



# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## “The Mysterious Woman and Her Legs”: Scrutinizing the Disabled Body in *Barchester Towers*

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<1>In *Barchester Towers* Anthony Trollope thematizes domestic violence, but resists describing the consequences of that violence in any detail. He thus renders the suffering female body conspicuous by virtue of its difficult intelligibility; the battered woman is fascinating because her injuries are discernible yet ambiguous. Specifically, Trollope portrays Madeline Neroni's body – particularly her legs, deformed and disabled by the violence she has presumably suffered – as paradoxically both on display and carefully concealed. Madeline's injuries are patent but abstruse; she draws attention to her physical abnormalities, but the exact nature of the damage remains shrouded in mystery. Such reticence about representing domestic violence and its consequences, typical of Victorian novels,<sup>(1)</sup> risks interfering with the politicization of an issue that was (and still is) inextricably bound not just to women's rights, but also to historical understandings of class, morality, and respectability. By constructing Madeline Neroni's disability as noticeable yet nebulous, though, Trollope is able to provide the context for an empowering corporeal indecipherability. Madeline's body becomes the subject of great interest in a community that conflates unnatural physicality with dubious morality; it registers as a “contaminated” site against which her neighbours can define themselves as citizens and subjects. A number of critics have accordingly read Madeline's injured body as a reflection of Victorian impulses to contain deviant femininity, a dangerous and defiling physique that must be marginalized in if not cast out of the town and the text.<sup>(2)</sup> Departing from these insights, highly valuable insofar as they explore the manner in which social values are inscribed onto the body, I want to consider how Madeline's clandestine self-presentation allows her to manipulate that scrutiny, and to disavow the moral and social management that inheres in looking at bodies. Through Madeline's unique and complex physicality, I contend, Trollope

comments on impossibility of defining the self against anxious encounters with disability.

<2>On the surface, *Barchester Towers* appears to be more concerned with male competition than with violence against women. The story begins with the death of Bishop Grantly, propelling a plot devoted largely to settling the question of which man should occupy which position of power. While the majority of the men in the community believe that Archdeacon Grantly should succeed his father, the position goes instead to an outsider, Dr. Proudie, who is heavily influenced by his domineering wife. A secondary question thus emerges: how much institutional authority should women be able to harness? Trollope quickly establishes Bishop Proudie's chaplain, Mr. Slope, as the novel's most outspoken opponent of female power; he takes particular exception to Mrs. Proudie's influence, and the two battle for control over the Bishop's decisions throughout the novel. While Trollope makes both characters objects of social ridicule, Slope is the less popular (read: more threatening) of the two. His disruptive evangelism irritates Grantly's camp of traditional clergymen, and the remainder of the novel therefore attends to the homosocial contests in a church negotiating "moderate schism" (169). After leaving her abusive husband in Italy and returning to her family, apparently battered so badly that deformities prevent her from walking, Madeline arouses curiosity among the community, but she does not appear to play a significant role in these problems. The fascination aroused by Madeline's highly visible yet obfuscated body, though, is precisely what facilitates her subtle coercion of the central male characters, and, by extension, what finally insists upon the interconnectedness of the text's interests in men's and women's authority.

<3>Of course, as many readings of "normal" and "abnormal" physicality in nineteenth-century Britain would suggest, Madeline's disability seems to merely mark her aberrance. Madeline cannot conform, for example, to what Paul Youngquist identifies as the "proper body" of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century culture, an ideal corporeality that affirmed discourses of liberalism, free-market economics, and nationalism (xxiii). As a victim of abuse Madeline cannot embody liberalism; her body betrays the blatant inequality and disorder of the marriage contract. Having turned up penniless on her father's doorstep, Madeline also fails to signify the wealth-generation that was so central to elevating the middle classes in the free-market economics of the nineteenth century.(3) Finally, by moving to Italy and marrying an abusive Italian count instead of one of her many British suitors, Madeline appears to have rejected the formation of a middle-class British home, the very heart of British nationalism.(4)

<4>Nor does Madeline conform to the "proper" body as Pamela Gilbert defines it

(drawing on Michel Foucault and Mary Poovey): the body that “naturally manifests certain desires (for shelter, financial security, cleanliness, etc.),” thus contributing to the overall health of the “social body” (xiv). Gilbert’s explication of the proper body does even more than Youngquist’s to emphasize the constructed relationship between moral health and physical health in the nineteenth century. According to this paradigm, problems like illness, homelessness, and poverty resemble “perversions of human nature,” symptoms of the individual’s refusal or inability to be “natural” (xiv). By this logic, Madeline’s inability to maintain her household, her husband, or her physical integrity gestures toward her depravity and abnormality.

