

TURNING MOURNING: TROLLOPE'S AMBIVALENT WIDOWS

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NEAR THE END OF ANTHONY TROLLOPE'S *The Small House at Allington* (1864), the protagonist Lily Dale disagrees with her mother about the prospect of marrying Johnny Eames, an earnest, but perhaps too ardent graduate of hobbledehoyhood whom Lily finds herself both unwilling and unable to love. Having been jilted by Adolphus Crosbie, a social climber as naïve as he is disingenuous, Lily protests that marrying Johnny Eames would constitute a form of adultery. "In my heart I am married to that other man," Lily contends, "I gave myself to him, and loved him, and rejoiced in his love" (630; ch. 57). Noting that the situation may have changed – Crosbie has since married a noble's daughter and run through her fortune – Lily nevertheless maintains that there "are things that will not have themselves buried and put out of sight, as though they had never been" (631; ch. 57).

Continuing her explanation, Lily marks an identification that says in one word what the previous four hundred pages could not: "I am as you are, mamma – widowed" (631; ch. 57). Despite the reluctance of Bassetshire residents to accept Lily's refusal of Eames, with this identification Lily makes an appeal that, apparently, cannot be refused (at least until the novel's sequel). Left at a loss for words, Mrs. Dale, focalized through the narrator, admits that "no rejoinder on her part was possible" (631; ch. 57). However unhappily, Mrs. Dale thus accepts Lily as a fellow widow, and so she can only accede to Lily's proclamation, murmuring, "It shall be as you will" (631; ch. 57).

Certainly Lily finds more accurate identifications to characterize her situation. In *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (1866–67) she opts to sign her name followed by "O.M." for "Old Maid," signaling that she will "take [her] degree" in spinsterhood (817; ch. 76). The fact of the matter is that Lily has not been married and indeed she will never become married – and there would usually be the rub. Why, then, is Lily's appeal to widowhood one to which "no reasoning could be of avail?" (*TSHA* 631; ch. 57). What in Lily's romantic history suggests her alignment with Mrs. Dale as a widow? Why does Mrs. Dale accept Lily's figuration of herself as a widow as an end to the argument, rather than finding it precociously fanciful or even caustically insensitive? What does Lily seek to accomplish by identifying as a widow?

Given the ubiquity of widows throughout Trollope's oeuvre and Victorian fiction at large, Lily's identification seems, despite its rhetorical efficacy, remarkably non-specific. Writing on Trollope's many widowed characters, Christopher Noble suggests that widowhood's figural flexibility leaves its terms open even as it accomplishes a great deal of work for the social imaginary of realist fiction. Pointing to Sylvia Plath's notion of widowhood as "vacancy," Noble notes that "Victorian widows' vacancy was a vocation, requiring bodily

entombment in crape and prolonged social seclusion,” concluding that the Victorian widow thus “continued to be married to her husband long after his demise, her identity subsumed in his absence; loss was her occupation” (178). Although Noble’s readings of Trollope’s widows are insightful, detailed, and nuanced, his formulation of widowhood moves too quickly to substitute material loss and semiotic lack with consolatory content. This move is characteristic not of the figure of the widow in Victorian fiction, but rather of the tension between the figure and her historical analogues.

As Karen B. Gevartz details of widows in eighteenth-century fiction, the figure of the Victorian widow too “can be understood not simply as one of the ciphers of the age,” but also as a way to understand the relationship between fiction and history (168). But where Gevartz sees the eighteenth-century widow as registering “the period’s anxieties about its own cultural developments,” the figure of the widow in Victorian fiction bears no easy, determined relationship to her historical counterparts. The fictional widow’s relationship to history is not “anxious” in the Victorian era – and really, when aren’t ideologies “anxious” about the success or failure of their operations? – so much as it is profoundly ambivalent, diverging from, playing upon, and calling into question contemporary cultural assumptions about the links between affective experience and the fabric of the social.

This essay thus proceeds from the claim that the widow is not necessarily a figure for mourning, but rather for a radical form of ambivalence. In some senses, the basis for this thesis is purely materialist. Stated bluntly, besides the fact that widows are women whose husbands have died, there is literally nothing that one could or indeed should assume about the ties connecting one widow’s experiences to those of another. As much as the figure of the widow seems most emblematic of the Victorian era’s mourning practices – practices that circulated material goods as fetishistic guarantors of grief’s experience – it is already too much to assume that a widow mourns a husband whose death may not necessarily be felt as a loss, even if the implications of this assumption are crucial. To the contrary of her grim trappings, when she is deployed in realist fiction the figure of the widow remains ironically lively, resisting reduction.

