Fiction and the Law: Stylistic Uncertainties in Trollope’s *Orley Farm*

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*Style, Liberalism and the Law*

‘I hold that gentleman to be the best dressed whose dress no one observes. I am not sure but that the same may be said of an author’s written language.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Trollope makes this blunt and seemingly straightforward comment in his critical biography of Thackeray, published in 1879, three years before his death. Throughout his writing life, he denies that his style, or any writer’s style, is worthy of much notice. Equally characteristic is the implication that a self-effacing style is bound up with the values of gender and class that Trollope wishes his readers to find in his work. A clearly-presented story is comparable with the quiet confidence of a gentleman, always the highest point of value in Trollope’s scale of social reference, for himself and for his characters. He is careful, however, not to make his point in dogmatic terms. ‘I am not sure’, he tells us, though his observation doesn’t allow for much real doubt. This professed hesitation is a recurrent tactic in his writing. It is a strategy that rests on an imagined dialogue with the reader, often calling for the exercise of judgement in the face of alternative possibilities. In this instance, the outcome of the invitation is heavily directed; elsewhere, matters are less easily settled. In *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864-5), it is always clear that Alice Vavasor’s offence may be forgiven; but the title reflects a fundamental aspect of Trollope’s relations with his readership. Despite its air of authority, his style points to questions rather than answers.

Stylistic gestures of deference to the judgement of readers reflect a loose analogy with legal practice that persists throughout Trollope’s fiction. His readers might be required to deliver decisive verdicts, but his advocacy in presenting his fictional cases is often equivocal. Trollope’s down-to-earth narrative persona sits, often uneasily, alongside the uncertainties that revolve in his fiction, as he moves between a qualified belief that the changes that were inexorably transforming the social structures of his boyhood were to be welcomed, and a stubborn inclination to identify with the ideals of a world that was fading into the past. His style, apparently designed to erase itself,[[2]](#footnote-2) becomes the means of involving readers as active participants in unstable processes of moral and political adjudication.

Trollope was not much given to reflecting on his art as he approached the end of his life as a writer. His autobiography, published posthumously in 1883, gives little away about his creative processes. However, his late work on Thackeray’s life and writing seems to have prompted an unusual bout of retrospective reflection. Views on matters of style also find their way into his fiction at this point in his career. In *The Duke’s Children* (1879), the last of the six parliamentary novels, Trollope is preoccupied with the distance between solid worth and specious charm. He dismisses stylistic technique in both speech and writing as a superficial matter, amounting to nothing more than a necessary vessel for meaning. Any showy accomplishment in style or rhetoric might be cause for suspicion, suggesting the potential for slick deception rather than frank honesty. This ‘skill of tongue, this glibness of speech is hardly an affair of intellect at all. It is, — as is style to the writer, — not the wares which he has to take to market, but the vehicle in which they may be carried.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Trollope’s study of Thackeray makes a similar point at greater length. ‘A novel in style should be easy, lucid, and of course grammatical. The same may be said of any book; but that which is intended to recreate should be easily understood, - for which purpose lucid narrative is an essential’.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is all determinedly plain-spoken, and in line with Trollope’s familiar resistance to any notion of over-refinement as a strength in writers’ methods, or in the nature of their characters. However, complications and qualifications begin to crowd into his account of the right-thinking novelist’s approach to style. Despite his implicit claim to dependability and good sense, Trollope notes that aligning style with reason is difficult. ‘Reason in style has not all the ease which seems to belong to it.’[[5]](#footnote-5) Nor can any writer hope to achieve a simple relation between realism and truth. Trollope concedes that ‘the realistic must not be true, - but just so far removed from truth as to suit the erroneous idea of truth which the reader may be supposed to entertain.’[[6]](#footnote-6) The expectation that realism will deliver ‘truth’, and Trollope’s sceptical supposition that the reader’s idea of truth will be imperfect, or ‘erroneous’, creates a gap that his realistic fiction must take into account. Trollope’s style hovers between the need to cater for the preferences of readers who are prone to misunderstanding, and reluctant to make serious intellectual efforts as they pursue the pleasures of the novel, and an obligation to accuracy, lucidity, or even ‘truth’:

I call that style easy by which the writer has succeeded in conveying to the reader that which the reader is intended to receive with the least amount of trouble to him. I call that style lucid which conveys to the reader most accurately all that the writer wishes to convey on any subject. The two virtues will, I think, be seen to be very different.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Not only are these two qualities of writing different, they are often incompatible. In remarking on the difficulty of reconciling clarity with ease, Trollope broods on the recalcitrance of language. ‘Who among writers has not to acknowledge that he is often unable to tell all that he has to tell? Words refuse to do it for him. He struggles and stumbles and alters and adds, but finds at last that he has gone either too far or not quite far enough.’[[8]](#footnote-8) This is in part simply a wry acknowledgement of a technical challenge, but Trollope’s acknowledgement of an author’s inevitable tussle with words suggests the deeper tensions that underlie his fiction. Ease and clarity, described by Trollope as the twin ‘virtues’ of good writing, are not to be seen as superficial aesthetic characteristics. They are the expression of the moral perspectives that he wishes his readers to understand and to share. The difficulty in sustaining both ease and clarity suggests the nature of the challenges that underlie his apparently self-assured relations with his appreciative readership.

