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"Lily, Glencora, Ayala, and Isabel: Female Desire and Women's Rights in Anthony Trollope's Novels"

> "I do love Burgo Fitzerald! I do, I do, I do! How can I help loving him?"
> ---Glencora Palliser, *Can You Forgive Her?*

> "When he kissed me I kissed him again, and I longed for his kisses. I seemed to live only that he might caress me."
> ---Lily Dale, *The Small House at Allington*

> "I remember when you called me Ayala first. It went through and through me like an electric shock."
> — Ayala Dormer, *Ayala's Angel*

> "You are as sweet to me as I can be to you . . . Love you! Oh, my darling . . . From the sole of your foot to the crown of your head I love you as I think a man would wish to be loved by the girl he loves."
> —Isabel Boncassen, *The Duke's Children*

Whatever else you take away from my remarks tonight, I want you to understand that Trollope loved women and created complex female characters throughout his career. Trollope also lived in a time when there were continuous and urgent calls for change in women's roles, and he was highly aware of this restlessness. As the quotations I've just read illustrate, Trollope understood women's desire, and he understood the frustration of that desire in a society that often restricted women but was also increasingly promising change. I'm going to talk to you about four of those women in the next 20 minutes or so.

First I want to remind everyone here that between 1864 and 1881, the span in which Trollope wrote the novels in which these women appear, he formed the most special friendship of his life, with the American feminist lecturer, actress, and journalist Kate Field. Kate is most likely the beautiful, vibrant original of the quicksilver Isabel Boncassen in *The Duke's Children*—and quite possibly, of the wonderfully artistic and intelligent Ayala Dormer as well. Trollope met Kate at his brother Tom's in Florence in 1860 and visited her on his trip to America in 1861-62. They had a lifelong, intimate friendship and correspondence that lasted until Trollope's death in 1882. In *An Autobiography*, Trollope famously states: "There is an American woman, of whom not to speak in a work purporting to be a memoir of my own life would be to omit all allusion to one of the chief pleasures which has graced my later years. In the last fifteen years she has been, out of my own family, my most chosen friend. She is a ray of light to me, from which I can always raise a spark by thinking of her."

In *Ayala's Angel*, as in other novels of Trollope's final decade such as *The Way We Live Now* and *The Duke's Children*, Trollope is passionately interested in how thoroughly the values of the

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marketplace had penetrated every aspect of English culture. Trollope represents the marriage market as a displaying of wares. This of course includes a woman's body as well as her material property. She might be trading upon her looks for money or status, or she might be a wealthy beauty looking for rank.

Trollope's appraisal of commercial values is inevitably concerned with women's rights. The 1881 novel *Ayala's Angel* was written in the era of most intense agitation for passage of the 1882 Married Women's Property Act. The Reform Bill of 1867 had promised a greater expansion of male voters than it delivered, and the struggle for more comprehensive male suffrage continued in the 1870s. The resistance to women possessing the right to vote also continued.

Like any Victorian man about town, Trollope was fully aware of the raging debates on the proper roles for women. That the very political Trollope was engaged by these debates is a certainty. He was, after all, writing and revising the last four of his parliamentary novels during the 1870's, and he had run unsuccessfully for Parliament as a Liberal candidate for Beverley in 1868. Trollope responds to the debates on women's rights by telling the story of two fiercely independent sisters, Ayala and Lucy Dormer, who are treated like property. Throughout this novel, Trollope is interested in legitimizing individual female desire as a human right. Trollope argues that women are justified when they want control over their lives—and their bodies—and that the voicing of their desire is a necessary form of resistance.

Ayala Dormer, the novel's vibrant heroine, is shuttled from one uncle's house to another's in the aftermath of her improvident artist father's death. Her sister Lucy is separated not only from Ayala during the period of mourning for their father, but also from her acknowledged lover, the illegitimate sculptor Isadore Hamel, who is persona non grata as a matter of course with the Dormer relatives. No one is compassionate enough to take in both Dormer sisters so that they can grieve together, although everyone recognizes that the sisters are very close—and Trollope, who loved Jane Austen, uses the Bennet sisters Elizabeth and Jane as his model for the relation between Ayala and Lucy. (Recall that Trollope's favorite novel when he was 19 was *Pride and Prejudice*.) The uncles and aunts consider the Dormer girls' sororal bond insignificant, an indulgence that their dependent state does not justify. Their rich Uncle Tringle "made this proposition. He would take one girl and let Dosett take the other. To this Lady Tringle added her proviso, that she should have the choice. To her nerves affairs of taste were of such paramount importance!"

Trollope introduces Lady's Tringle's remark explicitly in relation to women as property, and to the possession of Ayala Dormer in particular. Lady Tringle sees her feminine "nerves" and her "taste" as markers of her exquisite upper-class temperament. For Trollope of course, Lady Tringle's concern with her own feelings rather than with those of the mourning Lucy and Ayala signals her true opacity of soul. The scintillating Ayala is a status symbol for her:

> *It was a matter of course that Ayala should be chosen. She sang as though Nature had intended her to be a singing-bird—requiring no education, no labour. She had been once for three months in Paris, and French had come naturally to her . . . Her hands, her feet, her figure were perfect. Though she was as yet but nineteen, London had already begun to talk about Ayala Dormer.*

Ayala's value is seen in her being "an attraction" to the upper-class London social world. Lady Tringle wants to acquire her, as she might buy a beautiful bird, a spirited horse—or a work of art. She is admired as a sculpture—or a doll—might be admired: "her hands, her feet, her figure were perfect." In her effortless beauty and talent, Ayala embodies the aristocratic ease that Lady Tringle hopes to put on display.

