy into Alice’s happy
ending. The forgiveness that the novel asks of its readers for Alice
herself may be for the domestic tragedy that she threatens to bring
to her family and friends by throwing herself and her money away
on George’s political “cause.” But if Alice’s potential tragedy seems
precipitated by fiction that Trollope is at great pains to designate
“safe,” then it is unclear if his own novel has furthered the cause
of “love-making” or if, instead, it has left in its readers, as in Alice,
“some remnant of that feeling of rebellion” which impelled her to
resist the marriage plot.

MISS MACKENZIE: “THE BEAUTY OF A
HIGH RATE OF INTEREST”

Mr. Trollope has taken the trouble to execute a very skilful photograph of a number
of exceedingly tedious and unpleasant people, in order to show that vulgarity, and
middle-age, and dulness are none of them incompatible with a good deal of sound
sentiment. The indisputable truth of the implied conclusions scarcely compensates for
the stupidity and downright unpleasantness of the people who have been introduced
to us in order to illustrate the truth.

—Review of Miss Mackenzie, Saturday Review (1865)

Published in two volumes the same year that Can You Forgive Her?
was appearing in serial form, Miss Mackenzie describes the problem
of an independent woman with capital. The novel is about an aging
spinster who inherits the fortune of her invalid brother (whom she
has nursed for fifteen years) once he dies. When the novel opens,
the prosaic heroine, Miss Margaret Mackenzie, is thirty-four years old and “neither beautiful nor clever” (4), but with a clandestine attachment to poetry and romance and a fortune large enough to give her “eight hundred a year” (13), she sets out to get the best happiness that her money can buy. She is approached by four suitors who find her eight hundred attractive: Harry Handcock, who exits the plot early on; Samuel Rubb, junior, the son of her brother’s business partner, a dealer in oilcloths who is good-looking and young but vulgar (with a predilection for bright-yellow gloves and oiled hair); Jeremiah Maguire, a clergyman who is a gentleman but who also has a disfiguring squint; and her cousin Sir John Ball, who is an old, bald, and penny-pinching widower with nine children. Margaret seems first to incline to Samuel Rubb, who, though he is vulgar, might offer her romance, but eventually she learns to love Sir John Ball. When the fortune is discovered to belong not to Margaret, but to Sir John, he romantically asks her to marry him for love and not for money. Mr. Maguire becomes the villain of the piece when he hounds Margaret and Sir John, pretending that he is engaged to her already and publishing libelous letters about Sir John’s predations on the innocent heiress, until he is finally discredited. Ultimately, Margaret is relieved to give up her fortune, which has caused her so much trouble, and to become Lady Ball “thankfully, quietly, and with an enduring satisfaction as became such a woman to do” (401).

On the surface, Margaret and Alice seem to have opposite problems: Margaret calculates her chances at the kind of romance and love she has read about in novels, whereas Alice flees from precisely that romance and love for “some vague idea that there was something to be done; a something above and beyond, or perhaps altogether beside that marrying and having two children” (Can You Forgive Her? 110, vol. 1, chap. 11). Yet in their nascent desires to exercise agency, they pursue similarly speculative investments. Margaret speculates on her chances for romance, eschewing the safe investments that will offer security but little “interest.”

In the first chapter of Miss Mackenzie, Margaret rejects Harry Handcock, the friend of her late brother, who proposes to her in a “short and sensible” letter, of which the narrator says: “As to her money he told her that no doubt he regarded it now as a great addition to their chance of happiness, should they put their lots together” (12). Margaret, however, has “strong aspirations”: “She thought, or rather hoped, that society might still open to her its portals—not simply the society of the Handcocks from Somerset House, but that society of
which she had read in novels during the day, and of which she had dreamed at night” (13). She likewise rejects her cousin’s first offer because “he was very careworn, soiled as it were with the world,” because “of romance in him there was nothing left,” and because “it would be very sad to be the wife of such a man” (111). Margaret’s desire for something better is, not surprisingly, couched in terms of novel-reading—novels that she consumes in daily doses and that shape her dreams and desires for more and similar romance.

