



Jane Austen and the Trollopes

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I cannot attempt to detail what an agreeable day we had on Friday. The gentlemen dedicated the morning to field sports; the ladies accompanied me round the grounds, and afterwards we took a ride round Lord Rivers' park before we dressed for dinner; when there was an addition to our numbers of a Mr Milton, his wife, and two daughters; the youngest of whom, Miss Fanny Milton, is a very lively, pleasant young woman. I do not mean to infer that Miss Milton may not be equally agreeable, but the other took a far greater share in the conversation, and, playing casino great part of the evening with Mr S. Lefevre . . . and your old Mumps, it gave me an opportunity of seeing her in a more favourable light than her sister. (L'Estrange 1:7-8)

ONE COULD BE FORGIVEN FOR THINKING that this passage, composed in 1802, is a scene from a Jane Austen novel: a day in the English countryside filled with field sports, long walks, rides in the local lord's park, and ending with an evening of cards and conversation. The *dramatis personae* even include a suitable heroine not unlike Elizabeth Bennet: the "lively, pleasant" Miss Fanny Milton. In fact, this is a letter from Mrs. George Mitford to her fifteen-year-old daughter, Mary Russell Mitford. But the resemblance to Jane Austen's fictional realm is not merely coincidental, for Lord Rivers and his Hampshire neighbors formed part of the microcosm in which she lived and about which

she wrote. As for the vivacious Miss Fanny Milton, she is better known now as Mrs. Fanny Trollope, mother of the more famous Anthony Trollope.

To imagine the world in which Fanny Trollope, née Milton, grew up, one need go no further than the novels of Jane Austen. Jane was only four years Fanny's senior; their fathers, George Austen and William Milton, were the rectors of Steventon and Heckfield, respectively, both situated in the same Hampshire deanery of Basingstoke. Jane and Fanny would have admired the same red coats of the local militia, visited the same milliners' shops, worn the same fashions, subscribed to the same circulating libraries, and danced in the same assembly rooms above Basingstoke's town hall. They enjoyed the same pastimes: dancing, country walks, amateur theatricals, and reading. There was, however, one important, if subtle, distinction between the two girls. Fanny's grandfather was a Bristol tradesman; Jane came from more genteel stock.

It seems that the two young women never met. The Rev. Milton installed a curate and moved to Bristol before Fanny was born, only returning to Heckfield with his family in 1801, the same year the Austens moved to Bath. By 1803 the Milton girls had gone to London to keep house for their younger brother at 27 Keppel Street, near Brunswick Square. Jane was familiar with that part of town, for she sometimes visited her brother Charles when he was staying with his in-laws at no. 22 Keppel Street. In *Emma*, Isabella Knightley prefers Brunswick Square to any other area of London.

As young ladies just turned twenty, Jane and Fanny would have shared the same dreams of marriage and children. They were both to discover, however, that women who had too little money and too much learning did not find husbands easily. Jane, of course, never married. Fanny was a spinster, too, until 1809 when, at the advanced age of thirty, she married yet another Keppel Street resident, Thomas Anthony Trollope, a very serious, undemonstrative, but well-bred man—not unlike Mr. Darcy. Fanny would probably not have made a very favorable impression on Jane if they had met, say, at a small gathering of Keppel Street neighbors hosted by Charles Austen's in-laws. She was a little too warm in her enthusiasms for Jane's tastes, and Jane would have cringed to hear Fanny call her husband "*caro sposo*"—a "vulgar" habit that the newlywed shared with Mrs. Elton in

Emma. (Coincidentally, Mrs. Elton's father was a Bristol merchant, like Fanny's grandfather.)

As a married woman, Fanny's social world was greatly extended, as was her family, with the birth of six children in nine years. Meanwhile, Jane continued to live the semireclusive life of a spinster in Hampshire, closely observing her neighbors and their domestic dramas. By the time the youngest Trollope arrived, in 1818, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Persuasion* had been published—the last two posthumously, for Jane Austen had already been dead a year. Her novels circulated among the Trollope household. Tom, Fanny's oldest son, recalled how his great-aunt carried about the house a little basket, with the keys to the larder and a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, which she read over and over. Tom's little brother, Anthony, read *Pride and Prejudice* as a boy and considered it the best novel in the English language.

Anthony Trollope came to this conclusion, so he tells us in his autobiography, at the age of nineteen, in 1832, the same year in which his mother, aged fifty-three, published her first book, *The Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Much had changed in the fifteen years since Jane Austen's death. Queen Victoria had ascended the throne, and Fanny Trollope had spent four disastrous years, from 1827 to 1831, in America in an attempt to save the family fortunes. She went on to write five more travel books and thirty-five novels over the next quarter of a century. Mrs. Trollope was a best-selling author at a time when Jane Austen's popularity was in decline.