The ambivalence of Trollope’s widow characters offers an important vantage point from which to reframe discussions about the place of ideology, agency, and desire in the larger scope of Trollope’s oeuvre. Trollope’s critics have long pointed to tensions in his fiction between fixed, compulsive characters and disciplinary social frameworks. In one camp, critics have argued that Trollope essentially writes the least common denominator of Victorian society. Summarizing this perspective, John Kucich offers that “condemnations of Trollope’s one-dimensionality” have led to the author’s “enshrinement” as “the supreme literary embodiment of middle-class stodginess” (593). In this reckoning, Trollope’s characters are irretrievably the rubes of bourgeois Victorian ideology. Thus, Trollope offers “self-enclosed worlds peopled by inhabitants largely unconscious of the rules that govern their surroundings” (Michie 163). Even at the level of form, George Levine contends that Trollope merely “accepted the terms of the realistic technique he adopted” making no attempt to “test out [their] limits” and writing “comforting, conservative documents, easy in the ways of the middle class, admiring of the ways of the aristocracy, worldly wise in their acceptance of the inevitabilities of compromise” (5, 7).

A markedly different reception posits Trollope’s characters as relentlessly individualistic. In J. Hillis Miller’s estimation, Trollope’s fiction centers on a “conflict of wills” such that “each novel is a kind of game in which each character plays with all his energy

the role in which he finds himself cast" (114–15). In this view, Trollope's characters are powerfully narratable in their single-minded desires, but predictable because their defining traits over-determine their actions. Amanda Anderson accounts for the "wackiness" of Trollope's compulsive characters as manifesting "not exactly integrity but rather a kind of stubbornness or obsession that often shades into perversity" (511). Anderson argues that these characters' "recalcitrant psychologies" are ultimately "impossible to isolate . . . from their social circulation" and so conflicts in Trollope "become sites where the limits or constraints of the social are sometimes registered and reflected upon" (514–15). Similarly, William J. Overton contends that Trollope offers a "double perspective" that "allows him to see and to dramatize not only the arbitrariness of conventions, but their necessity; not only the dangers of the individual will, but its motive power" (300). For Trollope's characters, Overton asserts, "identity is not simply the expression of an inner being that precedes existence, but is assimilated in part to the relations that envelop it" (295).

Trollope's "double perspective" matters differently with regards to his widowed characters insofar as those widows continually wrestle with erotic desires not only as the expression of self-evident, personal aspirations, but also in their complicated relations to social demands. The ambivalence of the widow as figure thus points to tensions and points of convergence between competing, but interdependent systems of norms meant to control the autonomy of women in nineteenth-century Britain. Specifically, the figure of the widow demonstrates the extent to which compulsory heterosexuality – a system of norms and "demands" that keep "women within a male sexual purlieu," as explicated famously by Adrienne Rich – at once undergirded, depended upon, and was utterly at odds with what I will be calling a system of compulsory mourning (12, 26). In accordance with the logic of compulsory mourning, a Victorian widow was expected to perform the work of mourning her husband – publicly, rigorously, and formally – irrespective of whether or not she experienced the death of her husband as a loss. Because compulsory mourning underscored the married, monogamous, heterosexual couple form as the social bond whose loss was most worth mourning, it tells us a lot about the extent to which marriage has been idealized as a social good. The figural widow is in some senses always a problem for the idealization of marriage, though, because her first-hand knowledge of marriage necessitated that its particulars be made public.

Realist fiction's ability to depict inward epistemologies made it possible for Trollope to give voice to the ambivalence suggested by this double bind between compulsory mourning and compulsory heterosexuality. Free-indirect discourse, narratorial omniscience, direct narratee address, and other innovations of Victorian fiction thus made it possible – and perhaps even necessary – for Victorian authors, through widowed characters, to offer reflections on marriage that might otherwise have been regarded as improper or even monstrous. My aim is not to applaud critical widows as somehow more knowing, authentic, or feminist than widows who do earnestly mourn their husbands in Victorian fiction, or to dismiss the latter as dupes of false consciousness. To suggest that the widow is a demystifying figure is not to suggest that she is inherently subversive; rather, this is to posit that the widow's intimacy with marriage renders it a contingent, ambivalent affective object through a marking of particularity.

In this reckoning ambivalence is not a qualitative affective experience so much as an insistence upon a form of relation that is, for any of its provisionally describable arrangements, wholly contingent. The narrator's reflection upon Mrs. Hurtle's widowed existence in *The*

Way We Live Now (1875) offers a nice definition of the widow capable of giving voice to this versatility: “Circumstances had made her what she was” (1: 450; ch. 47). Indeed, that novel’s title offers a suggestion for approaching representations of widowhood in Victorian fiction, contending that widows’ ways of fictional life unfold insistently in the present tense. Widowhood is thus a figure after the Barthesian fashion, “understood, not in its rhetorical sense, but rather in its gymnastic or choreographic acceptance” (3–4). As “fragments of discourse,” Barthesian figures stand not for monolithic paradigms or schema, but operate instead “in a much livelier way,” necessitating neither structuralist nor formalist rigor so much as a notion of linguistic feeling that entails critical gropes and prods, but never attempts to hold things in place (4). Ascertaining these ironically lively widows, then, is a matter – to follow Barthes’ example – of comparative anatomy that seeks to describe “what in the straining body can be immobilized” (4).