Moreover, she is not just a consumer but also a producer of romance. The narrator tells us of the existence of

quires of manuscript in which Margaret had written her thoughts and feelings—hundreds of rhymes which had never met any eye but her own; and outspoken words of love contained in letters which had never been sent, or been intended to be sent, to any destination. Indeed these letters had been commenced with no name, and finished with no signature … No one had ever guessed all this, or had dreamed of accusing Margaret of romance. (9)

In these love letters with no sender and no recipient, Margaret has created a romantic narrative into which the inheritance finally allows her to insert herself. She then auditions, often humorously, the men in her life for the role of “leading man.” When, for example, she imagines the Reverend Maguire as her lover, she is troubled by his divergence from her literary ideal:

As soon as he was gone she remembered that his name was Jeremiah … If [the marriage] did come to pass how was she to call him? She tried the entire word Jeremiah, but it did not seem to answer. She tried Jerry also, but that was worse. Jerry might have been very well had they come together fifteen years earlier in life, but she did not think that she could call him Jerry now. She supposed it must be Mr. Maguire; but if so, half the romance of the thing would be gone at once! (172)

Margaret’s musings on the fitness of Mr. Maguire for the role of romantic hero signal the novel’s own play with the genre of the romance. How unromantic a romance can Margaret stand? Can she accept Mr. Maguire’s squint or his inelegant name? How unromantic a romance can the reader stand?
But Margaret’s desire for romance first leads her to an investment both financial and romantic. Within her first weeks at Littlebath, she receives a business letter from her brother asking for the loan of £2,400 and promising her the mortgage to the business as security. The letter announces that Mr. Samuel Rubb, junior, will come visit her to explain the affair. The narrator’s description of Margaret’s reaction to her brother’s proposal looks very similar to the description of Alexander Shand’s widow with her small inheritance to invest:

Like all other single ladies, she was very nervous about her money. She was quite alive to the beauty of a high rate of interest, but did not quite understand that high interest and impaired security should go hand in hand together … She knew that lone women were terribly robbed sometimes, and had almost resolved upon insisting [to her lawyers] that the money should be put into the Three per Cents. But she had gone to work with figures, and having ascertained that by doing so twenty-five pounds a year would be docked off her computed income, she had given no such order. She now again went to work with her figures, and found that if the loan were accomplished it would add twenty-five pounds a year to her computed income. (36–37)

If Margaret, preinheritance, has spent her energies producing and consuming romantic poetry and novels, postinheritance she expands her oeuvre to include financial computations. It is not that she has become less romantic, but that the possibilities of a lucrative investment exercise the same sensational appeal for her as her novels and poetry once did.

Likewise, when Samuel Rubb arrives, his attractions for Margaret are clearly a combination of the sexual and the economic. Although she is initially inclined to be snobbish, because he is not a gentleman, she finds that he is dignified after all, authoritative and good-looki-}

By the time that Mr. Samuel Rubb had done, Miss Mackenzie found herself to have dismounted altogether from her [high] horse, and to be pervaded by some slight fear that her lawyers might allow so favorable an opportunity for investing her money to slip through their hands.
Then, on a sudden, Mr. Rubb dropped the subject of the loan, and Miss Mackenzie, as he did so, felt herself to be almost disappointed. And when she found him talking easily to her about matters of external life, although she answered him readily, and talked to him also easily, she entertained some feeling that she ought to be offended … Nevertheless, Miss Mackenzie answered him when he asked questions, and allowed herself to be seduced into a conversation. (38)

Even more than his prepossessing appearance, Mr. Rubb’s business talk woos Margaret. Or it might be more accurate to say that the sexual and the financial attractions of Mr. Samuel Rubb, junior, are indistinguishable to her. Mr. Rubb represents just what one wants from a speculative investment: the potential of a big future payoff. Compared to the failed Sir John, “[Rubb] was not worn out with life; he was not broken with care; he would look forward into the world, and hope for things to come” (112).