A sustained interest in the formal qualities of Victorian writing, alongside a renewed focus on its ethical principles, has characterised recent critical work in the field. In an essay on Darwin’s ‘theological virtues’, James Williams proposes an inclusive relation between language and the moral life. ‘To talk about style is to talk about manner, or one might say *manners*, ethics, principles of conduct: virtues, that is, in something like the sense that “virtue ethics” has sought to understand a virtue not as one property of persons among others (like height, or weight) but as part of the shape of human flourishing’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Such a definition of style suggests that cultural politics, broadly defined, may be included alongside ethics among its shaping forces. Critics who have explored this issue from the perspective of Trollope’s writing have often done so from the perspective of his proclaimed identity as an ‘advanced conservative liberal’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Frederik Van Dam notes that ‘it is in work on Victorian liberalism … that the imprint of the new formalism on Victorian studies has been the deepest.’[[11]](#footnote-11) Trollope’s liberalism, seen in this light, amounts to more than his longstanding affiliation with the Liberal party, or his frustrated ambitions to be elected as a Member of Parliament. It represents ‘a reaction against modernity, or, more precisely, an intervention within it’,[[12]](#footnote-12) as Trollope contends with changing constructions of the self in an increasingly individualistic and competitive world, and attempts to assimilate new paradigms for ‘human flourishing’ with his lingering commitment to older patterns of value.

This is the context in which the ambiguities of Trollope’s style have generated recent scholarly debate, as his critics have moved away from earlier assumptions about the workmanlike dullness of his writing, and its dissociation from the dynamics of his social and political thought. Matthew Sussman’s extended work on Trollope’s narrative strategies reflects this interest in its focus on ‘the moral purpose of Trollope’s realism,’[[13]](#footnote-13) and the enduring anxieties that lie beneath its forthright surface. Sussman argues ‘not only that Trollope’s style is marked, but also that its markings reveal a sceptical attitude toward the very possibility of those virtues—honesty and transparency—with which he is so often associated.’[[14]](#footnote-14) Doubt and division, as Sussman understands Trollope’s writing, qualify the moral authority that Trollope seems to assert through his confiding relations with his readers. Like Van Dam, Sussman interprets style in broad terms. ‘Style, like the related term form, is perhaps the most amorphous of literary categories, and its increasing appearance in literary criticism has done little to specify what, exactly, falls within its purview.’[[15]](#footnote-15) Sussman explores ‘the extent to which stylistic description may overlap with ethical evaluation’, and finds that ‘in the case of Trollopian honesty, there are good reasons, encouraged by Trollope himself, for generating moral interpretations of form. Honesty and accuracy may rightly refer to the intentions of an author, the subject matter he represents, or his manner of representation, but when one sets aside the “middle course” of realism and the demands of morally didactic verisimilitude, one can see how other artistically independent preoccupations govern Trollope’s procedures in prose.’[[16]](#footnote-16) Similarly, Helen Small notes the doubleness that emerges in Trollope’s shifting relations with his readers, given his intermittent tendency to ‘oppose himself to, rather than align himself with, the reader.’[[17]](#footnote-17) Realism, for Trollope, is always subject to other demands upon the role of the writer, including his responsibilities to further a model of moral engagement with its community of readers.

If there is a tentative consensus to be identified within this movement in Trollope criticism, it is the suggestion that Trollope’s style, however it is to be defined, is neither an expression of the bland invisibility that was once seen as its primary characteristic, nor of a contradiction between Trollope’s careful work on character, plot, and theme, and a supposedly mechanical approach to the texture of his fictional prose. In foregrounding values and ethics, critics may be seen to offer a response to Trollope’s own sense of the priorities of his fiction. He saw his work in terms of its moral purpose, alongside what it owed to the entertainment of his readers, and his own need (never far from his mind) to translate literary production into a regular income. ‘I should be said to insist absurdly on the power of my own confraternity if I were to declare that the bulk of the young people in the upper and middle classes receive their moral teaching chiefly from the novels they read.’[[18]](#footnote-18) Thinking of Thackeray’s ethical direction, Trollope notes that ‘Thackeray thought that more can be done by exposing the vices, than extolling the virtues of mankind. No doubt he had a more thorough belief in one than the other.’[[19]](#footnote-19) Trollope’s approach was different, for he had no fixed belief in any absolute division between virtue and vice in his characters. Noting that ‘a novelist has two modes of teaching – by good example or by bad’,[[20]](#footnote-20) Trollope composes narratives that call on the reader to decide where the boundaries between good and bad examples might fall.

