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Madeline Neroni and the Moral Design of Barchester Towers

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Introduction

Anthony Trollope's Barchester Towers, like all his novels, is conspicuous for being a slow unfolding of the questions, "What are the right moral attitudes?" and "Who holds them?" Most critics pay scant attention to the secular characters, treating them as a diversion irrelevant to the moral structure portrayed in the battle of High and Low churchmen. As a character uniquely situated in the action, however, Madeline Neroni plays an important role which deserves attention, involving both narration and morality. Additionally, Trollope's strategic development of Neroni's character from a two-dimensional stereotype to a vital, challenging point of view demands examination.

Madeline Neroni, temptress of Barchester Towers, is a grand device of Trollope's. Signora Neroni sometimes serves as a narrative voice, complicating the already ambiguous moral judgments of the dramatized narrator. In addition, her very existence complicates the novel's moral fiber because of the different attitudes of the narrator and author toward her. Her presence in Barchester Towers guarantees a broader examination of moral judgment than would be possible if only the traditional figures of British society were depicted.

The first half of this paper will trace Neroni's development from the unlikely caricature of a siren to the rounded, believable narrator's accomplice whose position establishes her own credibility. Neroni serves to reinforce and augment the implications of the narrative whenever she holds court with her

suitors. As "the Circe of Barchester" (Kn 37 1), she leads her lovers into revealing those traits that the narrator has already warned us to expect, thereby providing the narrator with further text to comment upon. Trollope needs to reveal certain aspects of his men, not in their inward deliberation, but in startled reactions to a shot gone home. The narrator discloses their areas of potential psychological conflict; Neroni starts the conflict into motion.

My second half will examine Neroni's position as an accomplice to that side of the author that subverts the narrator's more conventional views. Neroni's subversive role is built on the foundations of the narrator's early dependence on her as a clear-seeing, analytical character. Her original position of moral ambiguity sets her up as the logical advocate for the views about which the author himself feels ambivalent. Even as Trollope cajoles the reader into belief in the reliability of Neroni's moral judgments, he is jolting us periodically with her unorthodox moral opinions. In this section, we build on a hypothetical delineation of Neroni's self-concept to show how her unorthodox perspective is both valid and necessary.

Part I: Neroni as an Accomplice of the Narrator

The first description of Neroni belies her later position of responsibility as a commentator. The summary of her life is sensationalized so much that it sounds like an extract from a French novel. The entire segment seems bound to make the reader view Neroni as a paper-thin stereotype; most prominent are such phrases as "she had become famous..." and "It had been told of

her..." "Stories were not slow to follow her..." (IX, 79). It seems unlikely that such a character would be used to express the author's views. But according to apRoberts,

There is something in Trollope's method very like Cervantes': does not the Don start out as an absurd caricature, and proceed to take on light and shade? and as he becomes real is he not more and more surrounded with the author's tenderness, and a kind of blessing? In a slighter way, the Signora Vesey-Neroni in Barchester Towers follows this pattern. (1)

Though Neroni first appears as a temptress, her character deepens as soon as she is free of the narrator's interpretation. Her first extended appearance is at Mrs. Proudie's reception. Immediately her [?]sensibility is apparent. Her mischievousness finds vent in making game of all the most hide-bound British conventions. She makes fun of the Victorian tendency to sentimentalize children ("Oh, my lord,...you must see that infant--the last bud of a wondrous tree" [XI, 106]); she pokes fun at moral propriety ("Is she [Mrs. Proudie] always like this?' said the signora" [XI, 108]); she mimics the language of Low Church evangelicism ("I would not allow her to learn lessons such as those in a land ridden over by priests and polluted by the idolatry of Rome" [XI, 102]). Neroni's perceptivity surprises us, and the ability to surprise is, according to Forster, the test of a round character(2). Before the reception ends, Neroni has shown wit, intelligence, and individuality. For the reader as well as Barchester, La Signora has arrived.

As the novel goes on, Neroni increasingly assumes the function of an assessor of the action. Her circumstances are peculiarly suited to judgment in that she stands as a passive and

disinterested observer--so much so that her inertia affects her importance to the story-line. Neroni's position in the plot itself is relatively small. Slope's downfall and Arabin's proposal, the events which most involve her, would still make sense if every sentence mentioning Neroni were expunged from the text. Like her sister, she does engineer a proposal (between Mr. Arabin and Mrs. Bold), but it is an event which would probably happen without her help. In addition, significant moral development in her character is absent. She does not gain in self-knowledge, as Mr. Arabin does, or become more morally conscious, as Mr. Harding does in The Warden.

If Neroni does not improve or change throughout the novel, neither does she gain or attempt to gain anything. Unlike her sister, Neroni engineers 'her' proposal (between Mr. Arabin and Mrs. Bold) from disinterested motives. She wants nothing for herself: she has no ambition to be satisfied, like Grantly or Slope, nor does she desire a marital attachment, as Eleanor does.

Neroni's place as a passive onlooker with formidable intelligence puts her in a natural position for judging the more central characters. No character is capable of objective observation who must tend his own fences, because a person's desires cloud his reason. Few of the other characters have Neroni's insight, because their concern about others' actions prevents them from analyzing others' characters. But for Madeline, her only desire--to be amused--promotes her clear-sightedness. To show properly a character trait like Slope's despicable lack of honesty, Trollope has no choice but to use a character in Neroni's position. He cannot, for example,

use Dr. Grantly, because that clergyman's vision is as clouded by ambition as Slope's. "Although we may think him to be on the right side of the battles of Barchester, we are led to discover that all 'sides,' all partisanship, merely cover up the same basic human vanities: pride, ambition, the desire for influence and power" (3). Grantly cannot even see why Slope is

despicable: he hates the man for what is similar to himself.