Mr. Rubb’s appeal, strangely, is not mitigated when Margaret learns from her lawyer that she doesn’t have the security on the mortgage and that Rubb has swindled her out of her £2,400. When Mr. Rubb himself follows the lawyer’s letter to do damage control, Trollope highlights the combination of confessed swindle and seduction:

He came close to her, hesitated for a moment, and then, putting one hand behind her waist, though barely touching her, he took her hand with his other hand. She thought that he was going to kiss her lips, and for a moment or two he thought so too … As it was, he merely raised her hand and kissed that. When she could look into his face his eyes were full of tears …

“[T]he fact is you could sell us up if you pleased. I didn’t mean it when I first got your brother to agree as to asking you for the loan; I didn’t indeed; but things were going wrong with us, and just at that moment they went more wrong than ever; and then came the temptation … .”

This was all true, but how far the truth should be taken towards palliating the deed done, I must leave the reader to decide; and the reader will doubtless perceive that the truth did not appear until Mr. Rubb had ascertained that its appearance would not injure him … The tear which he rubbed from his eye with his hand counted very much in his favor with Miss Mackenzie; she had not only forgiven him now, but she almost loved him for having given her something to forgive. (130–31)
The scene is a complex one, in which the reader (despite Trollope’s claim that he will “leave us to decide”) is clearly prompted to see Mr. Rubb as a scoundrel, but is also given to understand that Mr. Rubb, “having something real in his heart, having some remnant of generous feeling left about him” (131), is prevented from pushing his advantage with Margaret. She forgives him, I think, because even (or especially) if he is a dangerous investment, he offers her a sensational and dramatic interest. Trollope’s cynical observation that “with many women I doubt whether there be any more effectual way of touching their hearts than ill-using them and then confessing it” (131) might be read less as describing Margaret’s self-abnegation than as describing her desire for drama and excitement; betrayal and reconciliation are more exciting than reliability and comfort.

But even if Mr. Rubb is clearly a bad investment for Margaret, he is not entirely unsympathetic to the reader. And, equally, the “worthy man” of the novel, Sir John, does not present a particularly sound investment for the heroine. In addition to being bald and careworn, he is described in the novel as having ludicrous and sinister financial preoccupations:

He had some small capital—some remnant of his father’s trade wealth, which he nursed with extreme care, buying shares here and there as his keen outlook into City affairs directed him. I do not suppose that he had much talent for the business, or he would have grown rich … He was always thinking of his money; excusing himself to himself and to others by the fact of his nine children. For myself I think that his children were no justification to him; as they would have been held to be none, had he murdered and robbed his neighbors for their sake. (75)

Far from representing the fitness of men to rule the financial realm (as opposed to Margaret’s imprudent assay at investing), Sir John, who “nurses” his capital along with his nine children, appears emasculated by his financial dealings. Nevertheless, the narrator’s reference to murdering and robbing also imbues Sir John with a kind of sensational negative appeal; he is, we gather, both ruthless and ineffectual.

The shift in the novel by which Sir John becomes the romantic hero amounts to a sleight of hand on Trollope’s part. By flashing the increasingly unsympathetic Mr. Maguire (with his terrible squint) and Mr. Rubb with his vulgar yellow gloves and perfumed and oiled
hair in front of the reader, the novel gradually becomes kinder to Sir John. We are privy, for instance, to this reckoning by Margaret: “For, after all, she thought she liked him best of all the men and women that she knew. He was always in trouble, but then she fancied that with him she at any rate knew the worst. There was nothing concealed with him—nothing to be afraid of” (187). The humorously sensational horror of Mr. Rubb’s social faux pas and Mr. Maguire’s more genuinely dangerous debts and dishonesty make the “known evil” of Sir John—his ruthlessness and his ineptitude—seem less unpleasant.