Victorian mourning practices constituted a highly visible, embodied practice that ordered subjects (especially female subjects), social relations, and the boundaries of the social itself. Victorian mourning hinged on the manufacture, proliferation, and use of material objects – collectively referred to simply as “mourning” – that signified both emotional states and social allegiances in response to the death of an individual. While the practice of wearing mourning was not particular to the Victorians, nineteenth-century Britain’s booming industries facilitated a “booming trade” and manufacture of the textiles that came to be deemed proper for mourning (Taylor 30). At the same time, the rise of industry contributed to the expansion of a middle class eager to prove its upward mobility and social ties through the display of stylish, expensive mourning accoutrements as a form of participation in “respectable and socially required ceremony” (Taylor 36). Fashion magazines and etiquette manuals thus scrambled to codify and classify who should wear what sort of mourning, for whom, and for how long.

Widows’ culturally-imposed social isolation was characteristic of larger-scale efforts to deny women participation in the public sphere and market economies, and Cynthia Curran emphasizes that shifts in inheritance law worked to disenfranchise widows (14). As laws of coverture worked to subsume women into the category of non-subjects when they became wives, the Dower Act of 1833 ensured that the end of marriage by no means entailed the end of patriarchal control over capital. While coverture laws entailed the legal fiction that wives were impossible to distinguish from their husbands, marriage’s ambivalence with regards to the legal status of the female subject was complicated by a widow’s survival beyond the death of her husband. The magical thinking undergirding coverture’s disappearance of the married female – Now you see her, now you don’t! – could not account for the widow as a conspicuous remainder. While they presented a visually arresting image, widow’s weeds were nonetheless emblematic of a spectacular form of erasure, working to maintain coverture’s subjective *trompe-l’oeil*. The fetishism of Victorian mourning kept the dead husband symbolically alive as much as it marked his literal death.

In this regard, the figure of the widow highlights compulsory heterosexuality’s investment in bringing about certain ends while disavowing others. As critics such as Jenni Calder and James Kilroy have underscored, Victorian realist fiction was one of the means through the idealization of marriage as the coveted end of erotic attachment was bolstered during the nineteenth century. Similarly, narrative theorists such as D. A. Miller and Peter Brooks have underscored marriage’s powerful ability to provide narrative closure. Hetta Carbury’s remark that “that there could be no other chance of happiness for her in this world than that

of becoming Paul's wife" is in some senses paradigmatic, rather than exceptional (*TWWLN* 2: 403; ch. 93). The notion that marriage is the one and only "happy ending" of narrative is not, however, all-encompassing; there are myriad narrative situations in which its seeming inevitability is challenged, marked, or simply avoided. Tracking ambivalent figures, such as the widow, thus makes it possible to tease out an archive of ambivalence set not in opposition to, but already within the fictions that seem most in bed with the fetishism of marriage as a happy affective object, formal ending, and social good.

The figure of the widow thus serves as the junction point at which compulsory mourning and compulsory heterosexuality wrestle for control of narrative ends. In this regard, the widow must, on the one hand, mourn her first husband as a loss and, on the other, forget him in order to facilitate the marriage that will signify the closure of her loose narrative ends; the alternative is a kind of narrative oblivion. Getting the widow out of mourning and back into marriage thus becomes a tricky balancing act between respecting the propriety of widowhood and the fictional necessity of remedying desires outward. As Noble puts it, "One conservatism demands that widows remarry as quickly as possible; the other insists that they share their husband's death, rendering remarriage unthinkable" (182). The widow character must ideally make the transition from one injunction to the other without raising alarms about affectation; otherwise, she risks becoming morally suspect.

Eleanor Bold's remarriage plot in *Barchester Towers* (1857) highlights many of the ambivalences that the figural widow poses for narrative. Trollope's decision to kill off John Bold between *The Warden* (1855) and *Barchester* suggests – more than anything – that a married Eleanor Bold could be of limited narrative utility. Only by making Eleanor a widow could Trollope destabilize the nonnarratable status conferred upon her by marriage at the end of *The Warden*. But in setting his heroine back into the marriage market of Barchester, Trollope has a problem: widowed with money, Eleanor is left too bold and so she requires "incentives" to lure her "back into the bonds of matrimony" (Bredesen 113). Eleanor's "widowhood effectively makes her a bachelor," Noble contends, and in this regard the "masculine potential of her widowhood therefore threatens, however briefly, to destabilize the comfortable predictability of the courtship plot" (180). The plot of *Barchester Towers* thus works not to fulfill Eleanor's desires so much as to give her entirely new ones.