<5>Such rhetoric of the “unethical physique” appears often in critical discussions of Madeline’s body. Cindy LaCom and Jane Nardin, for instance, both read Madeline’s injuries as a symbol of her sexual transgressions (LaCom 192; Nardin 391). Similarly, Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky argue that Trollope makes Madeline’s body “the source of pollution and defilement in the Barchester community” and that her final disappearance facilitates the resolution of narrative and moral tensions (43). Madeline attracts interest from men, is able to use that interest to assist in solving the political and romantic quandaries in the text, and in the end leaves, ostensibly removing the social chaos that her body appears to signify. In this way, Madeline corresponds with what Martha Stoddard Holmes identifies as a broader Victorian trend in representing disabled women: they support the marriage plots of other women but, because they represent moral and physical contamination, they are rarely afforded opportunities of their own to marry or have children. Rather, they must disappear from the text when it ends so as to resolve anxieties about the superfluity and disorder implied by their bodies, “unacceptable” for marriage, reproduction, or even romance (6-7).

<6>However, as Ato Quayson points out in his study of disability in literature, the disabled body “acts as a threshold or focal point from which various vectors of the text may be examined” (28). That is, disability signals multiple textual problems, and not necessarily the social or moral contamination of the body in question. In fact, Quayson identifies nine primary functions of disability in literature:

...disability as null set and/or moral test; disability as the interface with otherness (race, class, and social identity); disability as articulation of disjuncture between thematic and narrative vectors; disability as bearer of moral deficit/evil; disability as epiphany; disability as inarticulable and enigmatic tragic insight; disability as hermeneutical impasse; and disability as normality” (52).

Quayson is critical of what he calls the “containment/defilement” approach to reading disability; he rejects the notion that literature produces disabled bodies as signs of deviance only to manage or excise them and thus contain or eliminate the problems they represent. Instead, Quayson suggests, literature’s tendency to cast out or otherwise obfuscate disabled characters constitutes a “short-circuit in the aesthetic domain” that actively *resists* resolution to a myriad of textual problems (26). Specifically, Quayson suggests, the gaps in representation that often surround the disabled body reference the impossibility of defining, stabilizing, or normativizing the self through interrogating it. Here Quayson draws on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies*, which contends that encounters with disabled individuals often inspire “forms of anxiety, dissonance, and disorder” for the “normate” (non-disabled) because humans attempt to order and define themselves through their perceptions of one another’s bodies (12).<sup>(5)</sup> When the “normate” encounters a disabled person, Quayson tells us, she may experience “fears of loss of control over [her] body,” and in literature such fears manifest in hermeneutical gaps that signal the impossibility of their being settled (17). Anxieties about physical contingency – the unforeseen events that can occur on the body – persist rather than expire in these lacunae, precluding the capacity to contain the unnatural body, and by extension casting doubt on the likelihood of ordering or producing a stable “normate” self.

<7>Madeline’s interactions reflect this phenomenon throughout *Barchester Towers* long before she leaves town permanently; her always only partially visible disability marks a break-down in representation and interpretation for those who work to circumscribe their identities through her abnormal body. The signora’s mystifying body makes her an object of interest in the community, and a site through which the people of Barchester attempt to categorize their social relationships and roles. Ultimately, though, the same indecipherability that attracts interest sets these characters up to fail and to inadvertently expose their own flaws as they focus on Madeline’s. Madeline therefore intensifies the paradoxical (in)decipherability of her body in several ways. First, she alludes but never refers explicitly to her husband’s abuse. She claims that her deformity is the result of a random accident:

She had fallen, she said, in ascending a ruin, and had fatally injured the sinews of her knee; so fatally, that when she stood she lost eight inches of her accustomed height; so fatally, that when she essayed to move, she could only drag herself painfully along with protruded hip and extended foot in a manner less graceful than that of a hunchback. (66)

But she also implies her husband’s guilt by alluding “in a mysterious way to her married

life and isolated state,” and by “referring Neroni’s extraction to the old Roman family from which the worst of Caesars sprang” (77). Such contradictory and deliberately vague accounts of the past encourage characters and readers alike to scrutinize Madeline’s injured body: has she been beaten, or did she really fall? On the body, we can look for evidence of the marital abuse she implies but refuses to admit.

<8>The manner in which Madeline presents her body, however, rendering her deformity obvious and yet never completely visible, signals a refusal to provide answers, and frustrates us with more contradictions. Rather than bear the indignity of lacking grace in her movements, Madeline makes a spectacle of not standing and not walking:

She had still frequented the opera at Milan; she had still been seen occasionally in the saloons of the noblesse; she had caused herself to be carried in and out from her carriage, and that in such a manner as in no wise to disturb her charms, disarrange her dress, or expose her deformities. Her sister always accompanied her and a maid, a manservant also, and on state occasions, two. (66)

These visual cues – Madeline lying on a sofa, her conspicuous refusal to use her legs, and her careful arrangement of her dress – emphasize both her deformities and the fact that they cannot be seen. Madeline’s attempts to conceal her body thus complement her efforts to draw attention to it, and, by extension, foreground its unsettling unintelligibility. Her entrance at Mrs. Proudie’s epitomizes this:

And very becoming her dress was. It was white velvet, without any other garniture that rich white lace worked with pearls across her bosom, and the same round the armlets of her dress. Across her brow she wore a band of red velvet, on the centre of which shone a magnificent Cupid in mosaic, the tints of whose wings were of the most lovely azure, and the colour of his chubby cheeks the clearest pink. On the one arm which her position required her to expose she wore three magnificent bracelets, each of different stones. Beneath her on the sofa, and over the cushion and head of it, was spread a crimson silk mantle or shawl, which went under her whole body and concealed her feet. (81)

Madeline’s flesh is decorated and therefore made conspicuous with lace, pearls and bracelets, but, even as they draw attention to her body, the adornments deflect attention away from it. Most notably, while pearls both accentuate and cover her bosom and arms, a crimson silk shawl decorates and completely conceals her feet. The

shawl in particular signals a paradox of visibility; the party guests are prohibited from seeing Madeline's feet, but the very fact that the feet are concealed invites individuals to gaze upon them, to ask what it is they are prohibited from seeing, and to question why. The feet thus become a sort of fetishized object of taboo desire, and the locus of Madeline's power. Her awareness of this power becomes apparent when Trollope refers to male desire with the clichéd subordinate position of being at her feet: "It was necessary to her to have some man at her feet. It was the one customary excitement of her life. She delighted in the exercise of power which this gave her" (242). Madeline's feet acquire significance both materially – as body parts that heighten her mysteriousness – and metaphorically – as body parts that symbolize, by extension, her authority over those who look at her. Madeline not only receives attention, then; she commands it. Even Bishop Proudie is "dying of curiosity about the mysterious lady and her legs" (79).