*Language and the Law*

Frederik Van Dam argues that these distinctive contentions are characteristic of Trollope’s late work, in its pained reaction against the materialist individualism of the 1870s and beyond.[[21]](#footnote-21) Their traces are, however, equally evident in earlier writing. They are particularly apparent in his lifelong preoccupation with the operations of the law, another professional arena where moral judgement is given public expression, often within the context of rhetorically purposeful language. Trollope’s father was a failed barrister, and his early life gave him good reason to doubt the reliability of legal processes and those who implemented them. His difficult relations with his father, coloured by both resentment and loyalty, were a formative influence on his dissatisfaction with contemporary legal practice. His views were mixed, and not entirely hostile. He did not, unlike Dickens, despise all lawyers and their works, in part because he sees essential points of comparison between their definitive qualities and those that he wanted to claim for the novelist. As Francis O’Gorman has noted, ‘There is an oddity, a conceptual tension, in Trollope’s impatience with barristers for using words, voice, rhetoric and gesture to persuade. For they are not *so* different from the realist novelist himself.’[[22]](#footnote-22) Both professions depended on language, and on the presentation of evidence; both turned on the need for judgement, in the face of concealment and confession. In general, however, Trollope is inclined to promote the moral claims of the writer’s insights as they are shared with the reader, despite their necessary ambivalence, rather than the decisive rulings of the law.

Trollope’s first major success as a novelist came with the publication of *The Warden* in 1855, where the plot turns on a lawsuit. Here, as often in his fiction, the formal processes of the law are seen as a defective response to the deeper truths of a complex situation. Septimus Harding’s resignation as the Warden of Hiram’s Hospital is the consequence of John Bold’s misplaced reforming zeal, damaging the happiness of all concerned. Initiated for honourable reasons, the lawsuit achieves no good end. The right-thinking Mr Bunce is among the moral arbiters of the novel: ‘ “Law!” said Bunce, with all the scorn he knew how to command, ̶ “law! Did ye ever know a poor man yet was the better for law, or for a lawyer?” ’[[23]](#footnote-23) It is the novelist who presents the moral conundrums of the story to the reader for final judgement, not the lawyers at the heart of its action. Trollope’s bid for the identity of a gentleman is framed within an implicit comparison with the standing of lawyers, a competition in which his own professional vocation as an author is necessarily awarded primacy.

The social and professional status of novelists in the mid-Victorian period was far from settled. The appetite for domestic fiction was growing, providing writers with welcome opportunities to expand their income and influence. But changes in its direction threatened to undermine Trollope’s ambition to establish authorship as a more respectable and morally dependable occupation than that of the lawyer. These changes were rooted in the rise of new forms of popular fiction, and the increasing success of women within the literary marketplace. In the later 1850s and early 1860s, the emergence of sensation novels presented a particular challenge to his preferred model of understated gentlemanly good sense. With their characteristic focus on madness, drug-taking, hidden crimes within homely settings, thrilling mysteries and dramatic plots, sensation novels were deliberately distant from the more sober patterns of realism that had provided Trollope with his reputation. The rackety thrills of sensation fiction were alien to the discreet values of an English gentleman, and the prominence of women within the genre, notably exemplified in the work of Ellen Wood and Mary Braddon, further emphasised the distance between this phenomenon and Trollope’s ideals as a writer. The emotional tone of these novels was often febrile, leaving no room for the calmly nuanced language that characterised Trollope’s approach to fiction. Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), with a wildly unrealistic but compelling plot that made it one of the most spectacularly successful examples of its kind, concludes with a conventional sentiment that Trollope might have endorsed. But it does so with a perfunctory simple-mindedness that could not compete with the lurid events that compel the reader’s attention throughout the course of Lady Isabel Vane’s dreadful downfall. ‘Never forget that the only way to ensure peace in the end, is to strive always to be doing right, unselfishly, under God.’[[24]](#footnote-24) Trollope, who was always disposed to identify with the underdog, is consistent in expressing his sympathy with the social disadvantages that confronted Victorian women. His mother, Frances Trollope, was a prolific novelist, and he greatly admired her persistence in writing under difficult circumstances. But if the novel was to be largely written by women, for women, his carefully constructed paradigm of a gentlemanly authority for the professional work of the novelist would be sidelined. Lawyers, as he understood the profession, could not reliably claim the identity of gentlemen, but women could never do so. As John Pemble puts it, ‘novel-writing, he wanted everyone to know, was men’s work.’[[25]](#footnote-25)

*Orley Farm*

It is within this context that Trollope continues to develop his interpretation of the parallels between the language of fiction and that of the law. In 1861, as the racy attractions of the sensation novel were starting to make themselves felt, he began to publish *Orley Farm*, his most extended exploration of the standing of the legal profession in relation to his own aspirations as a writer. Some of the features of the novel might be seen to cater for the changing tastes of readers, given that the plot turns on the wrongdoing of a seemingly blameless woman, Lady Mason, who has hidden her crime from the eyes of the world for twenty years. The courtroom drama at the heart of the novel is designed to grip the attention of the reader, as Lady Mason’s fate hangs in the balance, apparently to be decided by the contending efforts of the numerous lawyers who people the narrative. But the central concerns of the novel lie beyond the dramatic circumstances of Lady Mason’s trial, though it remains true that Trollope wanted to show his readers that he was quite as capable as the next man (or woman) of devising a riveting tale. In thinking about the rhetoric of the lawyers involved in Lady Mason’s case, and finding their manipulations of language for the most part dishonest and self-interested, he is also exploring the nature of the novelist’s unstable relations with concepts of truth. The comparison between the judgements of fiction and those of the law is complex, but finally the claims of the author are seen to be more substantial than those of the predatory lawyers who cluster around the unhappy Lady Mason.