But the main shift in the novel from Margaret feeling “it would be very sad to be the wife of such a man” (111) to the end, when she tells him, “I love you better than all the world besides” (393) is the difference between eight hundred a year and nothing a year. When the money is her own, Margaret considers a marriage to Sir John a sacrifice of herself and “what she ha[s] left of her youth” (110), but when he proposes to her after she has lost her fortune, and she accepts, the narrator tells us:

> It was not only, nor even chiefly, that she who, on the preceding morning, had awakened to the remembrance of her utter destitution, now felt that all those terrible troubles were over. It was not simply that her great care had been vanquished for her. It was this, that the man who had a second time come to her asking for her love, had now given her all-sufficient evidence that he did so for the sake of her love. (276)

By repeating twice Margaret’s rescue from destitution, the passage highlights what it purports to discount—her pecuniary interests in Sir John—but it is also precisely the moment in the novel when we are allowed to reinvest in the romance plot.

If we, like Margaret, can buy the “all-sufficient” evidence that love conquers all, then we will have invested in Trollope’s love story, and we will have learned the lesson that it strives to teach us: it is better to be rescued as a damsel in distress than to be an independent heiress attempting to make correct assessments of her opportunities. In fact, shortly before Margaret loses her fortune, she begins to wish it away:

> Since her brother’s death, three men had offered to marry her, and there was a fourth from whom she had expected such an offer. She
looked upon all this with dismay, and told herself that she was not fit to sail, under her own guidance, out in the broad sea, amidst such rocks as those ... Had she not always been ill at ease, and out of her element, while striving at Littlebath to live the life of a lady of fortune? (191)

*Miss Mackenzie* echoes the narrator’s question in *Can You Forgive Her?: “Would it not have been well for her to have a master who by his wisdom and strength could have saved her from such wretched doubtings as these?”* (358, vol. 1, chap. 34).

Margaret’s anxiety about choosing which of her four suitors is the best investment of her money and her self is alleviated when her investment shrinks to only herself. As a penniless spinster, in other words, she has less to lose and more to gain by a marriage to Sir John. Like the conclusion of *Can You Forgive Her?, Miss Mackenzie* allows the reader to buy into the romance plot by presenting financial perils from which the heroine must be rescued. Thus the very venal concerns that we understand as antithetical to “true love” become the vehicle for the reader to reinvest in the love story. The promises held out to the reader may, on even cursory inspection, look shady, unreliable, even dangerous, but as Alexander Shand remarks, “People must invest.”

**THE STRUGGLES OF BROWN, JONES, AND ROBINSON:**

“CREDIT AND CREDIT ONLY WAS REQUIRED”

We deeply regret, for Mr. Trollope’s own reputation, that “The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson” should have been published. It was universally felt, when the story first appeared in the ‘Cornhill Magazine,’ that the whole affair was a blunder.


If Trollope treated his novels as investment opportunities for his readers, then his “deformed child,” *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson,* seemingly never offered a convincing prospectus to its investors. This, I argue, is not because it offers his most unadorned version of realism, but because it presents his most complexly theoretical and self-reflexive account of the role of fiction. The sales pitch of the fictional memoir’s author, George Robinson, in presenting the novel itself as “a new article” with “nothing equal
to it at the price at present on the market” (10) seems to exemplify the commodification of Trollope’s fiction. Yet the novel offers a sophisticated account and critique of the production of belief that is mandated by the logic of both the Victorian economic exchange system and the sexual exchange system of the novel. The novel makes humorously explicit what is, I contend, implicit in Victorian realism in general: the realist novel’s project is the production of belief in a “real” that has no referent but that is itself crucial to the operation of the systems of exchange in which it participates and which it describes. Robinson is the ad man for his firm, and as such he understands himself as a producer of narrative, but not narrative-as-commodity. Robinson understands his work, rather, as participating in a credit economy, wherein the actual commodities and the capital associated with them are less important than the belief in them. As he explains in the preface:

That bugbear Capital is a crumbling old tower, and is pretty nigh brought to its last ruin. Credit is the polished shaft of the temple on which the new world of trade will be content to lean. That I take is the one great doctrine of modern commerce. Credit,—credit,—credit. Get credit, and capital will follow. Doesn’t the word speak for itself? Must not credit be respectable? (4)

