

# The Use of the Mock Heroic in Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers*

by Mirial J. Gainer

Anthony Trollope had come to realize the comic possibilities of mid-Victorian life while writing *The Warden*, the first of his Barset series. Even though times of change were affecting English life, he saw that, for the middle classes, the change was promising. Therefore, by expanding Barchester, he was able to shape a comic interpretation of his whole middle class. *Barchester Towers*\* is the story of a community, rather than of one man. Barsetshire becomes a miniature England. While outwardly calm and secure, inwardly it teems with ambition, passion, idealism, contradictions, banality, and change of all sorts. Trollope liked to juxtapose radically different kinds of behavior in the face of changing conditions, thereby showing the folly, the variety, and the joy of mid-Victorian life. The Barsetshire presented in his *esthat* books makes happy endings seem realistically possible, and makes the "Victorian compromise" come clear. Here is a place where the claims of the world and the individual conscience can be reconciled.

Change, and the strife it causes, is the essence of Trollope's comedy. However, he refuses to yield to a darker vision of the changing world. Instead, he seeks to portray life's constancy surviving the world's chaos.

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\*All references to *Barchester Towers* in the text are to the Signet Classics 1963 edition.

The Proudies and Slope are primarily responsible for bringing change and chaos to Barset at the time of *Barchester Towers*. The two main plot lines become clear at their entrance, as well as the vehicle for reducing the chaos and restoring order. His vehicle is the mock heroic and burlesque. Through this, the comedy is heightened and the chaos is resolved.

Throughout the book, the motif of war and battle is found, dressed as it were in the mock heroic. Battle lines are ever being drawn, armies formed, and combatants arrayed in battle dress. The high-flung heroic phrases and characters reduce the chaos and complications to their true, insignificant levels. Thus the reader does not become too involved in the fictional world and consequently can view it as Trollope intended.

What appears to be the main plot line is the battle of the clergy. The ideal of the church as a spiritual entity has been overshadowed by the church as a temporal organization—a business concern where people can shove their way to the top. The church was becoming more secular. Although there was much to-do about religious policy and decorum, there was very little of the mystical faith that touches men's hearts. The institution came to be comprised of comic, worldly people who struggled with each other for power.

As the old bishop dies, the power struggle begins, which progresses into a full-scale war within the clerical factions. Dr. Proudie was named bishop over Dr. Grantly. With him come Mrs. Proudie and Mr. Slope. Dr. Grantly and Mr. Harding meet the forces of the new bishop. During their first interview we see

Dr. Proudie was playing Venus to his [Dr. Grantly's] Juno, and he was prepared to wage an internecine war against the owner of the wished-for apple, and all his satellites, private chaplains, and others. (p. 42)

However, it is Mr. Slope, the bishop's chaplain, who sets the clerical factions marching. Dr. Grantly is angered by the chaplain. As Archdeacon Grantly and Mr. Harding leave the bishop's palace, Trollope remarks "had I the pen of a mighty poet, would I sing in epic verse the noble wrath of the archdeacon" (p. 48). Dr. Grantly already saw Bishop Proudie as a contemptible creature, ruled by the chaplain and Mrs. Proudie. The archdeacon wanted to wage war against the bishop but saw himself hindered by the chaplain. The archdeacon was greatly vexed.

Could he have ignored the chaplain and have fought the bishop, there would have been, at any rate, nothing degrading in such a contest. Let the Queen make whom she would Bishop of Barchester ; a man, or even an ape, when once a bishop, would be a respectable adversary, if he would but fight, himself. But what was such a person as Dr. Grantly to do when such another person as Mr. Slope was put forward as his antagonist?

If he, our archdeacon, refused the combat, Mr. Slope would walk triumphant over the field and have the diocese of Barchester under his heel. (p. 51)

Dr. Grantly's intent is evident.

War, war, internecine war was in his heart. He felt that, as regarded himself and Mr. Slope, one of the two must be annihilated as far as the city of Barchester was concerned, and he did not intend to give way until there was not left to him an inch of ground on which he could stand. (p. 54)

Back at the bishop's palace, though the Proudies and Mr. Slope

did not use quite such strong language as Dr. Grantly had done, they felt as much personal aversion and were quite as well aware as he was that there would be a battle to be fought, that there was hardly room for Proudieism in Barchester as long as Grantlyism was predominant. (p. 55)

Already we see the coming of battle and the gathering of alliances. On the side of Slope were arrayed the "enthusiastically religious young ladies and the middle-aged spinsters." For Grantlyism stood the dean and chapter.