The carefully-managed plot turns on an issue of inheritance. Sir Joseph Mason, of Groby Hall, leaves the bulk of his estate to his first-born son, the younger Joseph. But a codicil to his will gives Orley Farm to his young wife Mary, and infant son Lucius. The codicil is in Mary’s handwriting, and though it bears the signature of three witnesses, its legitimacy was only confirmed after a hard-fought court case. After her husband’s death, Lady Mason and her son live at Orley Farm for twenty years. Lucius, who has grown into a headstrong young man, plans to terminate the tenancy of a local solicitor, the tellingly-named Samuel Dockwrath, in order to farm Dockwrath’s land on scientific principles. This provokes the infuriated Dockwrath to re-investigate the validity of the codicil, and he uncovers evidence to cast further doubt on the innocence of Lady Mason. Dockwrath persuades Sir Joseph to mount a lawsuit, on the grounds of perjury. Lady Mason is eventually cleared of the charge, though by the time of her trial she has privately confessed her crime to her venerable suitor, Sir Peregrine Orme. The reader’s suspense subsequently depends on the question of whether she is to be convicted and punished, and not on any doubt concerning her guilt. Trollope later identifies this as a fault in the novel. ‘The plot of *Orley Farm* is probably the best I have ever made; but it has the fault of declaring itself, and thus coming to an end too early in the book. When Lady Mason tells her ancient lover that she did forge the will, the plot of *Orley Farm* has unraveled itself; – and this she does in the middle of the tale.’[[26]](#footnote-26) The structure of the plot is not, however, simply the result of a mistimed revelation. Trollope has removed the determination of guilt and punishment from the jurisdiction of the court, an institution which is represented as wholly untrustworthy, so that the reader is instead required to deliver a personal judgement on Lady Mason’s history and character. This is in part a reflection of Trollope’s resistance to the methods of the sensation novel. Authorial secrecy is among the features of sensationalism that he condemns, describing it as a ‘system which goes so far to violate all proper confidence between the author and his readers by maintaining nearly to the end of the third volume a mystery as to the fate of their favourite personage … is there not a species of deceit in this to which the honesty of the present age should lend no countenance?’[[27]](#footnote-27) His style rests on the supposition of a trusting relation between author and reader. But the ‘honesty of the present age’ is by no means a reliable virtue, and it turns out to be particularly elusive in *Orley Farm*. Lady Mason is not honest, and yet she finds that her principles, newly exposed to self-scrutiny as a consequence of the trial, will not allow her to remain in possession of Orley Farm. She chooses to relinquish the estate to Joseph Mason, and she and her son finally embark on a life of overseas exile.

A number of sub-plots are woven into this story, presenting a distinctly unflattering cross-section of the legal profession. Most of the unprepossessing lawyers who are involved with Lady Mason’s case are seen to be concealing truths of many different kinds, from themselves or from others. Samuel Dockwrath, a shabby re-imagining of John Bold’s rectitude, hides his vindictively self-interested motivation behind a show of indignant virtue. Thomas Furnival ̶ elderly, prosperous and worldly ̶ is the barrister who takes up Lady Mason’s cause, denying to himself that his approach to the case is influenced by his susceptibility to her sexual attractions, and refusing to respond to the hurt feelings of his neglected wife. Felix Graham, an aspiring barrister who is determined to resist what he regards as the corruptions of his profession, has fallen in love with Madeline, the daughter of the solidly established Judge Staveley ̶ despite the fact that he is secretly engaged to be married to Mary Snow, an impoverished girl whose character as a dutiful wife he intends to shape and polish according to his own inclinations. Mr. Chaffanbrass is the barrister, first introduced to Trollope’s readers in *The Three Clerks* (1857), and destined to reappear in *Phineas Finn* (1867-8), who represents the seamiest side of legal advocacy. It is his business to rescue criminals of every colour from the justice that ought properly to await them. When Trollope tells us that Chaffanbrass is dirty, he does not refer only to the moral turpitude that is evident in all his professional dealings. Chaffanbrass is physically dirty, in a way that would be impossible for any self-respecting gentleman:

He confined his practice almost entirely to one class of work, the defence namely of criminals arraigned for heavy crimes.... To such a perfection had he carried his skill and power of fence, so certain was he in attack, so invulnerable when attacked, that few men cared to come within reach of his forensic flail. ... To apply the thumbscrew, the boot, and the rack to the victim before him was the work of Mr. Chaffanbrass's life.... a little man, and a very dirty, little man. He has all manner of nasty tricks about him, which make him a disagreeable neighbour to barristers sitting near to him. He is profuse with snuff, and very generous with his handkerchief. He is always at work upon his teeth, which do not do much credit to his industry. His wig is never at ease upon his head, but is poked about by him, sometimes over one ear, sometimes over the other, now on the back of his head, and then on his nose; and it is impossible to say in which guise he looks most cruel, most sharp, and most intolerable. His linen is never clean, his hands never washed, and his clothes apparently never new.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Trollope’s is disgusted by all that Chaffanbrass represents, though the reader’s disapproval may in part tempered by an enjoyment of the force of the descriptive language here. This is partly a matter of Trollope’s sensitivity to the distinction of social class. Chaffanbrass is presented to the reader as the antithesis of every index of value in Trollope’s moral economy. Intimately connected with this distaste is his indignation at the notion that a lawyer like Chaffanbrass would betray the ends of justice for personal gain or professional advantage. ‘Mr. Furnival might feel himself sufficient to secure the acquittal of an innocent person, or even of a guilty person, under ordinary circumstances; but if any man in England could secure the acquittal of a guilty person under extraordinary circumstances, it would be Mr. Chaffanbrass. This had been his special line of work for the last thirty years.’[[29]](#footnote-29) At the heart of Trollope’s hostility to legal practice in *Orley Farm* lay his opposition to a concept of dishonest advocacy which would allow a lawyer to employ his abilities in order to rescue the guilty from a deserved conviction.