Neroni is the only viable character for espousing Trollope's beliefs on this point.

Certain elements of Neroni's past also suit her to observing Barchester society without bias. The most basic element is the alienation from England, which results from her long residence in Italy. English society is as foreign to her nature as her behavior is to its conventions. In addition, her marital status is open to suspicion: she holds none of the conventional positions in relation to men, being neither wife, widow, or virgin. As she will not fit into any acceptable category, Neroni is purposely excluded by Barchester society. This outcast status renders her free of the slavery to convention that characterizes many of the Barchester people. Although the behavior resulting from that freedom draws such comments from Mrs. Proudie on her origins as 'that nasty Italian woman' or just, 'that woman,' that status makes Neroni a more suitable commentator for us, as modern readers also foreign to that society.

On several levels, Trollope uses Neroni to supplement the narrator's assessments. As one of the characters, Neroni serves as a bringer of self-knowledge to others. Through her, the

narrator can almost speak to the characters in question, and test their reactions to his godlike judgment of them. At other times, Neroni serves as the complement of the narrator. The narrator describes a character's potential areas of conflict, Neroni sets them in motion, and the subsequent narrative verbalizes Neroni's analysis of what she has done. This sets up a situation in which reader, narrator, and one character have a clear understanding of what another character is foggily trying to grasp. Of course, it also guarantees that tone is consistent and that the narrator and Neroni are agreed about who or what to censure.

Like the narrator, who shows us the gap between outer appearance and inner character, Neroni reveals the psychology of other characters. The narrator, however, is a literary device: he can tell us the characters' inner workings because he is an artificial creation. ^{As omniscient} "People in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as ^{farther} well as their outer life can be exposed. And this is why they often seem more definite than ...our own friends; we have been told all about them that can be told" (4). Neroni, on the other hand, is a device within the framework of Barchester, and so is a completely realistic device. She is down there on Trollope's earth, while the narrator is up in heaven, as it were. Omniscience is out of the question: while the narrator who analyzes motives has "got" to be correct, Neroni has only her intuition. Her part is not to tell us what a character is really like; instead, she guesses at possibilities and tests them by various subterfuges. An obvious lie, a hesitancy in speaking, the character's next action are all part of the answer to Neroni's

guesses. The old distinction of "showing" and "telling" seems to hold here: the narrator tells us what the characters are like, but Neroni's interactions show us.

At the same time, Neroni's power is so strong that her vision resembles an author's. Her manipulation is direct enough, though within the confines of the plot, so that she can bring the characters to do as she likes. The comparison that the narrator uses, of a boy with a bug struggling on a pin, excellently illustrates the authorial way that Madeline treats Mr. Slope. She appears the more skillful as she does not attempt manipulations which will fail. As Trollope says, "she felt that she never could induce Mr. Arabin to make protestations to her that were not true, or to listen to nonsense that was mere nonsense " (XXXVIII, 390). The concept of Neroni's authorial power becomes more valuable once we look at how Neroni's technique differs from the narrator's.

author! The narrator sets up a sort of tableau of psychological conflicts. For example, when he makes Slope a more palatable character, he explains that the man does not wish to be immoral.

It must therefore be conceived that he did not admit to himself that he warmly admitted the beauty of a married woman without heartfelt stings of conscience, and to pacify that conscience he had to teach himself that the nature of his admiration was innocent. (XV, 136)

The statement gives "the kind of information never obtained about real people, even about our most intimate friends. Yet it is information that we must accept without question if we are to grasp the story that is to follow" (5). The narrator shows that because Slope will not easily give up the morals

of religious teachings or his idea of himself as a virtuous man, he usually conforms to his own notion of virtue, but when he cannot, will use every means possible to justify his ways to himself.

The narrator can sketch out a psychological situation, but when a character needs a revelation in self-knowledge, the stimulus must come from within the plot. Neroni, while not as reliable as an omniscient narrator, has the power of speaking directly to the character and provoking a new line of action. Simultaneously, she assesses the character's psychology as the narrator does. To perform both functions, however, demands a much more searching and incisive style than the narrator's position does.

Neroni's opening move is always to provoke a startled reaction. Once having caught a suitor off-balance through the use of her overtly sexual presence, she "strips away the hypocritical pretenses of his society" (6), by pointing out the gap between his beliefs and his actions with a skillful use of convention. Only a person free of the conventions of British manners and yet fully apprised of them could use them as Neroni does: she subverts them to the use of her own ends. These ends are the opposite of the original function of manners. Manners were supposed to keep life flowing smoothly: euphemisms and small talk were both devices to make conversation pleasant without revealing anything uncomfortable or embarrassing. Neroni rips right through the codes of etiquette, only using it as a clamp to hold down the object of her analysis. Once she has a firm grip on her victim, her probe is almost always a hard,

insightful truth quite at variance with the proper behavior.

Neroni forces her suitors through use of the conventions into a consciousness of the ways their conduct does not fit their beliefs. Having made their previous positions untenable, she leaves it to them whether to change their beliefs to fit with their conduct, or their conduct to fit with their beliefs.