<9>By conspicuously withholding evidence that would explain her conspicuous physical abnormality, of course, Madeline leaves herself open to being defined according to the only information that *is* available to her observers: their own prejudices, desires, and anxieties. Members of the community accordingly come to see Madeline as either a vulnerable victim, or as a wicked vixen. On the one hand, "[s]tories were not slow to follow her, averring that she had been cruelly ill used" (66). Slope, for example, assumes that Madeline is "a helpless hopeless cripple" who may be erotically interesting, but who is "unfitted to be chosen as the wife of any man who wanted a useful mate" (241). On the other hand, although Mrs. Proudie tells Lady DeCourcy that Madeline "has only one leg... that Signor Neroni beat her... till she was obliged to have one amputated" (355), the Bishop's wife insists that Madeline's physical anomalies reflect her status as a fallen, defiling woman, exclaiming that while she may only have one leg, "she is as full of mischief as tho' she had ten" (356). Such attempts to define Madeline are almost invariably also attempts to define the self. Slope's encounters with Madeline, for example, force him to confront the contradictions that inhere in his sexual and social desires, pitting his lust for the signora against the political aspirations he believes he can achieve through a marriage to Eleanor Bold. While Slope pursues "Mrs. Bold in obedience to his better instincts, and the signora in obedience to his worsen" (241), Madeline taunts him mercilessly. First tells him to choose *either* love or ambition: "whatever you do, my friend, do not mingle love and business. Either stick to your treasure and your city of wealth, or else follow your love like a true man. But never attempt both." (245) Then, she clearly instructs the chaplain to "never mind love" (245) and to marry Eleanor because "she will be a good mother to your children, and an excellent mistress of a clergyman's household" (249). Turning the tide yet again, Madeline then encourages Slope to choose love, claiming suddenly that can and will

marry him. When Slope hesitates, though, the signora scoffs at his incapacity to choose a path for himself (252).

<10>By emphasizing the relationship she sees between Madeline's physical and moral degradation, Mrs. Proudie likewise negotiates her sense of self. Unlike Slope, though, Mrs. Proudie consciously aims to consolidate her position of authority in the community through Madeline's physique. Specifically, she tries to best Slope by exposing his attraction to the signora's body. In one instance, for example, Mrs. Proudie wryly asks the chaplain, "do you think I have not heard of your kneelings at that creature's feet – that is if she has any feet..." (485), using the "chaotic," indecipherable corporeality to gesture towards Slope's moral confusion as opposed to her own moral uprightness. Mrs. Proudie exploits public uneasiness with Madeline's body to undermine Slope's authority within the community, claiming, for example, that "[Madeline] has absolutely ruined that man... and has so disgraced him that I am forced to require that he shall leave the palace" (356). But Slope is not Mrs. Proudie's only target. She also takes advantage of the anxiety that Madeline provokes to criticize Dr. Stanhope, who as a clergyman "should at any rate prevent her from exhibiting in public" (356), and Bertie Stanhope, who she points out is Madeline's "apish-looking" brother, "nearly as bad as she is," and "likely to be the new dean, too" (356). Mrs. Proudie is aware that by interpreting the one-legged woman as "beyond the reach of Christian charity" (357) she can in turn demean certain members of the clergy, manipulate the structure of the church with gossip, and fortify her authority as the bishop's wife.

<11>Even Lady DeCourcy, whose comments on Madeline are brief, negotiates her sense of self through what she sees on the signora's body. Her insistence that she had "heard George mention [Madeline]," that "George knows all about her," and that "George heard about her in Rome" (355) suggests that Lady DeCourcy's understanding of the disabled body is caught up in her relationship to her husband. Once we learn that Lady DeCourcy "herself knew something of matrimonial trials" (355), we can infer that she is contending with her own physical suffering through Madeline. When Lady DeCourcy immediately labels the signora, an "unfortunate creature" (355), she constructs the abnormal female body as necessarily victimized and vulnerable, conflating her own hidden abuse with Madeline's concealed deformities.

<12>All of these perceptions of Madeline resemble what Garland-Thomson refers to as the "dynamic struggle" of staring (*Staring* 3), a process whereby "who we are can shift into focus by staring at who we think we are not" (6). For Garland-Thomson, staring is a way of trying to order the disordered, making sense of the unintelligible" and thus more clearly understanding the self by looking at the other (19). Staring is not, though, limited