Ironically, too, Robinson links this symbolic credit directly to domestic romance when he plays with the multiple meanings of the word credit:

Capital, though it’s a bugbear, nevertheless it’s a virtue. Therefore, as you haven’t got it, you must assume it. That’s credit. Credit I take to be the belief of other people in a thing that doesn’t really exist. When you go into your friend Smith’s house and find Mrs. S. all smiles, you give her credit for the sweetest of tempers. Your friend S. knows better; but then you see she’s had wit enough to obtain credit. When I draw a bill at three months and get it done, I do the same thing. That’s credit. (7)

Just as Mrs. Smith’s assumption of good temper generates a belief in her as an Angel in the House, so Robinson’s assumption of the appearance of capital instills a belief in him as a paragon of economic virtue.
Robinson earns credit in this “new world of trade” by writing sensational advertising copy that has virtually no reference to either real capital or real commodities, which he himself admits: “To obtain credit the only certain method is to advertise. Advertise, advertise, advertise. That is, assume, assume, assume. Go on assuming your virtue. The more you haven’t got it, the more you must assume it” (7). The advertising flyers that Robinson produces in the service of the partners’ fledgling haberdashery business—gorgeous descriptions of fantastic merchandise at cut-rate prices, sensational bulletins about the status of villainous wholesale dealers, lurid reports of “three suckling infants … pressed to death in their mothers’ arms” by a crowd of overeager shoppers (200)—bear little or no resemblance to actual commodities or events. But they tell stories that establish the firm’s credit and credibility with the public.

Robinson advertises, in other words, not the commodities available to the public, but the image of a firm that provides luxury commodities to the public. For example, he “invents” a Katakairion shirt as a marketing ploy that he must then explain to his partners:

“If that isn’t swindling, I don’t know what is,” said Jones.
“Do you know what Katakairion means?” said Robinson.
“No; I don’t,” said Jones. “And I don’t want to know.”
“Katakairion means ‘fitting,’” said Robinson; “and the purchaser has only to take care that the shirt he buys does fit, and then it is a Katakairion.”
“But we didn’t invent them.”
“We invented the price and the name, and that’s as much as anybody does. But that is not all. It’s a well-understood maxim in trade, that a man may advertise what he chooses. We advertise to attract notice, not to state facts.” (139)

The downfall of the firm, which the memoir chronicles, stems in large part from Brown’s and Jones’s inability to grasp that there need not be, indeed can’t be, any actual reference to “real” items in their business. As we learn, Mr. Brown’s insistence on spending “ready money” on some small amount of stock for the store’s opening is “a suicidal act on his part”:

Credit and credit only was required. But of all modes of extinguishing credit, of crushing, as it were, the young baby in its cradle, there
is none equal to that of spending a little ready money, and then halting. In trade as in love, to doubt,—or rather, to seem to doubt,—is to be lost. When you order goods, do so as though the bank were at your back. Look your victim full in the face, and write down your long numbers without a falter in your pen. And should there seem a hesitation on his part, do not affect to understand it. (44–45)

In other words, there may be no “5,000 Kolinski and Minx Boas” in stock (42), but everyone must appear to believe that there are for the system of trade to function. Likewise, true love may not conquer all, but “to appear to doubt” is fatal to the system of sexual exchange.

One could argue, indeed, that the revulsion Trollope’s reviewers expressed at *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* is precisely because the novel, like a magician revealing trade secrets, “appears to doubt” its own narrative function. It does not, finally, show love’s triumph. Robinson’s “true love,” Maryanne Brown, is mercenary and hard from beginning to end. Moreover, the one marriage that does occur at the end of the novel, between Robinson’s ex-rival for Maryanne, the butcher William Brisket, and a drover’s daughter, is a happy ending of the most prosaic nature. As Brisket tells George: “She had three hundred, down, you know;—really down. So I said done and done, when I found the money wasn’t there with Maryanne. And I think that I’ve seen my way” (247).