Neroni's use of convention is most evident in "A Love Scene" with Mr. Slope. She banters with Slope, using the convention that men are deceivers. "Why - what gulls do you men make of us," she replied. "How you fool us to the top of your bent; and of all men, you clergymen are the most fluent of your honeyed caressing words" (XXVII, 264). When Slope refuses the charge of deceiver and continues to talk nonsense, she asks a most unorthodox question: "Now look me in the face, Mr. Slope. Am I to understand that you say you love me?" (XXVII, 264)

We can view Neroni's intention in saying this in two different ways. Most obvious, especially in light of Slope's reaction is the idea that Neroni led him on with the intention of trapping him. According to the narrator:

Mr. Slope never had said so. If he had come there with any formed plan at all, the intention was to make love to the lady without uttering any such declaration. It was, however, quite impossible that he should now deny his love. (XXVII, 265)

Another view, however, is to think that she is giving him a chance to get out of the net, or that she is actually testing him to see how he will react. Compare Slope's impassioned reaction to Arabin's, when she says to Arabin in a similar act of provocation, "You really have the affrontery to tell me that Mrs.

Bold is the most beautiful woman you know"(XXXVIII, 388). Arabin is willing to concede the greater beauty and intelligence to the signora, but will not pay extravagant compliments or allow his infatuation to make a fool of him. Neroni is displeased by Slope's exaggerated compliments. She recognizes their insincerity, and only leads him on to see how far he will go. Her way of testing limits is to proceed as far as she can with direct questions. One can hardly fail to understand her motive in saying, "'Come, answer me this at your leisure, not without thinking now, but leisurely and with consideration - are you not going to be married to Mrs. Bold?'" (XXVII, 265). When he denies it, in an outright lie that leads to a ridiculous situation, this man displays himself as a despicable creature, incapable of holding himself aloof the judgment of others. For that is what motivates him to lie - not his morality, but his public image. Slope cannot bear to be made a fool of. His subsequent hatred of her stems equally from her making him seem a fool and her demonstration of the weakness of his faith.

With Mr. Arabin Neroni also uses a combination of conventional speeches and unusually insightful questions, but within a very different context. Sometimes she conceals truth under a conventional tone of conversation, stating a hypothesis of hers about him as if it were a given truth. When she compares the actively ambitious Slope with the thoughtful Arabin, she ends with the words, "'then you will begin to wish that you had done the same'" (XXXVIII, 385). She speaks this lightly, jestingly, to test the truth of the statement. At other times, his answers are less important than his manner of answering, which reveals his

moral code. This code is clarified for us when Neroni assumes a pose of injury at Arabin's admiration of Mrs. Bold. She is almost surprised to receive, not the normal inflated compliment, but an open admission of her attractiveness. Even as he does so, however, it is perfectly clear that he "had no more thought of kissing Madeline Neroni than of kissing the Countess De Courcy" (XLI, 416). In spite of the fact that her tone is almost consistently bantering throughout, Arabin takes all her words seriously. As the narrator himself says, in describing Neroni's thoughts,

Not a word that she had spoken to him had been intended by her to be received as true, and yet he had answered her in the very spirit of truth. He had done so, and she had been aware that he had so done ." (XXXVIII, 390)

With regard to Mr. Arabin, Neroni actually furthers the plot. When Neroni speaks with Mr. Arabin at Ullathorne, the Grantlyite manoeuvring has come to a standstill. The Dean is dying, but Dr. Grantly's new ally is thinking more of Eleanor Bold than of the possible advancement of his career. The novel cannot continue its course without an ambitious and sympathetic churchman on the 'right' (i.e., conservative) side of the Barchester cathedral controversy. Neither Grantly nor Harding can ~~be~~ or ought to be changed from their moral polarities, and Arabin cannot learn to act without the aid of some outside force. For Arabin to lose his passivity, he must become aware of his own worldly ambition. According to Polhemus, "Trollope makes her [Neroni] his agent in overturning Arabin's stiffness....In a funny and brilliantly penetrating conversation with Arabin, she

[Neroni] teaches him to value the world and to understand his real feelings about Eleanor. She also expands his whole conception of life....He not only becomes happy, he becomes a better churchman by loving and winning Eleanor and accepting joy as a good in itself"(7).

The sum of Neroni's effect upon Arabin is this: until Neroni makes Arabin admit his ambition, he cannot oppose the Proudie/Slope faction in any but an academic, intellectual debate. Until she changes his feeling that love is a weakness that must be squelched, he cannot adequately court Eleanor. And until he admits both his ambition and his love, we as readers may still see him as a dry academician or an irritatingly apostolic minister.

Part II: Neroni as an Accomplice of the Author

In The World of Anthony Trollope, Polhemus suggests that

Trollope both loves and despises Madeline....
He explicitly condemns the signora's lack of principle and religion and her neglect of her child. But he loves her when she strips away the hypocritical pretenses of his society and demolishes its cheap platitudes. (8)

author a narrator?

This view seems to correspond with my own belief that Trollope may well view even Neroni's more subversive statements as valid on some level.

The Proof of this Position:

While Neroni continues to flaunt her attitudes toward men and marriage with her suitors, her insight into their behavior is so well aligned with the narrative voice that in spite of ourselves we begin to trust her. The idea of Neroni as one of our moral guides might even become plausible were it not for the

implications made by the narrator.