to the oppressive objectification typically associated with the gaze (9). The stare, Garland-Thomson contends, can be empowering for the looker and the person being looked at because it is “a circuit of communication and meaning-making” and not merely a one-sided disciplinary act (3). Just so, Madeline assumes a degree of authority through public scrutiny; she exposes the foolishness of the community insofar as the same thing that commands their stares – indecipherability – renders it impossible for them order their “normate” selves against her. Bishop Proudie’s reaction to the signora, for example, underscores the impossibility of fully comprehending her physicality, and thus of stabilizing one’s selfhood through defining it. When Madeline asks the Bishop if he knows her “sad story,” like Mrs. Proudie, Slope, and Lady DeCourcy, he pretends that he does, but we know that in actuality “[t]he Bishop didn’t know a word of it. He knew, however, or thought he knew, that she couldn’t walk into a room like other people, so made the most of that” (87). The ambiguity surrounding Madeline’s injuries allows the Bishop to pretend to know what he does not; he can assume things about Madeline’s body because there is no physical proof to contradict his assumptions, and he therefore blindly believes his daughter Netta when she informs him that Madeline has no legs at all (78). Emphasizing both the cryptic nature of Madeline’s body and identity and the erroneous information born out of such uncertainty, when the Bishop’s youngest daughter tells the Bishop Madeline’s name, he repeats it incorrectly as “La Signora Madeline Vicinironi” (79). As a site of unknowability, then, Madeline’s body encourages misinterpretation, but Trollope uses it to expose and critique arrogant efforts to define the indecipherable. The joke is on the Bishop here; his authority is weakened by a body that teases him with knowledge he cannot access.

<13>The danger Madeline therefore represents to the starrer is not some social or moral deviance signaled by her body, then, but that she presents the embarrassing consequences of visually “managing” the other. The signora is a cross between Lucifer and Medusa, highly compelling but highly dangerous as a result. Madeline’s eyes are as “bright as Lucifer’s...dreadful eyes to look at, such as would absolutely deter any man of quiet mind and easy spirit from attempting a passage of arms with such foes” (75). Like Lucifer, Madeline is a great beauty (Ezekiel 28:17). Also like Lucifer, Madeline has fallen; the angel fell from Heaven and from God’s favour, and Madeline fell socially – a disgrace symbolized by her supposed fall while ascending a ruin – when she left her husband in Italy and rejected the Victorian ideal of the Angel of the House. Just as Lucifer’s greatest sin is his aspiration to usurp God’s power, Madeline’s greatest “sin” is that she rivals sanctioned, distinctly patriarchal and religious authority. It might seem, then, that Trollope defines Madeline as a source of containment, but further investigation of her likeness to Lucifer reveals otherwise. Lucifer is not merely a fallen angel; it is also the morning star (Isaiah 12:12). Madeline’s eyes are dreadful to look at



because, like stars, they bring light – too much light; they symbolize her power to expose. The eyes accordingly symbolize Madeline’s new power over Slope once she realizes his involvement with Eleanor. Cognizant of the influence this new information gives her, “she looked at him full in the face, not angrily, nor yet with a smile, but with an intense overpowering gaze” (245).

<14>Merging Christian and Pagan mythology, Trollope illustrates Madeline’s capacity to manipulate the stare most clearly when, at Mrs. Proudie’s reception, the signora assumes a Medusan power to symbolically “cripple” those who look upon her body, just as that body itself has been crippled. Madeline freezes Mrs. Proudie’s guests, rendering them as still as she is on her sofa: “Dressed as she was, so beautiful and yet so motionless...it was impossible that either man or woman should do other than look at her” (92). Here Madeline arrests her spectators and draws conspicuous attention to their need to look at her. Like Medusa, she embodies the dangerous power of a woman’s allure; her ability to sustain the stares of her onlookers resonates with Medusa’s capacity to turn Perseus to stone, a recurring archetype of the paradoxically arousing yet emasculating power of attraction. Madeline is, as any good Medusa should be, both desirable and repellent, attractive but therefore disempowering by virtue of her command over the stares of others.(6) She represents the ability to control how looking works from what otherwise appears to be an objectified position.