Then the Stanhopes were recalled from Italy back to Barchester. That Dr. Stanhope was brother of a peer of Whiggish tendency "was sufficient to give to Mr. Slope high hope that he might enlist Dr. Stanhope on his side, before his enemies could out manoeuvre him." (p. 86) However, Dr. Grantly also felt Dr. Stanhope would "range himself under his banner."

Mr. Slope begins battle by dropping his sermonistic bomb on the assembled church. Dr. Grantly, in turn, seeks to place in his army worthy soldiers for this war. Among those he enlists are Mr. Arabin and Dr. Gwynne. Dr. Grantly and Mr. Harding then hold some

prophetic discussions on the future war of Arabin and Slope. The frogs and mice would be nothing to them, nor the angers of Agamemnon and Achilles. How the archdeacon rubbed his hands and plumed himself on the success of his last move. He could not himself descend into the arena with Slope, but Arabin would have no such scruples. (p. 132)

Peace is restored at the end because, while the Proudies continue in the palace, Slope is ousted, and the citadel is secured by Arabin's presence. By seeing Arabin put into the deanery,

the archdeacon had trampled upon Mr. Slope and had lifted to high honors the young clergyman whom he had induced to quit the retirement and comfort of the university. So at least the archdeacon thought; though to speak sooth, not he, but circumstances, had trampled Mr. Slope. (pp. 513-14)

Be that as it may, the archdeacon still

sang his song of triumph over Mr. Slope. This was his paen, his hymn of thanksgiving, his loud oration. He had girded himself with his sword and gone forth to the war; now he was returning from the field laden with the spoils of the foe. (p. 521)

The other plot line, which is actually the main theme, is the battle of the sexes. The role of women was changing and Trollope makes the best of the change. As Miss Thorne declared, "now-a-days the gentlemen were all women, and the ladies all men." The women are presented as the stronger sex. Trollope achieves much of his comedy through this inversion of the traditional role of the sexes.

We can see the beginnings of battle in the relationship between Bishop and Mrs. Proudie, and later, Mr. Slope and Mrs. Proudie. Of Mrs. Proudie we quickly learn that

in matters domestic she rules supreme over her titular lord, and rules with a rod of iron. . . . But Mrs. Proudie is not satisfied with such home dominion, and stretches her power over all his movements, and will not even abstain from things spiritual. (p. 31)

With the help of Mr. Slope, Bishop Proudie finally marches into

battle against his wife. He beards the "lioness" in her den. Courage nearly fails him, but a monitor within himself says:

Now, Bishop, look well to thyself and call up all the manhood that is in thee. Think how much is at stake. If now thou art not true to thy guns, no Slope can hereafter aid thee. How can he who deserts his own colors at the first smell of gunpowder expect faith in any ally? Thou thyself hast sought the battlefield; fight out the battle manfully now thou art there... Up, man, and at her with a constant heart...

There was another monitor there which advised him differently, and as follows. Remember, Bishop, she is a woman, and such a woman too as thou well knowest: a battle of words with such a woman is the very mischief. Were it not better for thee to carry on this war, if it must be waged, from behind thine own table in thine own study? ... Return, Bishop, to thy sanctum on the lower floor and postpone thy combative propensities for some occasion in which at least thou mayest fight the battle against odds less tremendously against thee. (pp. 157-58)

Mr. Slope tries to help the bishop gain control over Mrs. Proudie. Then Mr. Slope would control him, as "he intended to be master in that place, and as she had made the same resolution it was not improbable that they might come to blows." (p. 106) Mr. Slope won several skirmishes before Mrs. Proudie chanced upon a weapon which would give her sure victory. "As Achilles warmed at the sight of his armour, as Don Quixote's heart grew strong when he grasped his lance, so did Mrs. Proudie look forward to fresh laurels, as her eye fell on her husband's pillow." (p. 252) Mr. Slope might win in the bishop's study, but he could not hope to overcome Mrs. Proudie's

victories in the bedroom.