Neroni does not lack a moral sense as we mean the phrase when speaking of Slope: she never deceives herself and never grovels before money or position. But whenever Neroni serves as a litmus test for any moral idea, we are compelled to feel great ambivalence toward her conclusions. Trollope makes us question whether or not we can trust her, even though she does augment the narrator's view of her suitors.

The fact is that while the implied author, the guiding force of tone throughout the novel, reins in the narrator so that he looks free of bias, he gives an overall impression of Neroni as superficial, false, and wicked. The impression of the narrator's abstention from judgement is created by a careful, restrained tone. "Blood had flowed in quarrels about her charms, and she had heard of these encounters with pleasurable excitement" (IX, 79). "It had been told of her that on one occasion she had stood by in the disguise of a page and had seen her lover fall" (IX, 79). "A coronet, however, was a pretty ornament, and if it could solace a poor cripple to have such on her card, who would begrudge it to her?" (IX, 82).

The first sentence suggests that she is vain and heartless, but that the narrator is withholding judgment. The second implies that scandal has touched her, but that the narrator, for his part, will not believe without question such idle rumors. The third sentence makes it clear that the narrator thinks Neroni a vain hypocrite with little regard for truth, but that he, with a forbearing smile, has nothing but pity and acceptance for such small flaws and innocuous gestures as hers.

In such small ways, the impression is created that Neroni is vain, heartless, and superficial, with a taste for power and rank that makes her at best scandalous and ill-bred. And for quite some time, this stereotype lingers. Even much later, under the auspices of giving a plain, unvarnished account of the facts, the narrator undermines Neroni's reliability in the same way.

Occasionally also Madame Neroni would become bitter against mankind, more than usually antagonistic to the world's decencies, and would seem as though she was about to break from her moorings and allow herself to be carried forth by the tide of her feelings to utter ruin and shipwreck. She, however, like the rest of them, had no real feelings, could feel no true passion. In that was her security. Before she resolved on any contemplated escapade she would make a small calculation, and generally summed up that the Stanhope villa or even Barchester close was better than the world at large. (XIX, 171)

I think the author was untrue to his own feelings, not so much in the narrator's account of the facts, but in the cold tone of condemnation and contempt, quite at variance with the usual narrative style in the book. Such coldness as in "antagonistic to the world's decencies," such an implication of pettiness as in "a small calculation," and such superciliousness as we see in the curt sentence, "In that was her security," all contribute to treating Neroni with the contempt of a Mrs. Proudie. This narrowness is not compatible with Trollope's Fieldingesque narration, especially with its reference to Neroni's disregard for the world's decencies. True, Trollope's Neroni is far more complicated than Fielding's usual woman of easy virtue; nonetheless, by Fielding's standards, Neroni's sporting attitude toward bagging suitors renders her behavior relatively innocuous.

The most deceptive aspect of this commentary is how it induces us to believe that the narrator is not only tolerant of moral transgressions but can be generally trusted to give us a clear understanding of everyone's character.

At this juncture, one might ask whom the narrator is representing. At times, of course, the narrative represents the thoughts of a character, but when the narrator is addressing the reader, or sermonizing, whose voice is that? In large part, it is a Trollope persona, a broad-minded traditionalist whose views agree with the large conservative sector of the Victorian reading public.^{B⁺} At times, the author seems actually to have deferred (if not catered) to his public by having the narrator espouse views not quite his own.

Polhemus points out that the narrator's negative view of Neroni is not maintained throughout. "Her letters, Trollope says, 'were full of wit, mischief, love, latitudinarian philosophy, free religion, and sometimes, alas! loose ribaldry.' That 'alas!' has an ironical and plaintive quality, as if he envied her liberty to indulge in ribaldry. But her freedom must be in her letters and not her life" (9).

Other elements also illustrate Polhemus' statement. Certain statements of Neroni's so completely fly in the face of the conventional middle-class morality that one would expect the narrator to pounce on them. Instead, the narrator chooses these moments to abstain from any commentary. In these passages it seems as if the author is again taking a hand in influencing our decision of whom to trust.

The most notable instance of this situation is Neroni's statement about the binding laws of marriage.

The wretch, I think you were kind enough to call him so, whom I swore to love and obey is so base that he can only be thought of with repulsive disgust. In the council chamber of my heart I have divorced him. To me that is as good as though aged lords had gloated for months over the details of licentious life... I am free -- free as the winds. (XXVII, 268)

And the narrator's only comment:

For though there was no truth in her pretended regard for her clerical admirer, there was a mixture of real feeling in the scorn and satire with which she spoke of love and marriage generally. (XXVII, 268).

In making Neroni the spokesperson of this cavalier dismissal of matrimony's bonds, Trollope's motive would seem to be, at first glance, an intention of discrediting her completely as a moral guide. But in fact, the effect is much more subtle, and far more subversive. Since Neroni has become reliable in judgments of the suitors, we cannot discard her statements without giving consideration to discarding the narrator's as well. Such a development would be so disorienting in the context of a nineteenth-century novel that we would sooner examine the justice of even these subversive claims.