But first, Trollope's narrator in *Barchester Towers* must assure readers that Eleanor earnestly mourns John Bold. Accordingly, the narrator reintroduces Eleanor Bold with a series of assurances offset by opinions. Confessing, "I cannot say that with me John Bold was ever a favorite," he concedes that "he was a man to be loved by a woman," and by no woman more wholeheartedly than Eleanor, who "wept as for the loss of the most perfect treasure with which mortal woman had ever been endowed" (1: 14–15; ch. 2). In contrast to the narrator's untimely honesty about John Bold's "arrogance of thought," Eleanor's loss is earth-shattering and all-consuming as "for weeks after he was gone the idea of future happiness in this world was hateful to her" (1: 14–15; ch. 2). By balancing his own callousness with Eleanor's sincerity, the narrator assures us that although he might speak ill of the dead, Eleanor would never dream of it.

Barchester Towers continually elides the notion that Eleanor's widowhood is cause for sexual scandal, even as it opens her to the machinations of Slope, a social-climbing chaplain, and Bertie Stanhope, the buffoonish son of Barchester's newest neighbors. Her virtue is thus presented as a nearly willful naïveté. "To give Eleanor her due," the narrator assures us, "any suspicion as to the slightest inclination on her part towards Mr. Slope was a wrong to her"

and that indeed “she had never thought about suitors since her husband’s death” (1: 124; ch. 13). In the most dramatic instance of objection, the narrator patently gives away the novel’s ending, assuring the “gentle-hearted reader” that she or he need “be under no apprehension whatsoever” as “it is not destined that Eleanor shall marry Mr. Slope or Bertie Stanhope” (1: 143–44; ch. 15). So fraught is the prospect of Eleanor’s falling from widowed reverence into a wrong second marriage that the narrator defies narrative desire’s epistemological erotics, short-circuiting his story in order to make sure its heroine will not be interpreted as sexually supercharged. In order to shut down the sexual volatility of the figural widow, he must leave room for no alternative readings of the text, and in this way he attempts to excise the ambivalence inherent to widowhood.

The fitness of either Arabin or Slope as a companion to Eleanor is figured straightforwardly in their treatment – or mistreatment – of Eleanor’s widowhood. Chiding Slope for having used her Christian name, Eleanor corrects him through a claim on her married name, saying “My name, Mr. Slope, is Mrs. Bold” before slapping him “like a miniature thunderclap” when he attempts “to pass his arm around her waist” (2: 144; ch. 40). By contrast, Eleanor’s relenting to Arabin results from his cautious shift to using her Christian name. At first he insists on “Mrs. Bold,” but when this betrays coldness, Arabin shifts gently to “Eleanor” in his “softest” tone, before boldly declaring “Eleanor!” (2: 235; ch. 48). The magic of the name’s metonymy is, immediately, marriage, and in this simple transition of appellation all is apparently settled between the two. In a flurry of confusion between romantic subject and object, the narrator gushes that “There was now that sympathy between them which hardly admitted of individual motion. They were one and the same – one flesh – one spirit – one life” (2: 235; ch. 48). The fantasy of remarriage in *Barchester Towers* is thus one in which a woman shifts from widow to wife without a word in between; the understanding between Arabin and Eleanor is instantaneous and immaculate, and therefore incapable of misunderstanding. It is also, for all its ability to resolve various plot lines, free of the conscious premeditation that might mark it as a political plot or get-rich-quick scheme.

The logic of the name in *Barchester Towers* is also, as D. A. Miller would have it, the power to pronounce a semiotic end. In this case, Eleanor’s widowhood ends as soon as Arabin is able to supplant her dead husband’s name with his own. *Barchester* at once discounts the dangers of the femme découverte and disavows that Eleanor has ever been out of marriage to begin with. Instead, she successfully transitions from female subject, to female subject erased juridically through marriage to John Bold, to widow covered by her weeds, to remarried woman again consigned under the name of her new husband. In Bredezen’s estimation, then, the widows of Trollope’s fiction nevertheless serve as “living proof of the fictional status of marital unity,” even if Trollope relentlessly romanticizes that unity (Bredezen 103). In this fashion, Eleanor allows Trollope to critique of coverture laws, even if she ultimately submits to them through remarriage. Widowhood renders endings, however comfortably married, contingent, and the logic of *Barset*’s seriality – and its serial marriages – demands as much.

Like marriage, the materials of mourning organized subjects, social life, and economies around the emotional lives of individuals. Concomitantly, these materials presumed upon the emotional states and forms of affective performance best suited to the forms of subjectivity and social life they engendered. The display and interplay of mourning textiles located subjects along the axes of gender, class, kinship, nationality, and race, all the while staging

such aspects of subjectivity as intimately related to the experience of grief. Compulsory mourning renegotiated the terms of mourning not as an individual, affective experience, but rather as a practice that defined the terms of the social itself. As Dana Luciano explains, for Victorians and their North American contemporaries “the pain of grief was . . . testimony to the importance of interpersonal attachment; indeed, its persistence helped keep alive attachment even in the absence of the beloved object” (2). To the side of Luciano’s emphasis on the “natural” and “spontaneous” nature of grief, though, critics are right to characterize Victorian mourning practices as “fetishistic” insofar as revolved around ordered, codified, and commodified symbolic objects. As fetish objects, the trappings of Victorian mourning presumed a correspondence between the mourning materials and the psychological experience of grief. As much as psychoanalytic theories of mourning and melancholia underscore a phenomenology characterized by operations of interiorization, entombment, and incorporation, Victorian practices were equally a matter of extravagant exteriorization.