Nearly all the women in the book are aggressive, though not necessarily as much as Mrs. Proudie. Of Mrs. Grantly we learn that she

was quite as well prepared as her lord to carry on the battle without giving or taking quarter. . . and the people of Barchester were surprised at the amount of military vigour she displayed as general of the feminine Grantlyite forces. (p. 123)

Madeline Neroni is viewed at one time as a "noxious siren" who has bewitched Mr. Slope. She wins her battle against him, however. Then,

whenever he again thought of her in his dreams, it was not as of an angel with azure wings. He connected her rather with fire and brimstone, and though he could still believe her to be a spirit, he banished her entirely out of heaven and found a place for her among the infernal gods. (p. 471)

The narrator remarks that Charlotte Stanhope, had she been a man, "would have been a very fine young man." She managed her father and her brother, worked the accounts, and kept the family running smoothly.

Mrs. Quiverful, when she heard from her husband that the wardenship had been withdrawn, "felt within her bosom all the rage of the lioness, the rapacity of the hound, the fury of the tragic queen." She aggressively faces Mrs. Proudie about Mr. Slope and his treatment toward her husband.

Two meeker women are Eleanor Bold and Miss Thorne. Of Eleanor we find that in her effort to "avoid that terrible Charybdis of

a Slope she was in great danger of falling into an unseen Scylla on the other hand, that Scylla being Bertie Stanhope." (p. 378) But she is seen as a dragon killer as she rids herself of both Mr. Slope and Bertie. Also, her strength is seen when she forces both Mr. Harding and Mr. Arabin to live with her in the deanery. Miss Thorne is a remnant of the past, with her antiquated house, ideals, and ways. However, even she takes on a role reversal when she sees to the sports for her Fête Champêtre in her brother's stead.

Mr. Slope has too little respect for the supremacy of women, and therein lies his downfall. Mrs. Proudie has gained the upper-hand with her husband and ousts Mr. Slope. With the defeat of Mr. Slope comes peace between the sexes, and Barchester returns to normalcy. In comedy, normalcy is signified by marriage. The marriage, in turn, is emblematic of the restitution of order. Barchester is induced to make some progress, but the progress is minimal.

The structure of *Barchester Towers* is dramatic, written in an ancient poetic tradition, the tradition of mock heroic. Its mock heroic tone is established by the narrator's comments—a privilege denied to the dramatist—and by Trollope's ingenious plotting. The struggle between High and Low Churchmen is comic because it is seen as a harmless Trojan War. Not only is the mock heroic tone shown through the narrator, but also in various chapter headings, such as, "War", "The Dean and Chapter Take Counsel", or "The New Champion". Trollope uses a variety of classical allusions, although they are not always systematic or epic in scope.

The mock-epic style is most amusing and functional in its portrayal of the aggressors. While dissension over Eleanor weakens the Grantly party, the bishop's party becomes involved in fighting one another, even as Agamemnon and Achilles did. Mrs. Proudie gloats over her success in blocking her husband's visit to the archbishop. "Triumph sat upon her brow, and all the joys of dominion hovered about her curls." (p. 243) Then when Slope persuades the bishop to go

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on the visit and to change his decision about the wardenship, she "began to feel that if every affair was to be thus discussed and battled about twice and even thrice, the work of the diocese would be too much even for her." (p. 246) But she possesses a secret weapon, the curtain lecture. She finally gains control of the bishop in the chapter entitled "Mrs. Proudie Victrix". This strife does more than exploit the hen-pecked husband for the sake of laughter. It is necessary for the resolution of the plot. The Proudies defeat themselves. But the citadel remains standing, as Troy still stands at the conclusion of the *Iliad*.

The order to which Barchester returns contains Trollope's own values and assumptions. Change and progress are inevitable. However, they must evolve through natural growth. In a world of change, the old must make way for the new; yet the new must recognize that experience and tradition contain the foundation for all future growth. Ullathorne is seen as the ancient, stable past upon which the Grantly tradition is built. Proudieism in turn brings additional changes to Barchester.

In serious comedy there are two modes: the positive and the negative.

Positive comedy celebrated the capacity of the human organism to stabilize itself after a shock. It opposes our tendency to underrate ourselves, as Mr. Harding and Mr. Arabin do... Negative comedy deflates the human tendency to presume that all our purposes are both right and realizable—to overrate ourselves, as Slope and the archdeacon do... *Barchester Towers* harmonizes the two modes of comedy. (Polhemus, 1968)

*Barchester Towers* is comical in both the ordinary sense and the serious. Trollope's use of the mock heroic enhanced the quality of its comedy while underlining areas of mid-Victorian life.

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