

Reassessing the Cleverness of Frances Trollope's Social Fictions

The Social Problem Novels of Frances Trollope, 4 volumes. Frances Milton Trollope. Ed. Brenda Ayres. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009.

Vol. 1. *The Life and Adventures of Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw; or Scenes on the Mississippi.* Ed. Christine Sutphin. 403 pp.

Vol. 2. *The Vicar of Wrexhill.* Intro. Douglas Murray. 413 pp.

Vol. 3. *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy.* Intro. Priti Joshi. 469 pp.

Vol. 4. *Jessie Phillips: A Tale of the Present Day.* Ed. Ann-Barbara Graf. 427 pp.

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<1> In the four-volume set *The Social Problem Novels of Frances Trollope*, Brenda Ayres has made available important work of the prolific and influential mid-nineteenth-century novelist Frances Milton Trollope, whose writings have, until recently, dropped off the critical map in part because of being so difficult to access. Ayres helps solve this problem by issuing a uniform edition of Trollope's four social problem novels that includes both scholarly and textual notes. A general introduction to the series provides information about Trollope's life, a brief discussion of the novels, a general bibliography of the author, and a shorter specific bibliography for each of the four novels. A separate editor introduces each volume. Though those introductions are necessarily compact, given space constraints, each is packed with historical background information crucial for the work in question. Christine Sutphin gives an overview of abolitionist literature for Trollope's antislavery novel *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw* (1836), Douglas Murray a brief history of Evangelicalism for her satire *The Vicar of Wrexhill* (1837), Priti Joshi a discussion of the factory movement for the anti-child-labor novel *Michael Armstrong* (1840), and Barbara-Ann Graf an explanation of seamstress narratives and the Bastardy Clause and New Poor Law for Trollope's anti-workhouse novel *Jessie Phillips* (1843). The explanatory notes at the end of each volume are also particularly helpful in a novelist so widely allusive as Trollope is.

<2> It makes sense to begin a recovery of Trollope with her social problem novels, since those novels played a key role in the evolution of nineteenth-century fiction as it began to address social reform. Like Dickens, Trollope started her career writing non-fiction, publishing in 1832 the hugely successful *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. She quickly sought to give that non-fictional material a fictional form, producing two American novels, *The Refugee in America* (1832) and *The Life and Adventures of Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw; or Life on the Mississippi*. The latter, a bestseller that went through three editions in its first year, appeared a year before Dickens ventured into social reform fiction with *Oliver Twist*. Trollope's novels explicitly used the rhetoric and addressed the issues of non-fiction in fiction. Each of the four novels focuses on a social issue of immediate topical interest. *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw* addressed slavery two years before the Abolition of Slavery Act in 1838. *Michael Armstrong* appeared four years before the passage of the Factory Act in 1844. *Jessie Phillips* came out immediately before the passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1844-5. *The Vicar of Wrexhill* reflected social anxieties about the rise of Evangelical power that had intensified in the decade following the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828. The power these religious schisms held in the period is reflected even in the textual notes to *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw*, which inform readers that virtually all references to God or the Lord were cut in the 1840 edition of the novel, "so as not to upset either Evangelical or non-Evangelical Anglicans" (403).

<3> Critics' reactions to Trollope's entry into contemporary debates were tempered by her political position. Since the publication of *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, which was read as an implicit argument against the passage of the First Reform Bill, she has been seen as a Tory Radical. As a result her novels were critiqued for endorsing a Tory paternalist response to social problems. While there are certainly traces of Tory paternalism in her writing, that stance does not necessarily make her novels uninteresting. Indeed, part of the problem she poses for critics is how to think through the strengths of a conservative as opposed to a liberal social critique, but a conservative critique that, as Trollope herself noted, was embraced by Chartists as well as Tories. Trollope's novels also compel because their formal structure reflects the hybridity of her historical as well as her political position. Born in 1780, four years after Jane Austen, yet beginning her authorial career in the years immediately before Charles Dickens burst on the scene, Trollope occupies an intermediate position between the eighteenth-century literature that formed her childhood reading and the Victorian novels that were to emerge in the wake of her adult writing. Though nineteenth-century reviews of her novels are typically negative, they invariably acknowledge the power and cleverness of her work. Trollope was herself eventually to write a novel entitled *The Life and Adventures of a Clever Woman* (1854), a title Pamela Neville-Sington has used for her recent biography of Trollope (1998). By making Trollope's social novels available to the scholarly reader, Ayres allows critics to think about how and why Trollope might be conceived as clever, to develop a critical assessment of the intelligence behind novels that Trollope's contemporaries both read and railed against.