The “happy” ending of *The Struggles*, inasmuch as it can be said to have one, refers self-reflexively to Robinson’s successes as a producer of narrative, when, on the strength of his advertising skill, he is commissioned by the editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*—the magazine in which *The Struggles* actually first appeared serially—to write an “account of the doings of the firm” because “it may be of advantage to commerce in general” (239). Thus, Trollope self-referentially asks his readers to invest in a narrative that tells the story of its own inception—a narrative about the production of narrative.

Although the novel ends with its own beginning, with Robinson at last producing a “real” commodity for public consumption, it is clear that this is not the end point of his endeavors: “George Robinson, though his present wants were provided for by his pen, was by no means disposed to sink into a literary hack. It was by commerce that he desired to shine. It was to trade,—trade, in the highest sense of the word,—that his ambition led him” (250). Robinson, suffering
an existential crisis at the end of the novel, ponders failure in trade:

First he took from his pocket a short list which he always carried, and once more read over the names and figures which it bore.

Barlywig, £40,000 per annum.

How did Barlywig begin such an outlay as that? He knew that Barlywig had, as a boy, walked up to town with twopence in his pocket, and in his early days, had swept out the shop of a shoemaker. The giants of trade all have done that. Then he went on with the list:—

Holloway . . . . £30,000 per annum.
Moses . . . . 10,000 "
Macassar Oil . . . 10,000 "
Dr. De Jongh . . . 10,000 "

What a glorious fraternity! There were many others that followed with figures almost equally stupendous. Revalenta Arabica! Bedsteads! Paletots! Food for Cattle! But then how did these great men begin? He himself had begun with some money in hand, and he had failed. As to them, he believed that they had all begun with twopence.

(249–50)

Robinson’s list, which tracks not yearly income but yearly advertising expenses, does several things: Certainly the list looks a little like Trollope’s own An Autobiography, which famously ends with the list of his novels and the money he received for each—a life’s successes recorded in creative outlay and compensation. But, more than that, it evokes a stock portfolio with companies, variously exotic and prosaic, that may or may not be “real” companies dealing in “real” commodities—like Ferdinand Lopez’s speculations in the guano trade or Augustus Melmotte’s Mexican Railroad—but that are so great as to spend fortunes in advertising alone. Finally, it presents highly sensationalized accounts of the “glorious fraternity”; like Horatio Alger, they have all “begun with twopence” and risen to greatness. The “rags to riches” stories are ones that Robinson himself is heavily invested in.

In An Autobiography, a chronicle very much about the novels he wrote, Trollope describes the book he never wrote:
I intended to write that book to vindicate my own profession as a novelist, and also to vindicate that public taste in literature which has created and nourished the profession which I follow. And I was stirred up to make such an attempt by a conviction that there still exists among us Englishmen a prejudice in respect to novels which might, perhaps, be lessened by such a work. This prejudice is not against the reading of novels, as is proved by their general acceptance among us. But it exists strongly in reference to the appreciation in which they are professed to be held; and it robs them of much of that high character which they may claim to have earned by their grace, their honesty, and good teaching. (196–97)

It may be fanciful to say that *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson* is that book; nonetheless, I believe that the desire to vindicate fiction writing that Trollope articulates here and elsewhere is expressed as an ambivalence in *The Struggles* that is not, as critics have remarked, about “the equation between money and fiction” (Brantlinger, *Reading Lesson* 121) but about Trollope’s own participation, like George Robinson, in an economy of credit, in the production of belief: advertising “to attract notice, not to state facts.”