<15>Slope is especially susceptible to Madeline’s “charms.” While Madeline may symbolically cripple Mrs. Proudie’s guests, she cripples Slope both politically and socially, too. Having positioned the Chaplain at her feet, she can take advantage of his sexual attraction to her and, through several intimate conversations, learn that he is an extraordinary hypocrite. She can then reveal to the community that Slope wooed both herself and Eleanor Bold during the same period, chiding Slope with the verse “It’s gude to be off with the old love – Mr. Slope, before you are on with the new” (448). Moreover, Madeline stresses the severity of Slope’s indiscretion by implying that he is a woman abuser; when she asks Slope to describe his proposal to Eleanor – “Tell us with what words she accepted you. Was it with a simple ‘yes,’ or with two ‘no no’s,’ which make an affirmative? or did silence give consent?” (449) – she implies that he is the sort of man who would force himself on a virtuous woman. This in turn recalls the liberties that Slope has, in fact, taken, and suggests that they might have been more sinister than the realist novel will represent given its tendency to gloss over serious details of violence against women. Earlier in the text, Eleanor rebukes Slope for using her Christian name. When she asserts her uneasiness with Slope’s inappropriate assumption of intimacy by reminding him that her name is Mrs. Bold, Slope playfully instructs her to “be not so cold” and leads her on a walk to a spot “nearly enveloped by

shrubs" (355). At this private spot, Slope places his arm around Eleanor's waist, as an "outward demonstration of that affection of which he talked so much" (355). This act seems relatively innocent, until Trollope notes that "it may perhaps be presumed that same stamp of measures had been found to succeed with Olivia Proudie" (356). Given Slope's history of conflict and competition with Olivia's mother, the "stamp" here evokes a certain degree of aggression. In fact, in the context of Slope's warning to Mrs. Proudie – "remember this, madam, that you yourself may still have a fall" (486) – and Madeline's "fall" – which refers to both her social status and her codification of spousal violence – this "stamp" implies serious violence. As the narrator's description of the "greasy Slope" implies, Slope embodies physical brutality and the social power to make women fall, and to make fallen women.<sup>(7)</sup> Slope's clerical talents reflect and legitimate this power. The chaplain excels at frightening women with God's vengeance; he "is gifted with a certain kind of pulpit eloquence, not likely indeed to be persuasive with men, but powerful with the softer sex" and "[i]n his sermons he deals greatly in denunciations, excites the minds of his weaker hearers with a not unpleasant terror" (27).

<16>When Madeline hints at Slope's violence she embarrasses him not only by exposing his misconduct, but by evoking the shame of its consequences. When she reminds Slope that Eleanor has dealt him "a box on the ear with such right good will, that it sounded among the trees like a miniature thunder clap" (356), she leaves him "red as a carbuncle and mute as a fish; grinning just sufficiently to show his teeth; an object of pity" (447). For Slope the experience is so profound that it manifests on his body: "he felt on his cheek the sharp points of Eleanor's fingers" (447). Madeline is thus able to violate Slope as she herself has been violated socially, through the objectifying scrutiny of the community, and physically, by her husband. She inverts typical gendered violence and renders the abusive chaplain vulnerable both socially and physically. In this way, perhaps, Madeline exacts her revenge for the abuse she has suffered from her husband and from her patriarchal Christian community.

<17>By exposing Slope Madeline also sets off a chain of events that accomplish the aims of Harding, Grantly, Arabin and even Mrs. Proudie, and illustrates to the reader her influence in the community. As a result of Slope's exposure, Mrs. Proudie has an excuse to have the Chaplain dismissed and the clergymen therefore no longer have to worry about Slope's evangelical influence. Arabin is granted the Deanship of Barchester Cathedral, and Quiverful receives some much needed financial relief with the wardenship of Hiram's. Harding, the now-defeated candidate for Hiram's, is able to maintain his financial position due to the fact that Madeline encourages the engagement between Eleanor and the now wealthy and powerful Arabin. Although she

is largely motivated by a desire to prevent Slope from gaining more power in the community through a potential marriage to Harding's daughter, Madeline's match-making also rewards Arabin, the only male character in the novel who does not attempt to objectify or otherwise manage her. Arabin's gaze "is one of wonder, and not of admiration"; he does not merely look at the injured woman and arrive at his own biased conclusions, but rather betrays curiosity and confusion (367). Unlike Slope, the Bishop, Mrs. Proudie, and Lady DeCourcy, Arabin resists labeling Madeline, or even claiming to understand her. Madeline thus facilitates his romantic success.