<4> Nineteenth-century reviewers critiqued her novels for their exaggerated portraits of villains, portraits reviewers read as both prejudiced and dangerous because they might foster prejudice in others. In *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw* and *Michael Armstrong*, Trollope aims her critique at the middle or managerial level. In her antislavery novel she focuses not, as a number of contemporaneous works do, on plantation owners but on the overseer who manages the slave system, the title character of the novel, whose childhood, rise to power, cruelty to slaves, and

relentless pursuit of abolitionists the narrative charts. In her anti-child-labor novel, she focuses not just on the factory owner but also on the overseer and doctor who help the owner execute his plans. She also picks up the imagery of slavery from her earlier novel and applies it to her tale of the factory. While this rhetorical transposition was characteristic of non-fiction prose of the period, reviewers found it upsetting because it meant her novel could be conceived as advocating revolt. Trollope, however, thought of her work less as a political manifesto than as social commentary that used caricature to skewer its opponents. When, in the mid-1830s, she hoped to edit a compendium like *Bentley's Miscellany*, she planned to fill it with satiric portraits that would resemble William Hogarth's print series.

<5> This satiric tone has led critics to read Trollope's writing as like that of an eighteenth-century novelist, an assessment that is reinforced by the explicit sexuality of her novels. However, the sexuality of these novels reflects nineteenth-century political rhetoric as much as it does the eighteenth-century freedoms of Smollett, Sterne, and Fielding. Early nineteenth-century tracts on slavery stress the immorality of the slave plantation as essays on the factory system emphasize the licentiousness of industrial environments. The linkage of Evangelicalism with sexuality was, as Henry Abelove has shown in *The Evangelist of Desire* (1990), part of the way the new Dissenting sects both presented themselves and were criticized by others. To address male sexuality directly, as Trollope does in her depiction of a seductive squire's son in *Jessie Phillips*, makes sense in a novel that is explicitly critical of the Bastardy Clause, an issue Dickens takes on obliquely in *Oliver Twist*. The problem for Trollope's contemporaries was that such sexuality was conceived as inappropriate to the novel, which was being redefined as a vehicle for family-oriented issues. For her contemporaries, Trollope wrote about topics that fiction should hide rather than reveal. As the critic for the *Times* explained in horror in reviewing *The Vicar of Wrexhill*, Trollope was like Noah's son Ham looking on his father's nakedness as he lay drunk.(1)

<6> Twentieth-century critics have read Trollope as a paternalist because of the conclusions of novels like *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw* and *Michael Armstrong*. The former ends with a family of German aristocrats, the Steinmarks, returning to Germany, taking with them all the virtuous characters that have survived the conflict between planters and abolitionists that the novel has depicted. The latter ends with the cotton heiress Mary Brotherton escaping to Germany, taking with her three children she rescues from the evils of child labor. But to condemn the novels for these endings is to miss the point Trollope emphasizes in both. The systems she criticizes are so widespread, corrupting, and socially engrained that it is virtually impossible to imagine eradicating them. *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw* is particularly powerful in its depictions of slavery as a system that deforms the lives not just of slaves and planters, but also of the abolitionists who seek to oppose it. The novel shows how social institutions that license sadism create masochistic opponents who willingly sacrifice themselves for their cause. *Michael Armstrong* charts the gradual awakening of Mary Brotherton to the brutality of factory life, but it also suggests that little or nothing can be done to overturn such a system. All the novel can advocate is the Ten Hours Bill for mitigating the conditions of those who perform industrial labor.

<7> The darkness of Trollope's novelistic perspective follows a slightly different pattern in *The Vicar of Wrexhill* and *Jessie Phillips*, whose stories depend less on identifying the evils of a

particular system than on showing how life in an idealized English village is transformed by the intrusion of individuals and practices that Trollope associates with the rise of bureaucracy, or what she identifies in *Jessie Phillips* as the French system of centralization. Readers will feel the presence of Tory values in her depictions of those villages, which maintain a network of ties that mean the Squire knows the inhabitants of his estate as the Anglican minister the needs of his parishioners. In *The Vicar of Wrexhill* these interpersonal ties are destroyed as Wrexhill's squire dies and its vicar is replaced by a Low Church Evangelical, whose appointment is made possible by Whig politics. That new vicar espouses a system of professional advancement that Trollope associates with both the Age of Machinery and the rise of commerce. Setting up what his daughter calls a complex mechanism for the satisfaction of his desires, he marries the squire's widow Mrs. Mowbray, seduces a number of the village's female inhabitants, and supplants its schoolmaster with one of his own, who practices in the utilitarian manner captured in Dickens' *Hard Times* (1854) rather than with the benevolent paternalism of his predecessor.

<8> In *Jessie Phillips*, the last and most narratively complex of Trollope's social problem novels, the attack on village values occurs on several fronts. The novel tells the story of the establishment of a local workhouse and the arrival of a new commissioner, who is, like the Evangelical vicar in *The Vicar of Wrexhill*, a political appointee who descends on the village from London. Showing the societal impact of that institution and its board as they seek to prevent outdoor relief and instead compel individuals to come into the workhouse, the novel also locates corruption within the village itself. The son of the squire, familiar with the implications of the Bastardy Clause, proceeds to seduce and abandon the novel's title character, a working-class seamstress, who becomes pregnant, gives birth, and is ultimately tried for infanticide. These social stories are interwoven with a narrative that feels as if it comes from Jane Austen. The squire's daughter Ellen has met and fallen in love with the son of the local marquis but been forced to give him up because the estate is no longer wealthy and the son must marry for money rather than love. Through a complex set of events, the two lovers are brought together again, and, though Ellen is, like Anne Elliott in *Persuasion*, worn and aged by her ordeal, the Marquis of Rochdale knows that he still loves her and finally obtains his father's permission to marry her. The juxtaposition of these plots makes the novel a strange hybrid that combines the dark concerns of reformist prose with the romantic brightness of earlier nineteenth-century fiction.