It is in this respect that Trollope’s exploration of the interaction between language and moral purpose in *Orley Farm* engages with contemporary debate, for the function of advocacy in the British legal system had become a matter of controversy at the time of the novel’s publication. Reforms in the representation of the accused had led to a system in which facts were no longer held to speak for themselves, and lawyers were permitted to defend or prosecute in criminal trials in order to facilitate a more rigorous consideration of the evidence.[[30]](#footnote-30) Thackeray, who had briefly flirted with the legal profession as a student in the Middle Temple of the Inns of Court, had been among those who had questioned the reforms: ‘If an honest man is to be bullied in a witness-box, the barrister is instructed to bully him. If a murderer is to be rescued from the gallows, the barrister blubbers over him’.[[31]](#footnote-31) Later, Thackeray came to acknowledge the arguments for the admission of legal advocacy. ‘The first thing, therefore, to be borne in mind in examining the moral character of the profession of advocacy is, that the advocate is administering law and not attempting to satisfy the sentiment of justice’.[[32]](#footnote-32) This is the point that Trollope refuses to accept. An insistence that it must always be the business of the lawyer to ‘satisfy the sentiment of justice’ pervades *Orley Farm,* bringing down on Trollope’s head the exasperation of reviewers, especially those with professional experience of legal practice. ‘There is … one subject which Mr. Trollope pursues with unremitting zeal. He cannot bear a lawyer. They are all rogues, not by nature, but by profession.’[[33]](#footnote-33)  Trollope’s attack on the practice of legal advocacy can scarcely be said to rest on a solid understanding of its principles. Coral Lansbury puts it succinctly: ‘Trollope belligerently chose to misunderstand the system of advocacy whereby everybody is entitled to the best defence a lawyer can provide, whether or not he is guilty. It is hardly for the lawyer to determine the question of guilt, derogating the authority of judge and jury.’[[34]](#footnote-34) Trollope’s settled antagonism is irrational, but it is grounded in something other than legal argument. Much of his hostility relates to his belief that a man who deliberately presents an argument that he knows to be untrue cannot be a gentleman – as the grubby example of Chaffanbrass demonstrates so repellently. Felix Graham reflects Trollope’s views of the matter: ‘Let every lawyer go into court with a mind resolved to make conspicuous to the light of day that which seems to him to be the truth. A lawyer who does not do that—who does the reverse of that, has in my mind undertaken work which is unfit for a gentleman and impossible for an honest man.’[[35]](#footnote-35) Revealingly, the high-minded Graham hankers after a career as a writer, rather than a lawyer. ‘He wrote poetry for the periodicals, and politics for the penny papers with considerable success and sufficient pecuniary results. He would sooner do this, he often boasted, than abandon his great ideas or descend into the arena with other weapons than those which he regarded as fitting for an honest man's hand.’[[36]](#footnote-36) A later authorial interjection endorses this view with unusual directness. ‘I cannot understand how any gentleman can be willing to use his intellect for the propagation of untruth, and to be paid for so using it.’[[37]](#footnote-37) If the calling of a lawyer necessarily entails professional lying, Trollope’s claim for the higher dignity of the writer’s profession is vindicated.