The narrator himself has made it plain that Signor Neroni had "cruelly ill-used" his wife and then abandoned her; there is no question as to the justice of her separation from him. The issue involved is her desire to "move with the world" and her wish to enjoy a normal social life instead of the semi-secluded one common to such "disgraced" women. Viewed sympathetically, Neroni's statement is not an endorsement of thinly disguised adultery, but a manifesto of the right of an abandoned wife to a

place in society. Neroni is denying the justice of the societal code that permits certain freedoms to men that it denies to women.

Neroni holds steadfastly to the idea that she is better off as an independent dependent of her father's household than as a partner in marriage, an institution which would force her to give up part of her identity. Her scorn of marital ties, it seems to me, possibly stems not only from what she has seen of marriage, but the fact that the institution of marriage incurred the subjugation of the woman's identity for the common good of the whole. Support for this view can be strengthened by looking at the evidence of the plot. In spite of the narrator's favorable attitudes towards marriage, the author's views are ambiguous, as far as we can see from the story-line. In no marriage in the novel do we see a woman who does not act as an extension of her husband, except for the unwomanly and ill-bred Mrs. Proudie. No one in their right mind could see the female bishop as a positive image of a strong woman. The viable alternative for strong women is Neroni's position: a dependent, but able to shift for herself. Neroni's life is a commentary on the quandary of gifted women. She lacks the selflessness that would allow her to delight in self-effacement like Dickens' Agnes. Nor does she have that clinging nature that functions best in a dependent relationship, like Thackeray's Amelia Sedley, or Trollope's own Mrs. Bold. But one trait she does not lack is self-knowledge. Her statement, "What I would not give to be loved in such a way by such a man, that is, if I were an object fit for any man to love" (XLV, 462), seems more significant than mention of mere

physical disability. To my mind, her words to Mrs. Bold are a qualification of her blanket statements about marriage.

As Polhemus phrases it, "Madeline Neroni plays the role of social outlaw. Trollope sees her as a kind of revolutionary" (10). The only way for Trollope to justify the creation of Neroni without discrediting himself is to put her justification in her own mouth, and to paint her position ambiguously. The lack of narrative condemnation leaves Trollope room to jump in either direction.

Trollope's ambivalence, his divided judgment on Neroni, is revealed in the narrator's variations in tone. The fact is that Neroni does not commit morally reprehensible acts. She does not torture the susceptible Mr. Thorne or make him uncomfortable, as she does Slope. She displays "singular disinterestedness" concerning Mr. Arabin's affections. Although she has espoused such unorthodox views as the futility of marriage, she actually helps two people toward a marriage which she knows will be beneficial and salutary. Neroni's behavior belies her reputation. Through Trollope's use of a narrator who implies that Neroni is thorough reprobate, we see more effectively than we would from a forbearing narrator how useless reputation is as a criterion for moral judgment.

Of course, Neroni's free religion and latitudinarian principles are clearly not inventions of the narrator. But calling Neroni unprincipled is another matter. Polhemus says of her family,

Lacking earnestness and moral ambition, they just want to get through life as best they can. They

are neither moral nor immoral but amoral, standing apart from the conventional middle-class morality and idealism of the age....Trollope stresses their good nature, but he calls them heartless, which means, as he uses it, that they cannot love or feel deeply. (11)

To evaluate the question of Neroni's moral sense, the best place to start is the term 'heartlessness,' a charge Neroni levels at herself as often as the narrator does.

When the word 'heartlessness' first appears, the narrator is referring to the entire Stanhope family, and the word means lack of concern for the well-being of others. Later, however, the narrator says of Neroni in particular that she "had no real feelings, could feel no true passion" (XIX, 171). In this context, the narrator seems to mean that she is incapable of being roused for any continuous period by an idea or an emotion. Later, Madeline herself says that she has no heart, and while the narrative concurs at this point, it mentions her "true feeling" in the same chapter.

One could hardly call Neroni a great humanitarian, but I find it tempting to hypothesize that Neroni's concern for others is proportional to each individual's moral value. Such an idea would explain both her general selfishness and her altruistic act for Mr. Arabin. Yet we must be careful to avoid sentimentalizing Neroni: her final deed could be interpreted merely as an amusement and an enjoyment of the exercise of power on the part of a completely egotistical person. Clearly, we cannot profit from an iteration of all mentions of her heart or lack of it. Nor can we test the more sympathetic hypothesis by looking at Neroni's doings with the many characters whom we do not respect. However, insight may be gained by examining the passages where Neroni

interacts with strongly ethical people: Arabin and Mrs. Bold.

In the crucial tete-a-tete between the Signora Neroni and Mrs. Bold, we see Neroni's first sustained conversation with a woman outside her own family. The scene is almost entirely dialogue, and where there is narration, it usually recounts Neroni's thoughts. Such a meeting could easily become a demonstration of Neroni's power in which she would reduce Eleanor to extreme embarrassment. Eleanor is not spiritually dishonest like Slope, but she is easily manipulated. "The narrator...extends this distinction [between the outer and the inner man] not only to dissemblers like Mr. Slope but even to characters like Eleanor Bold or Mr. Arabin who, though far less fallible, are only imperfectly aware of their own inner motives" (12). As Arabin found to his sorrow, Eleanor sometimes finds her temper leading her to say things she does not mean, and Eleanor's dealings with Slope demonstrate how her ethics sometimes lead her into acting more cordial than she feels. Though Dr. Grantly would dispute it, Eleanor is easily manipulated--by those who understand the process. From the time that Eleanor receives the note, Madeline Neroni controls the situation competely. Yet she does not use her power to amuse herself, as she has done so often in Barchester. The scene is dead serious. Even the narrator eschews such comic comparisons as a cockchafer on a pin. There is none of that teasing about matrimony, so prominent in Slope's last interview with the signora. There is no manipulation of the language, no tone of conventional speeches--which cannot even be said of Neroni's tete-a-tete with Arabin. Although she knows she

is dealing with a timid woman, a rival, and a person she has heretofore described as "that vapid, swarthy creature in the widow's cap, who looked as though her clothes had been stuck on her back with a pitchfork" (XV, 139), Neroni treats her guest with the utmost respect.