Did Trollope make up his nearly perfect heroine out of whole cloth? Probably not. Besides the dazzling American Kate Field, there were other young women who may have served as models for Ayala's character. Bice Trollope, daughter of Trollope's older brother Tom and his first wife Theodosia, may be an influence upon the character of Ayala, although as far as I am aware, no scholar has remarked upon this. Muriel Trollope, Trollope's granddaughter [his older son Henry's only daughter], wrote in "What They Told Me": "My mother [Rose Trollope, Anthony's wife] thought Bice was one of the most fascinating beings she ever came across. In fact, she never met anyone quite like her. Asked to sing, Bice would quietly sit down to the piano and give song after song, all by heart, to her own accompaniment. Singing was her second nature. Music was the ruling passion of her life. Sir Arthur Sullivan [of Gilbert & Sullivan fame] pronounced her 'a most consummate little artist with the smallest of voices.'" Twenty-four years after Bice's death, when Muriel visited the former Via Trollopino, the old gardener remembered Bice thus: "La dormiva la Signorina Bice-eh! come cantava!" (There slept the Signorina Bice-oh! how she sang!")

Ayala's romantic quandary centers upon the figure of Colonel Jonathan Stubbs in relation to her ideal "Angel of Light," her imaginary, ethereal lover. Ayala has trouble imagining herself married to such a red and ugly man as Jonathan Stubbs, despite his charm and intelligence, and she has even more trouble imagining herself as Mrs. Ayala—Stubbs. Colonel Stubbs himself is full of wit and fun, waltzes beautifully, reads a great deal (including poetry), is very kind—and is already a war hero at the age of 28.

When Ayala at last *chooses* Jonathan Stubbs as her lover and husband—when she welcomes the "burning love of his kisses upon her cheeks"—he becomes one with the 'Angel of Light': "The Angel of Light had come for her, and had taken her to himself," Trollope tells us. Ayala is then able to admit to her lover that she always loved him—and that she was sexually attracted to him from the outset: "I remember when you called me Ayala first. It went through and through me like an electric shock." There is an intimacy and a recognition of Ayala's deepest desires—as well as his own—that causes Jonathan Stubbs to call Ayala by her Christian name upon first meeting her. Perhaps this is Trollope's way of expressing the sacredness of mutual desire between a man and woman in an equal love: a marvelous, earthy man named Stubbs is the real, ethereal Angel of Light.

Now that I've shown how a late novel quietly champions female independence, I'm going to talk about a much earlier work, *The Small House at Allington*, written nearly two decades before *Ayala's Angel,* in which Trollope is already radically questioning other traditional values his readers may hold dear. Let's turn to the rural beauty Lily Dale, one of Trollope's most admired and most infuriating women, and the heroine of *Small House*. Lily soon understands that her London fiancé Crosbie is concerned that he cannot maintain his fashionable lifestyle and a wife on his £800 per annum. (And he must also provide for that mistress in London, the

"entanglement" about which he tries to tell Lily.) Lily offers to set Crosbie free even as she tells him that "nothing on earth can I ever love as I have loved you." Lily's passionate declarations stir even the worldly, jaded Crosbie. Lily tells him:

> *'Then listen to me again, once more, my heart's own darling, my love, my husband, my lord! If I cannot be to you at once like Ruth, and never cease from coming after you, my thoughts to you shall be those of Ruth:--if aught but death part thee and me, may God do so to me and more also.' Then she fell upon his breast and wept.*
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> *He still hardly understood the depth of her character. He was not himself deep enough to comprehend it all. But yet he was awed by her great love . . . .*

Although Crosbie thinks that "better than any of his London pleasures was this pleasure of making love in the green fields to Lily Dale," he does of course betray her to marry the daughter of an Earl.

Lily, however, cannot change the object of her desire, although the lusty John Eames, victor over Lord deGuest's bull and thrasher of Crosbie, asks her twice to marry him. She explains to her mother that "I am as you are, mamma—widowed." Like Trollope's later heroine Ayala Dormer, Lily is passionate about her lover, declaring that

> *In my heart I am married to that other man. I gave myself to him, and loved him, and rejoiced in his love. When he kissed me I kissed him again, and I longed for his kisses. I seemed to live so that he could caress me.*

But unlike Ayala, Lily cannot find romantic and erotic satisfaction. After Crosbie leaves her, she chooses to be a single woman. As she puts it four years later in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, she will forever be "Lily Dale, O.M. (Old Maid)."