<18>Inasmuch as it disrupts Slope's plans and positions a woman's body as central to the organization of the Church, however, Madeline's part in resolving the political and romantic problems of the text could be said to merely affirm one form of patriarchal power over another. Although Madeline does ruin Slope, she does so to restore an even more traditional, if less violent, form of patriarchal authority exemplified by Harding's non-evangelical Anglicanism. In fact, the novel frequently points out the limits of female power, particularly in terms of its disruption of male authority. Descriptions of Mrs. Proudie in particular exemplify this anxiety about women taking on men's roles:

I cannot think that with all her virtues she adds much to her husband's happiness. The truth is that in matters domestic she rules supreme over her titular lord, and rules with a rod of iron. Nor is this all. Things domestic Dr. Proudie might have abandoned to her, if not voluntarily, yet willingly. But Mrs. Proudie is not satisfied with such home dominion, and stretches her power over all his movements and will not even abstain from things spiritual. In fact, the bishop is henpecked. (19)

Mrs. Proudie is problematic not just because she is a powerful woman, but because she enacts a distinctly *masculine* brand of authority. In contrast to Eleanor, who "knows what should be the limits of a woman's rule"(19), Mrs. Proudie rules with the "iron rod" and transgresses beyond the boundaries of proper female domestic authority. The image of the rod signifies masculine, phallic brutality, a symbol as a marker of domestic violence and control. Mrs. Proudie's symbolic wielding of the rod extends female power too far, and she is accordingly the target of much criticism and ridicule in the novel.

<19>Trollope thus constructs Mrs. Proudie's aspirations to power and authority as less effective and less acceptable than Madeline's, which depend on feminine wiles and the attractiveness of her body. The novel stages a competition between the women's distinct management styles which finally humiliates the Bishop's wife just as the homosocial male competition finally humiliates Slope. Both women exert power beyond

the realm of the domestic, but Trollope appears to favour Madeline, who influences the organization of that male homosocial world through an strangely alluring yet injured body, and thus without asserting too much active or masculinized power, over Mrs. Proudie, who has “almost more than feminine vigour” (231). Mrs. Proudie envies Madeline’s influence; she refers to Madeline as a “painted Jezebel” and resents her ability to command crowds (95). However, at Mrs. Proudie’s reception, Madeline symbolically defeats her rival. This all begins when Bertie Stanhope decides to move Madeline’s sofa because it was “so placed that those who were behind it found great difficulty in getting out” (84). The placement of the sofa corresponds with the interest the guests take in Madeline; she is, like the sofa, capable of trapping those who come near her. In fact, the sofa in this scene functions as a symbolic extension of Madeline’s body. When Bertie moves the sofa, it unexpectedly moves into the centre of the room and Mrs. Proudie’s dress catches in its wheel:

...unfortunately the castor of the sofa caught itself on her lace train, and carried away there is no saying how much of her garniture. Gathers were heard to go, stitches to crack, plaits to fall open, flounces were seen to fall, and breadths to expose themselves; – a long ruin of rent lace disfigured the carpet, and still clung to the vile wheel on which the sofa moved. (84)

Here Mrs. Proudie momentarily resembles the object of her jealousy. Her clothing literally tears open and falls, putting her body on display. Yet Mrs. Proudie’s body is not actually exposed; the torn fabric merely hints at the possibility of exposure and thus draws attention to the flesh that the clothing hides. In this state of half-undress, Mrs. Proudie temporarily – if unwittingly – possesses the power Madeline wields with her body. She commands attention, and soon there is a man at her feet as Bertie “rushed over to the sofa, and threw himself on one knee before the offended lady” (85).

<20>Mrs. Proudie cannot embrace this more stereotypically feminine – yet more scandalous – mode of power that Madeline exhibits, both “injured” and half-exposed. Although both women work towards the same end of divesting Slope of power, Madeline succeeds because she takes advantage of the interest in her corporeality, capitalizing on the heightened feminine “weakness” of the disabled and the allure of the partially obscured, rather than openly adopting masculine assertiveness. Mrs. Proudie is horrified by interest in her body and screams at Bertie to unhand her dress. Madeline, the clear victor, laughs as though to mock Mrs. Proudie’s inadequacy (86).