<9> The narrative impetus of Trollope's novels seems to be consciousness-raising in the sense that that term was used in 1960s feminist circles. Each of the four novels collected here works to expose the evils of a system or practice, and each shows that practice to have a distorting impact on everything in its purview, even social institutions and individuals that actively strive to be virtuous and socially constructive. As Trollope's career develops, the center of consciousness that is awakened to the evils of social systems is increasingly that of a woman. Though *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw* focuses on a male abolitionist, Edward Bligh, it also contains an aged female slave Juno, who understands the workings of slavery more fully than the younger slaves, the plantation owners, and the white abolitionists. It is she, in a surprisingly revolutionary move on Trollope's part, who eventually orchestrates a secret slave uprising that kills the overseer Whitlaw. Similarly, *The Vicar of Wrexhill* shows the Mowbray family's Irish Protestant ward Rosalind Torrington gradually becoming aware of the vicar of Wrexhill's machinations and sexual escapades.

<10> *The Vicar of Wrexhill* also marks an advance on *Jonathan Jefferson Whitlaw* as it represents such knowledge as requiring an alliance between female characters. Rosalind learns from the vicar's daughter, the atheist Henrietta Cartwright, the truth of her father's schemes. An alliance between women, both of whom have different knowledge of the systems that constrain them, forms also in *Michael Armstrong* and *Jessie Phillips*. In the former, the heiress Mary Brotherton seeks knowledge from the ugly but intelligent daughter of the mill-owner Sir Matthew Dowling. In the latter, the squire's daughter Ellen Dalton forms an alliance with the middle-class Martha Maxwell to try to uncover the extent of her brother's involvement with Jessie Phillips. Both these partnerships, like the one in *The Vicar of Wrexhill*, involve a female character that must face corruption in a member of her family. In *Michael Armstrong*, Martha loves her manufacturer father and yet must learn that she has been manipulated by him into condemning a factory boy to possible death. In *Jessie Phillips*, it is almost impossibly painful for Ellen to suspect her brother of the crimes he has actually committed: seduction, betrayal, and infanticide. She collapses under the burden of these suspicions, which never come fully to her consciousness again.

<11> Trollope's novels make characters aware of the violence and cruelty that can be inherent in their own family circle, an image we might extend to argue that she is interested in bringing to consciousness the violence that is part of one's own nation and race. She conveys the difficulty of coming to a full comprehension of that negative knowledge by representing it as something that is beyond what characters within the novel can bear. It is only Trollope's readers who are given full knowledge of the inhumane behavior her stories chart. This is a narrative position that was unlikely to please. As Trollope explains in describing Martha Maxwell in *Jessie Phillips* in what is surely intended to be a self-portrait, she has "a shrewdness of observation into character," "a shy sort of consciousness that the process by which she looked into the hearts and souls of her fellow-creatures was not such as the generality could understand or appreciate.... There was a degree of Denner-like distinctness in the wrinkles and warts of her portraits that looked a little as if she had used a microscope to assist her" (185).

<12> Trollope's use of the name Martha here, as well as in *Michael Armstrong* where it is paired with Mary, suggests the Biblical story of Martha and Mary. In a writer whose prose is infused with references to the Bible, Shakespeare, Lamb, Carlyle, Wordsworth and others, this particular reference suggests that as a novelist Trollope conceived of herself as occupying the Martha rather than the Mary position. She is not the one who publicly, even romantically, wipes Jesus' feet, and she certainly did not receive the public recognition of a contemporary like Dickens. She is the one behind the scenes concerned with the nuts and bolts of daily living. The appearance of Ayres' four-volume set suggests that we have reached a point where we are able to explore the implications of that position with all its problems and promises. It is time for modern critics to come to terms with novels that are effective even as they repel, novels that influenced many Victorian writers, among them Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and, despite his own denials, her son, Anthony Trollope. Frances Trollope is worthy of attention in her own right and had a significant impact on the Victorian canon. With the publication of *The Social Problem Novels of Frances Trollope*, which I understand is to be followed by a reprinting of further volumes of her novels, scholars are provided with an opportunity to develop a full-scale critical re-evaluation of Trollope's place in the evolution of nineteenth-century thinking about society and the novel.

Endnotes

(1)"The Vicar of Wrexhill.--by Mrs. Trollope," *The Times* (25 October 1837): 2.(^)