The contest would be a simple one, were it not for Trollope’s acknowledgement that the judgements that might arise from fiction’s claim to wholesome truth-telling are far from clear-cut. In *Orley Farm*, as elsewhere in his oeuvre, Trollope’s style is not a matter of a specific approach to syntax, idiom, or lexis, evident at the level of the sentence. It is to be identified in a reciprocal relation with his reader that allows for changing patterns of understanding and judgement. Throughout the novel, Trollope’s narrative perspectives shift, as he employs dialogue, authorial comment, or dramatic description to guide and sometimes to complicate the reader’s approach to a full understanding of the implications of this intricate story. Felix Graham seems to represent Trollope’s own position within the narrative, in his rejection of legalistic mendacity and his fervent devotion to ‘truth’. But Graham’s youthful scruples, like his ill-conceived plan to mould young Mary Snow into a meek and orderly wife, come to seem naïve. For all his ethical principles, Graham does not abandon the law once he is married to Madeline Staveley, finding himself with new responsibilities as a family man. The novel tacitly commends his reconciliation with the financial realities of the life he wishes to lead as a symptom of his growing maturity. ‘An income, I know, is a very commonplace sort of thing; but when a man has a family there are comforts attached to it.’[[38]](#footnote-38) Even Chaffanbrass, the most shameless of the lawyers who act on behalf of Lady Mason, earns a grudging concession from Trollope. ‘There was a species of honesty about Chaffanbrass which certainly deserved praise. He was always true to the man whose money he had taken.’[[39]](#footnote-39) The convictions of the ‘learned gentlemen’ who participate in a verbose legal congress in Birmingham (‘We have had a paper read by Von Bauhr. It lasted three hours’[[40]](#footnote-40)) are not radically different from those of Chaffanbrass. ‘No living orator would convince a grocer that coffee should be sold without chicory; and no amount of eloquence will make an English lawyer think that loyalty to truth should come before loyalty to his client.’[[41]](#footnote-41) Trollope doesn’t approve of the adulteration of coffee with chicory, nor does he approve of the hierarchy of loyalties he identifies in an English lawyer. But he never wholly withholds his sympathy from those who turn their energies to earning a living, and in general he identifies with personal loyalties, rather than adherence to abstract principle. Loyalty might after all be termed a variety of truth, as Trollope suggests when Mary Snow’s indiscretions are disloyally reported by her guardian, Mrs Thomas: ‘Truth between woman and woman should have prevented that.’[[42]](#footnote-42) Sir Peregrine Orme, inflexibly committed to the upright values of a gentleman, represents the ideal that Trollope admires most: ‘The word of a man or of a woman was to him always credible, until full proof had come home to him that it was utterly unworthy of credit.’[[43]](#footnote-43) But Sir Peregrine cannot accommodate his genuine passion for Lady Mason within his stiff moral code, and his story ends with the pathos of a passive defeat. ‘He lived, but he never returned to that living life which had been his before he had taken up the battle for Lady Mason … he was waiting patiently, as he said, till death should come to him.’[[44]](#footnote-44)

Recurrent parallels and echoes in *Orley Farm* question concepts of truth, or honesty, in either the legal or the literary profession. The principles that Trollope tests through the compromised lives of Lady Mason and her circle also find animated expression in a cast of minor characters. Francis O’Gorman has noted that the novel’s exuberant sub-plot, as it is conducted in the Commercial Room of the Bull Inn of Leeds, emulates Dickens’s comic manner (Madeline Staveley’s mother later expresses her horror at the thought that her prospective son-in-law might conceivably move to the inherently vulgar Leeds in an attempt to pursue his career as a barrister).[[45]](#footnote-45) Samuel Dockwrath, travelling north in order to persuade Sir Joseph Mason to mount a lawsuit against Lady Mason, takes advantage of the comfortable facilities of the Bull Inn’s commercial room. This effrontery greatly annoys Moulder, a commercial traveller with a firm of grocers, Hubbles and Grease of Houndsditch. Moulder appeals to the waiter:

"James, is that gentleman commercial, or is he not?"

It was clearly necessary now that Mr. Dockwrath himself should take his own part, and fight his own battle. "Sir," said he, turning to Mr. Moulder, "I think you'll find it extremely difficult to define that word;—extremely difficult. In this enterprising country all men are more or less commercial."

"Hear! hear!" said Mr. Kantwise.

"That's gammon," said Mr. Moulder.

"Gammon it may be," said Mr. Dockwrath, "but nevertheless it's right in law. Taking the word in its broadest, strictest, and most intelligible sense, I am a commercial gentleman; and as such I do maintain that I have a full right to the accommodation of this public room."[[46]](#footnote-46)

Dockwrath bases his claim to be a ‘commercial’ gentleman on the slipperiness of the word, and on the fact that his view is ‘right in law’. Much of Trollope’s hostility to the legal profession rests on his resistance to a growing assumption that ‘all men are more or less commercial’, defining their values and rights in relation to their activities in a commercial world. Here too Trollope may have had Dickens’s example in mind, for Dickens’s quasi-autobiographical serial *The Uncommercial Traveller*, with its pointed contrast between ‘the Uncommercial’ and ‘the kind of commercial traveller he is not’,[[47]](#footnote-47) had like Orley Farm begun to appear in 1861. If Dockwrath’s identity, like that of Chaffanbrass, is to be defined by what Carlyle termed the ‘cash nexus’,[[48]](#footnote-48) then he loses any entitlement to the status of a gentleman, whether commercial or not.

Conversations between the domineering Moulder and Mr Kantwise, John Kenneby and Maria Smiley, his miscellaneous associates, provide a grotesque commentary on the major themes of *Orley Farm*. Moulder’s low standing in Trollope’s social hierarchy is signalled to the reader by his satirical name, and by the fact that he is, like Chaffanbrass, physically repugnant: ‘His face rolled with fat, as also did all his limbs. His eyes were large, and bloodshot. He wore no beard, and therefore showed plainly the triple bagging of his fat chin.’[[49]](#footnote-49) Because Moulder is so obnoxious, his belief that advocacy is ‘the bulwark of the British Constitution’, and that the barristers who maintain the system are made of the same admirable stuff as an adulterating grocer, seems to reinforce Trollope’s message that the system is entirely dishonourable:

"They're paid for it; it's their duties; just as it's my duty to sell Hubbles and Grease's sugar. It's not for me to say the sugar's bad, or the samples not equal to the last. My duty is to sell, and I sell;—and it's their duty to get a verdict."