Everything I have so far pointed out has involved Neroni's behavior, but in her speech I find something even more telling. Neroni says, "And now, Mrs. Bold, I am going to tell you something which you may perhaps think indelicate, but yet I know that I am right in doing so" (XLV, 461). Her tone is unusual in its decision and directness, but what I call attention to is her use of the word "right," a word more common in a clergyman's mouth than in a siren's. It is clear from the context that Neroni does not mean correct in etiquette--she states the contrary. It is the ethical meaning that she refers to.

Neroni knows that in this case, making Eleanor squirm is the best thing for Eleanor. While she does not normally interact with women, she is willing to do so in this case, whether for Eleanor's sake or Arabin's, it does not matter. When she does entertain her rival, she is neither satirical nor mischievous. She merely does what is best for the other person.

This scene shows that Neroni is capable of caring for others: her willingness to bring Eleanor and Arabin together when she could have continued to enjoy Arabin's homage is proof of this. Some critics might argue that the scene only occurred through Trollope's inconsistency. Perhaps so, but the inconsistency was caused, not by the author's carelessness, but

by his ambivalence. According to Polhemus, Trollope "had that peculiar tendency of Victorian men...to regard moral virtue and critical intelligence in a woman as somehow incompatible" (13). Trollope's affection for Neroni is always struggling against his view of women, but her character is finally defined by this act. She may hold unprincipled views, but her actions are guided by an ethic based on respect.

Neroni does not lack heart (perhaps 'a moral sense' or 'sense of humanity' would be better phrases), but she only manifests it to those capable of recognizing it. The Stanhope family would devour the advantages of any altruism as easily as they do the monies of the Church; their opportunism does not offer very fruitful ground for acts of altruism. Only people as sensible of right behavior as Mrs. Bold or Mr. Arabin would appreciate the act of Madeline Neroni. In a word, she behaves to those around her in the way they best understand.

Once we decide that Madeline Neroni does indeed possess a moral sense in some form, we can consider how Trollope might choose to use this unprincipled but possibly ethical character to deepen his novel's moral attitudes.

The Uses of Her Position:

Polhemus defines Neroni's function in this fashion:

Trollope uses [Neroni] as an anti-heroine--the first of his highly intelligent women who contrast sharply with his pure, often passive heroines. His anti-heroines are not very nice or sweet, but they make perfect tools for destroying sacred cows with their iconoclastic wit. (14)

The idea that Trollope might use Neroni to endorse values

too radical for the reliable, conservative narrator will easily occur to a reader familiar with Thackeray's use of Becky Sharp. However, Neroni's position differs somewhat from Becky Sharp's in that she seldom holds an unarguable position. Her views are not the final word; rather, they serve as "the other side" of an argument. Some of Madeline's statements are outrageous, but she never talks nonsense. Her views are legitimate perspectives; if a character did not think of them, a cynical reader would. Her views balance out those of the traditional narrator; they make the novel as a whole more broad.

In addition, Neroni's perspective exercises the reader's ability to make moral judgments because^{au} they are subversive, yet valid. Trollope often leaves an issue undecided; without any final guiding statement from the narrator, we ourselves must decide the question after closing the book.

To illustrate these points, let us examine Neroni's other tirade on marriage.

You know as well as I do in what way husbands and wives generally live together; you know how far the warmth of conjugal affection can withstand the trial of a bad dinner, of a rainy day, or of the least privation which poverty brings with it; you know what freedom a man claims for himself, what slavery he would exact from his wife if he could! And you know also how wives generally obey. Marriage means tyranny on one side and deceit on the other. I say that a man is a fool to sacrifice his interests for such a bargain. A women, too generally, has no other way of living.
(XV, 141)

Polhemus views this speech as an expression of "the deepest urges of the mid-Victorian to rebel against the idealistic mythology of his age" (15). He states further, "Trollope could never put a statement like this in his own voice, but a

part of him obviously agrees with it.... The signora speaks for the sophisticated, analytic Victorian intelligence that more and more came to detest the complacency, maddening provincialism, and simplistic morality in the culture" (16).

Neroni's statement seems to me not altogether correct, but the fact that such marriages do exist is undeniable. My feeling is that Trollope intends us to consider the justice of Neroni's statement. We disagree indignantly, perhaps, but we might also search for the flaw in her reasoning. Though we probably dismiss her sentiment by pointing out the injustice of a generalization, we admit that the two marriages she has seen--her own and her father's--are very likely to be just as she describes.