Trollope understands his fiction as doing real things in the real world—as exercising a kind of discursive power over readers, for good or ill. In “On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement,” Trollope questions the writer’s ethical responsibility:

Simple success in a profession,—by which I mean the making of money or the gaining of a reputation,—cannot be sufficient for any man or woman with a conscience. Labour that is useless,—unproductive,—will break the heart of a convict. Do you believe it possible then that an enlightened man,—one, at least, so far enlightened as to be able to produce for you pictures of life that shall delight you,—can do so from year to year, contentedly, without a self-inquiry whether he be producing any good by his work,—without at least satisfying himself that he does not produce evil? (96)

Likewise, as Robinson ponders his ethical responsibility, he too questions the productivity of his own work:

“Why don’t you produce something, so as to make the world richer?” Poppins had said. He knew well what Poppins had meant by
making the world richer. If a man invent a Katakairion shirt, he does
make the world richer; if it be a good one, he makes it much richer.
But the man who simply says that he has done so adds nothing to
the world’s wealth … Was a man bound to produce true shirts for
the world’s benefit even though he should make no money by so
doing;—either true shirts or none at all? (252–53)

In Trollope’s case, the anxiety is not that his novels are commodi-
ties, but that they are not. And if his labor does not produce “true”
Katakairion shirts, but only the belief in them, should he then pro-
duce “none at all”?

Robinson ends up in a position similar to Trollope’s own, for as
Robinson worries that his work may not be productive, he hears a
message in the chiming of church bells, as if from heaven: “Turn again,
Robinson, Member of Parliament” (254). His faith in the power of his
work to produce a “real” product is renewed—that product: himself
as a man of consequence in the political world. It is well-known that
Trollope himself stood, unsuccessfully, for a seat in Parliament, but
I don’t wish to stress the connections between Robinson’s and his
personal aspirations. Rather, I want to return to Trollope’s claim that
Dickens’s novels will “help to make many women.” This is the “real”
product of Trollope’s writing, not the “dainty dishes” of novels for
consumption but actual social and political effects in the world—in
fact, real men and women.

Trollope’s critics have often imagined his work as inviting a turn
from sensational romance to the “faithful portraiture” of real life; that
is, the reader’s investments are transferred from romantic unrealities
to the scientific satisfactions of seeing “life as it really is.” But this
experiment overstepped its bounds, which is clear in a reviewer’s
comment about *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson*:

The chief characters, motives, and incidents were so odiously vulgar
and stupid that the staunchest champions of realism were forced to
give it up in disgust. It may be questioned whether any living being
ever got to the end of *Brown, Jones, and Robinson*, or had any other
sentiment than mingled loathing or despair towards that weary
tribe of butchers and drapers, and their still more wearisome wives.
(Review of *Miss Mackenzie*, Saturday Review 216)

In other words, realism is good insofar as it eschews “sensation poi-
son” in favor of “homogeneous and consistent pictures” (Hoey 400),
but it is bad insofar as its detailed pictures of ugly reality make affective attachments impossible.

Yet, as I have argued in this chapter, Trollope offers his readers a very different dynamic, whereby investments in “vulgar” empirical observations (or perhaps one might say empirical observations of vulgar “characters, motives and incidents”) initiate and sustain the reader’s sensational attachments. Venal quotidian concerns are rendered suspenseful and romantic. In _Can You Forgive Her?_ and _Miss Mackenzie_, the reader’s knowledge of the world “as it really is”—an aging spinster with a very small fortune may have some latitude in choosing what to do with herself and her money, but none of her choices are likely to be very good ones—is ultimately superceded by the reader’s belief in the world “as it is not”: true love chooses you if you can suffer patiently long enough. Thus, ironically, Trollope’s unveiling of the “man behind the curtain,” which Henry James found so appalling, serves to earn credit for the romances that he tells. Moreover, by inviting readers to buy into romances that look like bad investments, these novels highlight the process through which the objects of our empirical knowledge can become imbued with sentimental belief.

And, as I will show in the next chapter, it is this investment in the promises of sentiment and romance that George Meredith invites his readers to question in _The Egoist_ and _Diana of the Crossways_. If Trollope’s novels demonstrate that critical distance must, in the final analysis, be suspended for the social myths to do their work, then Meredith, in asking his readers to consider exactly what payoff they get from attachment to those myths, offers a much more complicated position that not only claims critical acumen but also owns its sensational susceptibility. In this way, Meredith asks his reader to turn a critical eye on his or her own most cherished attachments—attachments not just to romance, but to one’s own sophisticated immunity to romance.