For some critics, the fetishism of Victorian mourning betrays the threat that a personal, intimate, and often painful affective experience – grief – could be exploited. In this line of thinking, the fetishism of Victorian mourning profanes the memory of those lost by reducing them to the status of things that could be circulated in public as a matter of propriety or opportunism, rather than reverence. Esther Schor’s comments are characteristic of this perspective. “By the accession of Victoria,” she notes, “emphasis had begun to shift away from the mourner’s participation, through sympathy, in the social fabric, toward the social recognition and patronizing of the individual mourner” (11). “A culture of mourning,” she laments, “became a cult of mourning.”

While widowhood points us to largely materialist or juridical concerns, commentary on the subject often veers into affective prescription. With a sense of dire finality, Patricia Jalland offers that “Widowhood . . . was a devastating experience, entailing the loss of the central role of wife, which defined the identity and sense of worth of so many women” (230). “Widowhood,” she extrapolates, “was a final destiny, an involuntary commitment to a form of social exile” and thus “Victorian and Edwardian widows usually suffered a greater sense of the total disintegration of their lives” (231, 235). Without downplaying the extent to which a husband’s death might indeed be felt as a heartbreaking loss, it is worth emphasizing that Jalland’s conclusions are leading. The presumptions of compulsory mourning are what made the fetishism of Victorian mourning practices possible as a social enterprise. Only by shutting down the possible range of affective responses to the loss of one’s husband – you will feel devastated, you will experience your husband’s death as cause for grief – could the presumed correspondence between mourning and its symbolic representation through textiles be maintained.

These issues are brought to a head in Trollope’s 1864–65 novel *Can You Forgive Her?*. Though the novel centers primarily on Alice Vavasor, a young woman of means who jilts a worthy suitor early in the novel so that she can enjoy a vicarious political career through a planned marriage to her cousin George, Alice’s Aunt Greenow – a wealthy widow – becomes the heroine of an important, if comedic subplot that serves as a counterpoint to the novel’s ongoing project of getting Alice to regret her romantic missteps. In a crucial church scene, Mrs. Greenow arrives to church “in all the glory of widowhood” and assumes a centrally visible seat in the church (1: 70; ch. 7). There, she indulges in displaying “all her wardrobe of mourning, showing the richness of each article, the stiffness of the crape, the fineness of the

cambric, the breadth of the frills, – telling the price of each to a shilling, while she explained how the whole had been amassed without any consideration of expense” (1: 70–71; ch. 7). Mrs. Greenow dazzles onlookers by conducting her “performance” with “all the pride of a young bride when she shows the glories of her trousseau to the friend of her bosom” (1:70; ch. 7). Here, mourning authorizes, and even requires, eroticism in several different registers, and so Mrs. Greenow’s image is equally indulgent for onlooking husbands (as erotic), their avaricious wives (as commodity), and even the curate (in ways that are only elliptically sacred).

Cognizant of the extent to which Victorian mourning practices depend upon a widow’s ability to present a pleasing image of grieving devotion, Mrs. Greenow self-consciously performs her grief according to the demands of compulsory mourning, but is able to do so in order to further her own interests. To wit, she continually downplays social conventions preventing her appearance in public by calling attention to them. So, even as Greenow laments that “All that social intercourse could ever do for me lies buried in my darling’s grave,” such professions do nothing to change the fact that Greenow does appear in public under the auspices of socializing with her nieces (1: 73; ch. 7). Similarly, Mrs. Greenow’s awareness of the demands for dressing in full- and half-mourning allows her to elide the actual time since Mr. Greenow’s death so that she can pursue flirtations with Cheeseacre and Bellfield. In this fashion, Mrs. Greenow’s professions of mourning serve multiple erotic ends, suggesting that, when armed with *savoir-faire*, widows might make sexual spectacles of themselves without ever reducing themselves to the status of objects. Knowing the rules of the mourning game, Mrs. Greenow dresses like a pawn but moves like a queen.

Characters in the text are canny enough to call attention to Greenow’s mourning as potentially disingenuous, while noting that compulsory mourning requires her performance all the same. Initially, Kate laments that she must go to visit her aunt. “Fancy a month at Yarmouth with no companion but such a woman as that!” she protests to Alice, and calls attention to the fact that Mrs. Greenow’s deceased husband was “thirty years older than herself” (1: 55–56; ch. 6). Alice is characteristically more generous in reply, identifying with Greenow as a woman whose marital choices have thrust her into the social spotlight. “But still he was her husband,” Alice retorts, “And even if her tears are assumed, what of that? What’s a woman to do? . . . According to all accounts she made him a very good wife, and now that she’s got all his money, you wouldn’t have her go about laughing within three months of his death” (1: 56; ch. 6). Alice supposes that, whether or not Greenow is indeed affected in her mourning, that mourning is nevertheless necessary as an act of social propriety and, outwardly at least, a matter of reverence.