Neroni's assertion does not serve only as the cynical view, either. When the narrator compares man and wife to a strong wall and a clinging vine, that view seems the antithesis of Neroni's. "Alone they (vines) but spread themselves on the ground and cower in the dingy shade. But when they have found their firm supporters, how wonderful is their beauty" (XLIX, 493). Set side by side, the two passages provide great contrast, not only in perspective but in tone. The exaggerated praise of a parasitic relationship has always seemed strange to readers. Generally, people question whether Trollope's unctuous praise of the vine is ironic, but very seldom ask whether the whole sentimental encomium is his point of view at all. The passage seems bound to please excessively sentimental Victorians, but many readers would probably prefer Neroni's matter-of-factness to the steady flow of syrup; certainly, modern readers would. The most likely explanation seems to me to be that Trollope was on one hand

trying to please his married readership, but on the other, offering a more realistic perspective, perhaps his own, through 'bad' Madeline Neroni.

At times, however, Neroni's words are less a subversion of the established order than an alternative to the narrator's opinion. Most prominent in this area are the passages where Neroni's sense of humor comes to the fore. The insight and humor in Neroni's thoughts stand out sharply against the humorlessness of the ambitious men of Barchester, and her point of view lightens the atmosphere of a book that might otherwise seem dreadfully grave. As Polhemus puts it, "Madeline and Bertie, a generation younger than Grantly, Harding, and the Proudies, have a new outlook on life. They seem called into being in some dialectical fashion to give the old Barchester society what it lacks--a critical spirit of mind, a love of pleasure, and a touch of frivolity" (17).

If we were ever inclined to take the church matters seriously, Neroni punctures the balloon with her irreverent attitude. Her tongue-in cheek gravity at the Proudie reception perfectly counterpoints the new bishop's pompous talk of omnium gatherums and hebdomadal boards, just as her father's Broad Church tendencies contrast with Proudies Low Church tendencies. "You might speak to her; you might let her hear from your consecrated lips that she is not a castaway because she is a Roman; that she may be a Nero and yet a Christian ... you will tell her this, won't you, my friend?" (XI, 102) The fulsome overstatement is a conscious parody of Evangelical clergy on Neroni's part; the

flattery becomes even more comic when the Bishop accepts it at face value. When she says to Slope, "I must ask you to let Mr. Thorne sit here, just for a moment or two. I am sure you will pardon me. We can take a liberty with you this week. Next week, you know, when you move into the dean's house, we shall all be afraid of you" (XLVI, 467), we see the ridiculousness of the respect due to an office. While not actually debasing the church, she shows the humor of the idea that Slope could actually stand for the ecclesiastical power.

Neroni's aversion to pretentious self-importance extends beyond religion to the claims of the British class system. Just as she brings Slope down by making fun of his office, she deflates Lady De Courcy's patronage by ignoring that woman's claims to deferential treatment. Neroni seems genuinely to believe that the presumptions of social rank matter not at all. In this respect, she resembles Becky Sharp, who says to herself outright, "'What airs that girl gives herself, because she is an Earl's grand-daughter...I am as well-bred as the Earl's grand-daughter, for all her fine pedigree; and yet every one passes me by here'" (Vanity Fair, II, 22). According to Polhemus,

A social hierarchy based on class and heredity was beginning to disintegrate because many people could no longer take it seriously. When Madeline chooses her name, Vesey Neroni, just because she likes the sound of it, and makes the claim that her child by the Italian is 'the last of the Neros,' she subverts polite society and turns the presumptions of gentility into a huge joke. (18)

At a certain point, Neroni's alternate view shades off into subversion once more. Yet her mischievousness, which often grants a lightness to otherwise ponderous matters, also makes her

statements appear less dangerous. Amid all the preparations for the Proudie reception, among the Grantly faction's wish to "show that they were willing to respect the office, much as they might dislike the man" (X, 89), Neroni's view that "'parsons, I suppose, are much the same as other men, if you strip them of their black coats'" (X, 90) seems not so much subversive as refreshing. Polhemus says that "an age which demands duty and moral earnestness must sooner or later discover in itself a hedonistic longing for pleasure and jokes" (19). Some of Neroni's mischievous, lighthearted statements seem as if they would be palatable even to the Victorian reader.

Neroni is naturally a better tool for demonstrating the hypocrisies of convention than a member of Barchester society, but the advantage of Neroni over her sister or brother is not readily apparent. It seems to me, however, that Neroni's uniqueness goes beyond anything her siblings have to offer. Although Polhemus groups the "radical and provocative" Stanhopes together (20), neither Charlotte nor Bertie could offer an alternate perspective as broad in scope as Madeline's.

Charlotte, who is described as a pure free-thinker and who is much more involved in Dr. Stanhope's affairs might seem a much better device for jesting at the weaknesses of religion. But the problem with using Charlotte for this is that she is the axis upon which the Stanhope family turns--as the mediator between a fairly traditional father and his radically untraditional son, she must be all the more attentive to the attitudes of British society. Charlotte Stanhope, more than almost any character, is bound by society's rules. Since most of her family lives outside

the pale of traditional British propriety, it is left to her to retain their caste. She does this, first, by her own exquisitely correct behavior, and second, by determining which conventions are absolutely iron-bound, and insisting that the family abide by them. She serves as Madeline's watchdog, guarding not her morals but her etiquette. As the narrator says, "She and she alone, could in any degree control the absurdities of her sister" (IX, 78). Charlotte is too serious about using the conventions to treat them with levity, although she may speak of them lightly.