"But the truth, Moulder—!" said Kenneby.

"Gammon!" said Moulder. "Begging your pardon, Mrs. Smiley, for making use of the expression. Look you here, John; if you're paid to bring a man off not guilty, won't you bring him off if you can? I've been at trials times upon times, and listened till I've wished from the bottom of my heart that I'd been brought up a barrister. Not that I think much of myself, and I mean of course with education and all that accordingly. It's beautiful to hear them. You'll see a little fellow in a wig, and he'll get up; and there'll be a man in the box before him,—some swell dressed up to his eyes, who thinks no end of strong beer of himself; and in about ten minutes he'll be as flabby as wet paper, and he'll say—on his oath, mind you,—just anything that that little fellow wants him to say. That's power, mind you, and I call it beautiful."

"But it ain't justice," said Mrs. Smiley.

"Why not? I say it is justice. You can have it if you choose to pay for it, and so can I.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

Trollope’s perspective is clear. Yet the grossly unpleasant Moulder speaks with conviction, and with an engaging turn for self-reflective figurative language (he cannot remove his mind from thoughts of ‘sugar’, ‘strong beer’, and ‘gammon’, and his imagined ‘swell’ becomes, like Moulder himself, ‘as flabby as wet paper’). In part intended as a monstrous but emphatic travesty of the faded Sir Peregrine Orme, Moulder confronts his own mortality (‘I sha’n’t live long myself’) with a settled sense of his own righteousness – though his interpretation of honesty, like that of Chaffanbrass, is confined to doing the right thing by his employer (‘I've been honest to Hubbles and Grease’).[[51]](#footnote-51) Despite Trollope’s open contempt (‘Such is the modern philosophy of the Moulders, pigs out of the sty of Epicurus’),[[52]](#footnote-52) Moulder demands the reader’s attention, and some perverse measure of respect.

Here, Trollope’s vigorous style invites the reader’s condemnation alongside a degree of interest or even sympathy. His rhetorical treatment of unabashed scoundrels like Chaffanbrass and Moulder, couched as it is in vivid language that shares Dickens’s attractively theatrical methodology, undermines any potential parallel with the decisive verdicts of the courtroom. Trollope claims the authorial freedom to construct divergent models for judgement in *Orley Farm*, withdrawing or asserting his narrative presence as it suits the changing requirements of his story. In a different narrative context, the scope for uncertainty is particularly marked with regard to the reader’s judgement of Lady Mary Mason. Unlike Moulder, she knows herself to be dishonest, and the reader (alongside most of the novel’s characters) shares this knowledge. But Trollope is at pains to soften the response that the novel’s polemic seems to require. Her crime was not committed on her own behalf, but that of her young son. Trollope makes it clear that the elder Sir Joseph had failed in his duties as a husband and father, refusing to provide for his young wife’s ‘brat’ in a petulant denial of the claims of justice. Mary Mason’s steadfastness as she conceals her deception through decades of disciplined self-denial gives her an appeal that the conventionally well-behaved women who surround her cannot match. Throughout much of the novel, we learn little about her inner life, and her magnetism is primarily conveyed by the effect that she has on others (Sir Peregrine, Furnival, and the warm-hearted Mrs Orme all find her irresistible). ‘There was a power of endurance about her, and a courage that was almost awful’.[[53]](#footnote-53) *‘Can You Forgive Her?*’ might also have served as a title for this novel, and here too Trollope’s expectations are evident.

Trollope’s reticent depiction of Lady Mason influences our reaction to the conduct and consequences of her trial. Given his noisy denunciation of advocacy throughout *Orley Farm*, he might have been expected to thwart the efforts of her lawyers, who argue on her behalf despite knowing that she is guilty. But he was never likely to subject this elegant and spirited woman to the degradations of prison, and the reader responds to her acquittal with the sense that the right result has been achieved, though not necessarily in the right way. Trollope’s understanding of his moral responsibilities as a writer means that Lady Mason must be punished, but her dignity and privacy is protected. He is often ready to relinquish the claims of realism in order to acknowledge that his stories are fictional. We are, after all, reading a novel, in a companionable partnership with the novelist. As the story of *Orley Farm* unfolds, he makes this concession unusually explicit:

In an early part of this story I have endeavoured to describe how this woman sat alone, with deep sorrow in her heart and deep thought on her mind, when she first learned what terrible things were coming on her. The idea, however, which the reader will have conceived of her as she sat there will have come to him from the skill of the artist, and not from the words of the writer. If that drawing is now near him, let him go back to it.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Trollope’s reference to Millais’ illustration here suggests a reluctance to claim a novelist’s privileged access to Lady Mason’s experiences. He asks the reader to assume, briefly, the writer’s authority, looking at her image and forming an independent judgement of her mingled culpability and heroism. Yet he immediately goes on to reclaim his place in the text, informing and directing the reader’s response:

There was less of beauty, less of charm, less of softness; but in spite of all that she had gone through there was more of strength,—more of the power to resist all that this world could do to her.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Lady Mason is not a romantic heroine. Her transgressive behaviour, and her resolute tenacity, represent a challenge to the social values that Trollope seems to advocate. But her discomforting presence in *Orley Farm* is a tacit recognition of the limitations of those values, and of the possibility of alternative interpretations of truth and honesty. Trollope’s elusive style shares the responsibilities of judgement with his readers, forming a creative alliance that allows for the acknowledgement of uncertainty as an index of moral maturity.