Kate disagrees, replying that Greenow is “quite right to wear weeds . . . but she needn’t be so very outrageous in the depth of her hems, or so very careful that her caps are becoming” (1: 56; ch. 6). The “out” of “outrageousness” here suggests a problem of exteriorization. In Kate’s reckoning, grief should be a matter of giving social, visible testimony to preexisting truths of inner emotional life such that one corresponds to the other in degree and, in both senses of the word, fashion. While Kate doesn’t begrudge Greenow for being in mourning, she suggests that Greenow puts on her mourning to such an ostentatious degree that it becomes legible as a put on, and thus the fetishistic logic underpinning Greenow’s mourning tears at the seams. In so doing, Greenow inadvertently calls attention to the absurdity of the obligation that she overshoots. For Kate, the open secret of compulsory mourning is that it always already makes grief into a counterfeit because its exteriorization is always a matter

of excess; its exchange value as social commodity exceeds its value as cathartic emotional response. The problem with Greenow is that she makes this fetishism overt.

The narrator's epistemological ellipticism in *Can You Forgive Her?* suggests that only a penchant for searing irony keep him from calling Mrs. Greenow a Victorian gold digger. On the one hand, his lack of willingness to intervene on Greenow's behalf in order to clear her name is a damning silence. On the other, this vagary suggests that Greenow's case might be the only one in which the novel's titular question is not merely rhetorical, but in fact open to interpretation. To be sure, throughout the novel, Greenow's knack for affective performance is aligned with sexual promiscuity. "She had a wondrous power of smiling," the narrator informs us, "and could, upon occasion, give signs of peculiar favour to half a dozen different gentlemen in as many minutes" (1: 80; ch. 8). But crucially the narrator reveals this charade, and so even if Greenow's performance passes as the real thing for many characters, the curtain falls, Thackeray-like, between Greenow and the novel's readers. Importantly, elsewhere in the novel Mrs. Greenow is entirely sincere in her gratefulness to her deceased husband. "I'm not dependent on the world, – thanks to the care of that sainted lamb," she explains to Kate (1: 73; ch. 7). "I can hold my own," she continues, "and as long as I can do that the world won't hurt me."

While on the surface, Greenow's perspective on marriage might seem shrewdly pragmatic, readers would be remiss to disqualify such concerns as indicating that Greenow is a heartless opportunist. Later, advising Charlie Fairstairs to woo Cheeseacre, but never to deceive herself about her financial reasons for doing so, Greenow is blunt in saying, "I can afford that sort of thing; you can't" (2: 393; ch. 78). Fully aware of the privileges that widowhood affords her, Greenow understands full well that romantic love in marriage is a luxury. But as much as this phrase sounds like mere avarice, Greenow is careful to qualify that Charlie should learn to love Cheeseacre, as indeed she probably will.

Ultimately, the text figures Greenow's worldview as emblematic of the same forms of compromise that it validates in resolving the novel's central romantic plots. "I always think that worldliness and sentimentality are like brandy-and-water," Greenow opines (2: 393; ch. 78). "I don't like either of them separately, but taken together they make a very nice drink." As one who has "seen too much both of the world's rough side and of its smooth side," Greenow is, whether genuine or not, at least consistent in that she scorns "to make any compromise between the world of pleasure and the world of woe" (1: 80–81; ch. 8). Moreover, in mixing the base and the emotional, Greenow develops a keen taste for emotion not as a natural, pre-social truth around which one ought to build altars. Instead, she suggests that it is precisely in holding affect and affectation in an awkward *mélange* that one can deduce their values. That one might turn these values into one's own fortune goes without saying. But through Mrs. Greenow, *Can You Forgive Her?* nevertheless manages a more nuanced moralism than either its title or conclusion would suggest. It does so by maintaining a critical space in which polyvalent readings allow for an ambivalent suspension from moralistic judgment in a novel that is otherwise drunk with it.

As the example of Mrs. Greenow illustrates, figural widows trouble the distinction between affect – the supposedly genuine, more-or-less spontaneous experience of emotion in response to an affective object – and affectation – the performance of affect, often in ways that are read as in excess of, or in conflict with, affective experience. The point here is not to posit or substantiate any of the mind/body, real/counterfeit, or signifier/signified binaries presupposed by this reckoning (however inaccurate) of affect. Rather, my effort is to

highlight that such oppositions depend upon a method of fetishizing affect while discounting – often as morally dubious – affectation. The figure of the widow demystifies the fetishism of affect, and concomitantly highlights the extent to which it is wholly incommensurate with the object-based affective economies of Victorian Britain’s culture of mourning.