I'll end with a look at Glencora McCluskie Palliser, perhaps Trollope's greatest female creation—and also with her future daughter-in-law Isabel Boncassen, the beautiful and vibrant wife of Glencora's son Silverbridge. At the beginning of the Palliser series, Glencora has been compelled to give up her handsome scapegrace lover Burgo Fitzgerald in order to make a safe marriage with Plantagenet Palliser. In the remarkable chapter in the 1864 novel *Can You Forgive Her?* entitled "The Pallisers at Breakfast," Glencora declares her continuing passion for Burgo while admitting her misery in her marriage: "I do love Burgo Fitzgerald! I do! I do! I do! How can I help loving him? Have I not loved him from the first, before I had seen you? Did you not know that it was so?" . . . Glencora has not been able to become pregnant with Palliser's child, and she admits that she has thought of drowning herself instead of running away with Burgo "so that you might marry again, and have a child . . . I'd die—I'd die willingly. How I wish I could die! Plantagenet, I would kill myself if I dared." Trollope's scene of reconciliation is, to my mind, one of the most powerful in his fiction:

> *"Softly, slowly, very gradually, as though he were afraid of what he was doing, he put his arm around her waist. 'You are wrong in one thing, he said. 'I do love you.'*

She shook her head, touching his breast with her hair as she did so.

'. . . I do love you. If you cannot love me, it is a great misfortune to us both. But we need not therefore be disgraced. As for that other thing of which you spoke,—of our having, as yet, no child—and in saying this he pressed her somewhat closer with his arm—'you allow yourself to think too much of it;—much more of it than I do. . . . I would rather have you for my wife, childless—if you will try to love me—than any other woman, though another might give me an heir. Will you try to love me?'

In the immediate aftermath of this conversation, Palliser gives up his long-coveted appointment as Chancellor of the Exchequer, while Glencora agrees to go abroad with him and her best friend Alice Vavasor. Trollope shows that the acknowledgement of both husband's and wife's desires and the mutual sacrifice they make for each other is rewarded when they conceive their first child, Lord Silverbridge.

The young woman who will eventually be Silverbridge's wife, Isabel Boncassen of *The Duke's Children*, is also one of Trollope's great creations. She is intelligent, witty—and exasperated with the immaturity and witlessness of most of the young men she meets in London. One of the most humorous scenes in the novel depicts the languid Adolphus (Dolly) Longstaffe proposing to Isabel at her "river-party": Dolly speaks first:

'Would you mind coming up to the temple?' he said.

'What temple?'

'O such a beautiful place. The Temple of the Winds, I think they call it, or Venus—or—or Mrs. Arthur de Bever.'

'Was she a goddess?'

'It is something built to her memory. . . . Lovely spot; isn't it?'

'Yes indeed.'

'That's Maidenhead Bridge;—that's—somebody's place;—and now I've got something to say to you.'

'You're not going to murder me now you've got me up here alone!' said Miss Boncassen laughing.

'Murder you!' said Dolly, throwing himself into an attitude that was intended to express devoted affection. 'Oh no!'

'I am glad of that.'

'Miss Boncassen.'

'Mr. Longstaff! If you sigh like that you'll burst yourself.'

'I'll—what?'

'Burst yourself!' and she nodded her head at him.

Then he clapped his hands together, and turned his head away from her towards the little temple. 'I wonder whether she knows what love is,' he said, as though he were addressing himself to Mrs. Arthur de Bever.

'No, she don't,' said Miss Boncassen.

'But I do,' he shouted, turning back towards her. 'I do. If any man were ever absolutely, actually, really in love, I am the man.'

'Are you indeed, Mr. Longstaff? Isn't it pleasant?'

'Pleasant—pleasant? Oh, it could be so pleasant.'

'But who is the lady? Perhaps you don't mean to tell me that.'

'You mean to say you don't know?'

'Haven't the least idea in life.'

'Let me tell you then that it could be one person. It never was but one person. It never could have been but one person. It is you.' Then he put his hand well on his heart.

'Me!' said Miss Boncassen, choosing to be ungrammatical in order that he might be more absurd.

This wonderful comic scene ends in Dolly trying to explain his position in English society to Isabel, who replies, serious at last:

> *'Mr. Longstaff, I rather fancy that wherever I may be I can make a position for myself. At any rate I shall not marry with the view of getting one. If my husband were an English Duke I should think myself nothing, unless I was something as Isabel Boncassen.'*

When Isabel marries Lord Silverbridge, she has made it clear that she desires him, stating that "from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head I love you as I think a man would wish to be loved by the girl he loves." Isabel marries Silverbridge after making her vision of their marriage on "terms of equality" as clear as her longing for her future husband. In earlier heroines such as Lily Dale and Lucy Robarts in *Framley Parsonage*, Trollope gives us desiring heroines. The Shakespearean, Rosalindean Lucy, you recall, jokes about her desire for Lord Lufton, wondering whether she loves him for his title or his legs. Trollope's fullest evocation of this ideal, however, is in the heroine he created in the late 1870s during the fierce struggle for

women's rights, just as the great 1882 Married Women's Property Act was about to become law. In *The Duke's Children*, Trollope portrays Isabel Boncassen as a woman who possesses not only the right to desire, but also the right to choose a marriage which promises both erotic fulfillment and equality.

Thank you.