Bertie, on the other hand, has no regard for etiquette in any form. He also has at least an eye for the comic side of Barchester as we learn from his caricatures of various people. Yet he seems to lack a vitality present in his sisters. Even his indolence does not resemble Madeline's, because she loves challenges while he refuses even to see them. Of all the Stanhope siblings, Bertie is the least designing and the least aware. He genuinely likes everyone, though he may laugh at them, and demands little in deference or respect, as Madeline does. We cannot think that he means to plague the Bishop, though his very costume at Mrs. Proudie's reception is enough to irritate those who preside. Bertie Stanhope, who "had no respect for rank and no aversion to those below him" (IX, 85) and who "was above, or rather below all prejudices" (IX, 85) lacks a critical mind. He embraces all ways of life. Without any power of discrimination, he can do very little to judge the faults of British society. While detachment from any personal stake can be an asset to an impartial observer, in Bertie Stanhope's case there is too much detachment.

Madeline, then, is the only member of the Stanhope family with sufficient interest in assessing the world around her to do so and the only one with sufficient detachment to do a good job of it. Though her siblings share a similar perspective, they ultimately play a less subversive part in the moral design of the novel.

As yet we have only considered Neroni's viewpoint as an alternative in terms of specific statements. But Neroni's overall position in the novel can be viewed as that of being an alternative--an alternative moral system. Her functions, which I have described in the preceding sections, have led us to accept her to some extent as an arbiter of values. As has already been said, she is advantageously situated for judgment by her absence of ambition. To learn the sum of what Madeline has to offer us, finding another character who also serves as an arbiter of morals would be useful.

Most of the central characters in Barchester are involved in the church squabbles. Even the excellent Mr. Arabin is enlisted by the Grantlyites and, moreover, views Slope as a competitor for Eleanor's hand. The only other arbiter of morals is the single character who manifests genuine Christian, rather than merely religious, beliefs--Mr. Harding. Harding's judgments are almost diametrically opposed to Neroni's: Harding is willing to forgive Slope everything, even marrying Eleanor; Neroni plans to grind Slope into the dust. Harding is self-effacing; Neroni positively refuses to give up the world's attentions. Harding's major ethic is Christian charity, while the most charitable way of describing Neroni's ethic is to say that she behaves toward

others as best fits their merits.

Viewing these two characters as a schematic opposition gives us a way to hold in balance two competing moral structures. Harding represents the moral system of Christian charity. His behavior exemplifies religious principle at its best. Neroni's secular moral system shares the pride of the worldly clergymen, but transcends their narrowness. Unlike Mr. Harding, whose motives are always praiseworthy, Neroni's are ambiguous. Her hard-headed common sense and complex motivations make her attitudes seem closer to the modern reader's. In this book, as in The Warden, Harding serves as an example of a superior moral sensibility. The world of Barchester Towers, however, calls for the addition of a more worldly, discriminating voice to help make sense of the moral questions of this changing society.

Conclusion

Through Neroni, Trollope can make whatever criticisms of society he pleases, settled behind a screen too thick for his readers to penetrate. If he wants to provide a sympathetic view of independent women, if he wants to suggest that marriage is not an unalloyed good, he can do so through Neroni. In judgment of the other characters, she agrees almost entirely with the implied author. In her views of the institutions of British society, however, she serves an author whose personal views are not entirely those of his society.

When Trollope put a Madeline Neroni in his novel, he was bringing in an ambiguous voice whose statements would be much more difficult to manipulate than most of his characters'. As the brightest, most conscious character in the book, Neroni was in

one sense the closest in perception of all the characters to the author himself. However, Neroni, who saw through hypocrisy and etiquette so easily, was as disturbing to Trollope as to his readership. Rather than tone down her views, he created a far finer work by treating her as ambiguously as he did. In spite of her position of seeming unreliability, Neroni serves many purposes which even the Victorian would appreciate. Her questions bring self-knowledge to the hero of the work in a way that no-one would quarrel with. Her tete-a-tetes show both Arabin and Slope in all their respective glories. For the more careful and open-minded reader, of course, she does much more. She offers unusual views for us to mull over later, on questions which Trollope leaves unresolved. But most important, Neroni provides us with the only heretical moral view that could possibly seem valid within the context of Barchester society. Madeline Vesey Neroni may play only a ~~small~~ small part in the comedy of Barchester cathedral, but in evaluating the dispute and all its participants, she plays a very large part indeed.

Notes:

1. Ruth apRoberts. The Moral Trollope (Athens: Ohio University Press. 1971). p. 80.
2. E.M. Forster. Aspects of the Novel (U.S.A.: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc. 1927). p. 78.
3. U.C. Knoepfmacher. Laughter and Despair (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1971). p. 21.
4. Forster, p. 47.
5. Wayne C. Booth. The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1961). p. 3.
6. Robert M. Polhemus. The Changing World of Anthony Trollope (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1968). p. 43.
7. Polhemus, pp. 48-49.
8. Polhemus, p. 43.
9. Polhemus, p. 40-41.
10. Polhemus, p. 41.
11. Polhemus, p. 39.
12. Knoepfmacher, p. 27.
13. Polhemus, p. 43.
14. Polhemus, pp. 39-40.
15. Polhemus, p. 43.
16. Polhemus, p. 44.
17. Polhemus, p. 44.
18. Polhemus, p. 43.
19. Polhemus, p. 45.
20. Polhemus, p. 39.