Contrary to presumptions of, or wishes for, affective determinacy, Sara Ahmed suggests a queer form of affective relation that is profoundly contingent. Emotions are not inherent to an object, Ahmed suggests; rather, emotional objects are subject to models of circulation and value. Drawing on Marx’s model of fetishism, Ahmed maintains that “emotions accumulate over time” around certain objects “as a form of affective value” (11). “‘Feelings’ become ‘fetishes’, qualities that seem to reside in objects,” Ahmed suggests, “only through an erasure of the history of their production and circulation” (11). The fetishistic logic of compulsory mourning thus operates by disavowing that the loss of, for example, an abusive husband might not in fact be felt as a loss, and might in fact be met by any number of emotional responses.

Ahmed powerfully argues that the rhetoric of happiness works to fetishize certain forms of relation, but not others, as always already “promising” happiness as a reward for following certain life trajectories (22). In this regard, happiness has functioned as a powerfully regulatory discourse by rendering unimaginable the contingency with which happy objects – and, in particular, marriage – might be experienced differently. If Victorian mourning culture worked through prescription – “You will mourn your dead husband because his death is a loss for you because marriage is a social good, regardless of your particulars” – then affective ambivalence insists instead upon the radical contingency with which we experience loss, suggesting how it might be encountered and experienced differently.

In *The Way We Live Now* Trollope suggests that critical modes of reading and writing offer resources for giving realist voice to forms of attachment and experiences of loss that are contingent and complicated, rather than fetishistically determined. While this theme plays across several of the novel’s plotlines, perhaps the most intriguing variation concerns Mrs. Hurtle, an American widow who tracks Paul Montague back to London in order to pressure him to honor their engagement. In her intercourse with Paul, Mrs. Hurtle manipulates through emotional inflation rather than affective fabrication; she opts to accentuate and understate rather than invent. Although her letters to Paul possess “much art,” they are effective primarily because they present only images which Paul finds alluring, leaving “negative” arguments “suppressed” rather than denied or discounted (1: 254; ch. 27). Thus, while Mrs. Hurtle is repeatedly figured as a “wild cat,” the narrator insists that in one letter she writes to Paul “as to make him feel that if he would come he need not fear the claws of an offended lioness” (1: 254; ch. 27). Mrs. Hurtle is not outright false so much as she is a careful manager of her moods, and is therefore capable of translating her emotional life – however unpleasant – into words, phrases, and performances that are enticing. She never loses her claws, but she certainly knows when to sheathe them.

Although Hurtle’s deft affective editing is tied to her methods of embodiment, her true art is in selectively translating her moods and desires into textual phenomena that do justice to the multiple dimensions of her relationship to Paul. True to form, Hurtle considers giving Paul one of two letters when she is “torn in two ways” following an argument during which Paul states that he cannot marry her (2: 3; ch. 51). Rather than making good on threats of

violence, Hurtle composes a first letter that fully concedes his points. Aware that she has wronged Paul, Hurtle plaintively admits:

You are right and I am wrong. Our marriage would not have been fitting. I do not blame you. . . . If I have been violent with you, forgive me. You will acknowledge that I have suffered. Always know that there is one woman who will love you better than anyone else. I think too that you will love me even when some other woman is by your side. God bless you, and make you happy. Write me the shortest, shortest word of adieu. Not to do so would make you think yourself heartless. But do not come to me. (*The Way We Live Now* 1: 451–52; ch. 47)

The sense of defeat in Hurtle's first letter speaks to the fact that, for all of her contradictory, controlled, or concealed feelings towards Paul, "the strongest feeling which raged within her bosom was that of disappointed love" (1: 449–50; ch. 47).

The first letter goes unsent. In its place, Hurtle drafts a second version that gives voice only to her anguish. "I have suffered many injuries," she charges, "but . . . this is the worst and most unpardonable, – and the most unmanly" (2: 4–5; ch. 51). Imagining a sadomasochistic scenario, Hurtle commands Paul, writing, "I desire you to come to me, – according to your promise, – and you will find me with a horsewhip in my hand. I will whip you till I have not a breath in my body." (2: 4–5; ch. 51). Paul's word becomes the whip with which Hurtle might flog him, and the ties of love between the two are perverted into sadistic bondage. Given the centrality of agony to both letters – in the first Hurtle suffers it, in the second she inflicts it – it is fitting that Hurtle's fantasy of dedication to Paul figures the pains of self-abnegation as a kind of ecstasy. "Had she found him a cripple, or blind, or miserably struck with some disease," the narrator tells us, "she would have stayed by him and have nursed him and given him comfort" (2: 3; ch. 51). Idealizing their relationship as hinging on "sacrifice" allows Hurtle to preserve her agony, but in a way that figures it as a gift of love, rather than selfishness.