The novel thus suggests that social and political power is more readily available to women whose behaviour corresponds with dominant gender ideology. Although the power Madeline accrues derives from her non-normative conduct as a woman who

refuses to act as if shamed by her misfortunes, it is nevertheless dependent on her ability to appear submissive to hegemonic codes. Madeline's powers are ultimately only possible because of what D.A. Miller refers to as "a willing assumption of the male power fantasies that have been literally pounded into her" (142).

<21>Moreover, perhaps because she is so effective, Madeline must leave Barchester at the end of the novel, while Mrs. Proudie can stay. In her absence, Barchester can return to a more traditional mode of problem solving without the disorder implied by the disabled body. Yet it is important to remember that Madeline leaves Barchester only after rupturing its systems of power and re-figuring its interpersonal relationships permanently; although Madeline does affirm a patriarchal model, even when she is gone she is always present in the altered social order, just as her injuries are always detectable in a social universe where they must remain invisible. Trollope thus ensures that the woman who is inevitably relegated to the margins of the community and, finally, the text, can remain at the very least to haunt the lives that continue beyond the novel's conclusion. Moreover, her absence as the text concludes, unsatisfying though it may be, resonates with the conspicuous confusion surrounding her injuries insofar as both signal the fact that we cannot understand what we are not permitted to view. In Slope's mind she has gone to hell; "he banished her entirely out of heaven" (448). This "banishment" is Slope's last desperate effort to consolidate his authority, in his own mind, against the unmanageable signora, and it seems to support the notion that Trollope has constructed Madeline to signify defilement and its expulsion. We know that Madeline is a Lucifer figure, after all. We also know, however, that Slope is not a God figure any more, because his Lucifer has successfully robbed him of his religious authority – in this community, at least. Given Trollope's tendency to embarrass those characters who attempt to define the self by managing the indecipherable, Madeline's disappearance constitutes the penultimate reminder not of her deviance, but of the impossibility of fully understanding let alone formulating identity against that which remains culturally and socially difficult to access.

#### Endnotes

(1) See also, for example, Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Collins's *The Woman in White*, and Reade's *A Woman Hater*, all of which refer to domestic violence without ever narrating abuse directly. (▲)

(2) Lawson and Shakinovsky, 50; LaCom 192; Nardin 391. (▲)

(3) See Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* and Langland's *Nobody's Angels* for

complementary discussions of how middle-class female virtue mirrored middle-class male virtue insofar as it was caught up in an economy of management and economic authority (Armstrong 75; Langland 49-52).<sup>(^)</sup>

(4) A highly contested site, the middle-class domestic space featured prominently in literary and cultural representations as the epitome of the nation – particularly its moral strengths and weaknesses. Victorian writers like Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, and Coventry Patmore energetically promoted the illusion of the bourgeois home as a haven from the ethically compromised domains of economics and politics. Sarah Stickney Ellis further idealized the home as the model for and conscience of the public sphere. Her 1839 *The Women of England* argues that middle-class domestic economy – that is, the well-regulated home in terms of practical affairs, morality, and affective bonds – provides the foundation for social harmony and national prosperity (38).<sup>(^)</sup>

(5) Among the growing field of Victorian Disability Studies, several critics have pointed out that nineteenth-century novels imagine opportunities for women to transform their physical abnormalities into agents of resistance. See, for example, Stoddard Holmes's Fictions of Affliction and Helena Michie's "Who is this in Pain?: Scarring, Disfigurement, and Female Identity in *Bleak House and Our Mutual Friend* ."<sup>(^)</sup>

(6) As Lawson and Shakinovsky suggest, men in particular are both drawn to and disgusted by that which is hidden underneath Madeline's clothes; her body signals the conspicuous covering up of not only violence but also the sexual taboos she embodies as a desirable woman of ill-repute (49-50).<sup>(^)</sup>

(7) Edward Kelly points out that Trollope frequently gives his characters names that reflect their nature. Mr. Quiverful, for example, has too many children, and his name refers to "an overflowing nursery" (28).<sup>(^)</sup>

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