One critic, reviewing *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* a year after the author's death, observed that Jane Austen's fiction appeared too bland in "an age whose taste can only be gratified with the highest seasoned food" (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* May 1818). Two years earlier Jane had declared that, even for the sake of "Profit or Popularity," she "could not sit seriously down to write a serious Romance under any other motive than to save my Life" (*Letters* 1 April 1816). Fanny Trollope had no choice, for despite her literary success, she continued to be dogged by misfortune. In 1834 she fled with her bankrupt husband to Bruges, where he died a broken man, and money was needed to care for the four Trollope children who suffered, and eventually died, from consumption. Fanny fed the somewhat lowbrow taste of the circulating library with romantic novels as well

as social satire. She also tried her hand at a Gothic tale (*The Abbess*), a genre that Jane Austen had parodied so well in *Northanger Abbey*.

Yet, at its best Fanny Trollope's writing is as subtle and well-observed as Jane Austen's. Even in the most far-fetched romance, Fanny is able to convey with great skill and wit the foibles and follies of human nature—and of English manners in particular. A number of Fanny's novels, like Jane's, focus on a young provincial girl's search for a suitable husband. Their heroines come to realize the importance of a good pedigree, the difficulty of keeping a smart wardrobe on a limited income, the need to conceal too much learning, the all-too-human failings of clergymen, and the crucial role played by assembly rooms in a spa town. In *The Widow Barnaby*, set in the West Country during the Napoleonic Wars, Fanny gives a wink and a nod to Jane Austen's novels. The fifteen-year-old Sophy Compton is carried off by a red-coated officer, as was the young Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*—the man's name is Willoughby, the name of Marianne Dashwood's seducer in *Sense and Sensibility*. However, the vulgar, savvy, and irrepressible Martha Barnaby, "heroine" of the hugely popular *Widow Barnaby*, was entirely Fanny's own creation.

Anthony Trollope, in turn, made English manners and rural life his particular province. He continued to regard Jane Austen as one of the great English novelists, though, on re-reading *Emma*, he criticized her for "timidity in dealing with the most touching scenes" and for "not allowing the final part to be told in dialogue" (Mullen 575). Nevertheless, he would have been gratified to see an article by R. H. Hutton, published just ten days after his death, entitled "From Miss Austen to Mr Trollope" (*Spectator* 16 December 1882). "The loss of Mr Anthony Trollope," Hutton writes, "makes us turn back from his long series of elaborate pictures of English society during the third quarter of the present century, to those in which Miss Austen painted the rural society of England during the end of the last and the beginning of the present century," but "with a quite new sense of the magnitude of the change which had taken place in the transition from the one to the other." Jane Austen had portrayed English rural life as "mild and unobtrusive"; Anthony Trollope introduced into this country idyll the "rush of commercial activity" and London's increasing dominance.

Fanny Trollope's writing career spanned the gap between the

death of Jane Austen and Anthony's birth as a novelist, and her books document the effects, both large and small, of the Industrial Revolution on English society. In *The Three Cousins* (1847) Fanny hails the advent of the railway, which made the countryside shrink in the English imagination. Her last novel, *Fashionable Life* (1856), charts the rise and fall of one of the new breed of ruthless financiers and speculators, Monsieur Roche. At the same time that Charles Dickens was writing his great social novels, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, Fanny Trollope created her own tales of greed and suffering. In *Michael Armstrong* (1839) she exposed the evils of child labor, and in *Jessie Phillips* (1843) she attacked the New Poor Law and Union Workhouse. These two books proved to be as influential and popular as Dickens's.

Anthony Trollope's novels take on board the changes in English life and manners that his mother had chronicled. But the debt to his mother's fiction is greater still. The Trollopian realm for which he would become famous had, in fact, been his mother's before him. This was a world filled not only with young provincial girls and self-seeking clergymen—so familiar to Jane Austen—but also with women trapped in unhappy marriages and shady London dealers. Anthony clearly borrowed a number of plots and characters from his mother's novels. The larger-than-life financier Augustus Melmotte in Anthony's *The Way We Live Now* bears a striking resemblance to Monsieur Roche in Fanny's *Fashionable Life*. In *He Knew He Was Right*, Anthony portrays a husband's obsessive attempt to control his wife, a daring subject that his mother had first addressed in her novel, *One Fault*. Neither Anthony nor his mother shared Jane Austen's "timidity" and reticence in tackling emotionally powerful scenes.

Anthony never acknowledged his mother's literary influence. Her reputation as that "vulgar" woman who produced popular romances, coarse satire, and grim social novels was an embarrassment to the aspiring young writer, especially as cheap reprints of Fanny's books continued to appear alongside his own in shops. In his autobiography, Anthony Trollope went so far as to condemn his mother's novels, claiming that "in her attempts to describe morals, manners, and even facts, [she] was unable to avoid the pitfalls of exaggeration" (26). His criticisms seemed to have hit their mark, because from the time *An Autobiography* was published in 1883, the year following Anthony's

death, Fanny Trollope's novels suddenly ceased to be published.

Anthony had, in effect, buried his mother's literary reputation; yet, he had publicly welcomed the renewed interest in Jane Austen inspired by James Edward Austen-Leigh's memoir of his aunt, published in 1870. Anthony Trollope was his mother's son, but he preferred to be thought of as Jane Austen's literary successor. No one could ever accuse the genteel Miss Austen of being vulgar.

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