Like Lady Carbury – also a widow – Hurtle suffers violence at the hands of her first husband. But where domestic abuse so taints marriage for Lady Carbury that she has difficulty contemplating a second chance at it, Hurtle seeks marriage with Paul as a form of recompense. For Hurtle, marriage to Paul figures neither as happy achievement nor a promise fulfilled; instead it offers only the barest respite from a life that has been fraught with the unease of reciprocation gone awry. In one of the few bluntly revealing statements about Hurtle's past, the narrator tells us that Hurtle "had endured violence, and had been violent. She had been schemed against, and had schemed. She had fitted herself to the life which had befallen her" (1: 149; ch. 47). Wrong marriage has made Hurtle a victim, but it has also made her capable of the same treachery she has suffered. By "fitting" herself to such a life, Hurtle reacts rather than acts; she becomes completely subject to contingency, and so for all of her forthrightness she has no real agency. On the one hand, this seems like a painful prospect; after all, it seems to render Hurtle into a creature of compulsion and instinct. On the other, though, the guiding principle here also suggests that the twinned experiences of being wronged and doing wrong grant Hurtle the wholly fortunate ability to see life from multiple perspectives.

The two letters thus represent both sides of an ambivalent reaction to the end of love. The first letter works to give testament to Hurtle's loss of Paul as such; the second engages only in wound fetishism. But held together, the two letters establish an equivalency between the two affective postures, establishing both as equally potent forms of retribution that depend

upon the notion that agony fulfills some portion of Hurtle's desire. The first letter speaks to the brokenness of the relationship, mourning its end. The second letter can only spout obscenities at a love that has continually failed to meet Hurtle's expectations. The former is a violent act of love; the latter is an equally violent act of revenge. While these two letters seem diametrically opposed, however, I want instead to hold open the possibility that both letters are instead equally true.

In this way, the letters are not only alternate writings, but also alternate readings of the same situation. When Hurtle finally confronts Paul, she tellingly reveals both letters to him, beginning with the second. Although Paul clearly rejects the second letter's premise, Hurtle makes clear that she "meant it," asking, "Shall a woman be flayed alive because it is unfeminine in her to fight for her own skin?" (2: 8; ch. 51). As much as critics underscore Trollope's ethos as organized centrally around gentlemanliness, Hurtle's central question to Paul – "What is the good of being – feminine, as you call it?" – is an equally recurrent issue throughout Trollope's oeuvre. Hurtle's dissent from the feminine is a straightforward rejection of gender norms that, in her reckoning, require her subjection to violence at the hands of men.

While it seems dismissive for Hurtle to write off the first letter as betraying "the charm of womanly weakness," she quickly tells Paul that it is equally genuine; if she "means" the second letter, then the first shows "how [her] mind has been at work," suggesting that both letters are the result of thoughtful intentionality, rather than simple reaction – a clear reversal from her relationship with her husband (2: 8; ch. 51). This tension of radically different, but nevertheless reconciled writings and readings suggests that Hurtle's dominatrix bravado is not at all incommensurate with her demure acquiescence; one form of relation to Paul is unknowable and perhaps even meaningless without the other. The two qualities do not cancel each other out. Instead, Hurtle – reconciled that Paul is an object of love, and prepared to accept his loss out of that love – destroys the second letter, releasing him from her claim to his hand; erasing her words frees him from honoring his own. Because she keeps the first letter and restores it "to her pocket-book," readers are left with the distinct impression that Hurtle has decided which relational perspective ultimately holds the most value for her. This confirms what Hurtle, for all of her oscillations, has known all along: "her love was no counterfeit" (1: 449–50; ch. 47).

Against a sexist rhetoric of mood swings and hysteria, I want instead to suggest that in the cases of Mrs. Greenow, Mrs. Hurtle, Eleanor Bold, and other literary widows, ambivalence does not figure as an undecidability or mixedness of affect. Instead, these widows maintain affective orientations in relation to husbands, marriages, and indeed loves that are both discrete and distinct, but also simultaneous. These widows' moods do not swing. Rather, these widows engage in inquisitive, prescient, and sometimes politic processes of affective turning that keep their erotic relationships in an active state of renegotiation. Looking at love and life "from both sides now," these widows establish a form of ambivalent attachment that might at time read as tense, contradictory, or even outright disingenuous. But by holding various affective positions at the same time, these widows work to establish what Eve Sedgwick has called "affective texture" (13). In this capacity, the figure of the widow suggests that we must look on love from multiple angles, exploring and exposing the contingent, unpredictable ways in which we encounter those objects, rather than falling back on the ease of fetishism. As Sedgwick proposes in *Touching Feeling*, "To perceive texture is never only to ask or know What is it like? nor even just How does it impinge on me?" (13). "Textural perception," she

continues, “always explores two other questions as well: How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?” In helping us to confront these last, speculative questions concerning the affective textures of marriage, love, and social life more largely conceived, the figure of the widow affords us an opportunity to consider how such objects might be encountered otherwise, might be felt in other ways.

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