1. Anthony Trollope, *Thackeray* (London: Macmillan & Co; 1879), p. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lord David Cecil summed up what was for many years an accepted view when he remarked of Trollope’s style that he “has none at all”. Lord David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1948), p. 199. See Ruth apRoberts, ‘Anthony Trollope, or the man with no style at all’, *Victorian Newsletter*, Spring 1969, pp. 10-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anthony Trollope, *The Duke’s Children* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), eds. Katherine Mullin and Francis O’Gorman, p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Trollope, *Thackeray*, p. 184 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Trollope, *Thackeray*, p. 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 185 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 196 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 196 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. James Williams, ‘Darwin’s Theological Virtues’, in *Thinking Through Style: Non-Fiction Prose of the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds. Michael D Hurley and Marcus Waithe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The wave of recent accounts of Trollope’s liberalism began with Amanda Anderson’s seminal article, ‘‘Trollope’s Modernity,’’ *ELH*, 74 (2007), 509–34, in which Anderson identified unresolved contradictions within Trollope’s liberalism and his inclination to value traditional values. See also Lynette Felber, ‘‘The Advanced Conservative Liberal: Victorian Liberalism and the Aesthetics of Anthony Trollope’s Palliser Novels,’’ *Modern Philology*, 107 (2010), 421–46; Regenia Gagnier, ‘‘Gender, Liberalism, and Resentment,’’ in *The Politics of Gender in Anthony Trollope’s Novels: New Readings for the Twenty First Century*, ed. Margaret Markwick, Deborah Denenholz Morse, and Regenia Gagnier (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 235–48; David M. Craig, ‘‘Advanced Conservative Liberalism: Party and Principle in Trollope’s Parliamentary Novels,’’ *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 38 (2010), 355–71; and Frederik Van Dam, ‘Liberal Formalisms’, *European Journal of English Studies*, Vol 20 (3), 2016, 236-48, and Van Dam’s *Anthony Trollope’s Late Style: Victorian Liberalism and Literary Form* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Frederik Van Dam, ‘Liberal Formalisms’, 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Frederik Van Dam, *Anthony Trollope’s Late Style,* p.3*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Matthew Sussman, ‘Optative Form in Trollope’s *The Small House at Allington’*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 71, No.4 (2017), 485-515; 491. See also Sussman’s ‘Stylistic Virtue in Nineteenth-Century Criticism’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 56, No 2, Winter 2014, 225-249. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Matthew Sussman, ‘Trollope’s Honesty’, *Studies in English Literature*, Vol. 53, No 4, Autumn 2013, 877-895; 878. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 893. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [Helen Small](javascript:;), ‘Against Self-Interest: Trollope and Realism’,*Essays in Criticism*, Volume 62, Issue 4, 1 October 2012, pp. 396–416; 416. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Thackeray*, p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, p. 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Frederik Van Dam, ‘Introduction’, *Anthony Trollope’s Late Style*, pp.1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Francis O’Gorman, ‘Introduction’, Anthony Trollope, *Orley Farm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), xxvii [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Anthony Trollope, *The Warden*, ed. Nicholas Shrimpton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.35. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*, ed. Elisabeth Jay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 624. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. John Pemble, ‘Besieged by Female Writers’, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 38, No 21, 3 November 2016, 39-40; 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Nicholas Shrimpton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers*, ed. John Bowen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.112 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Anthony Trollope, *The Three Clerks*, ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 469. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Orley Farm*, p. 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Jan-Melissa Schramm, *Testimony and Advocacy in Victorian Law, Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), for a thoughtful analysis of these developments in the context of the nineteenth-century novel. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. W. M. Thackeray, ‘War Between the Press and the Bar: Mr Punch to the Gentlemen of the Press’, *Punch* 9 (1845), 64-5: 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Thackeray, ‘The Morality of Advocacy’, *The Cornhill Magazine,* 3 (April 1861), 447-59; 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. "Mr. Trollope and the Lawyers," *London Review*, 8 November 1862, 5. 405-7; 407. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Coral Lansbury, *The Reasonable Man: Trollope’s Legal Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Orley Farm*, p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., p. 462. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., p. 611. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., p. 617. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., p. 136. Trollope is alluding to the debates on legal reform at the inaugural meeting of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science at Birmingham on 12th October 1857. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., p. 440. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid, p. 661. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Intro, xviii. O’Gorman gives a full account of Trollope’s competitive negotiations with the influence of Dickens in *Orley Farm* in ‘Trollope*, Orley Farm*, and Dickens’s Marriage Breakdown’, *English Studies*, Vol 99 (2018), 6, pp. 624-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Daniel Tyler, ‘Introduction’, Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Thomas Carlyle, ‘Chartism’ (1839): ‘*Cash Payment* … the universal sole nexus of man to man’. Thomas Carlyle, *Works*, ed. H. D. Traill (Centenary Edition), 30 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1896–99); 29.162. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Orley Farm*, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., p. 500. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., p. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid., p. 488. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., p. 513. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid, p. 514. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)