

**Reading Race in Trollope's Genders and Genres**

[\*Reforming Trollope: Race, Gender, and Englishness in the Novels of Anthony Trollope\*](#). Deborah Denenholz Morse. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. 197 pp.

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<1>In this engaging and insightful study, Deborah Denenholz Morse “proposes” a view of Anthony Trollope as a “reformer” of classed, raced, and gendered institutions and discourses (1). Morse’s Trollope is a “well-traveled, sophisticated cosmopolite who wrote radical critiques of the English cultural and legal institution of primogeniture and of English race discourses,” and his novels were furthermore as “experimental and innovative” in form as they were radical in content (1). Arguing for a reforming impulse and formal innovation in Trollope’s novels, Morse takes on the longstanding critique of Trollope’s work as formally uninteresting and ideologically conservative. This denigration of Trollope’s work has been equally the result of his categorization (by himself as well as contemporaries and later critics) as the English realist *ne plus ultra* and his famous comparison of writing to shoemaking. Beginning with this origin story of Trollope studies, Morse deftly summarizes various critical approaches to Trollope’s work, from critics who deplored his writing for its “deeply conservative vision” and “commonplace bourgeois empiricism” (2-3) to studies that consider how Trollope’s novels function in relation to nineteenth-century modernity, liberalism, and periodical and print culture (4). One of the many strengths of this book is how well it provides background for the reader new to Trollope scholarship as Morse articulates the ways in which other critics’ works intersect with her project of reforming our understanding of Trollope.

<2>Although Morse reminds us that Trollope identified himself as an “advanced conservative liberal,” she argues that Trollope “is a subversive in the realm of English realist fiction” (7). In making her argument for Trollope as radical subversive, Morse addresses texts that are less often analyzed in Trollope studies; *The Small House at Allington* (1862-1864) is the only novel she discusses from Trollope’s famous Barchester novels, and none are from the Palliser series. Other novels include *Lady Anna* (1873-1874), the novella *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite* (1870), *Ayala’s Angel* (1880-1881), *He Knew He Was Right* (1868-1869), and *Dr. Wortle’s School* (1880). Morse solves potential problems this selection could cause for the

reader by adroitly linking her readings of these less-canonical works to the better-known ones, for instance comparing Ayala Dormer of *Ayala's Angel* to the “incandescent Isabel Boncassen” (101) of *The Duke's Children*. Morse also does an excellent job of situating each of the texts within the context of Trollope's long and prolific career. This is but one example of how well Morse uses Trollope's novels to make the Trollope canon new, and newly legible, to experts as well as novices in the field.

<3>Morse organizes the book thematically rather than chronologically. The first section focuses on “Reforming Genre,” specifically the genres of the English pastoral and the marriage plot, which Trollope reshapes in response to Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859), the Governor Eyre Controversy, the Second Reform Act, and the Married Women's Property Act of 1870. In the second section, Morse shows Trollope “Reforming Gender” by challenging the gender politics of primogeniture, conventions of feminine modesty, and laws regarding women and property in *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite* and condemning the commodification of women's bodies in *Ayala's Angel*. Carefully explicating the ways in which institutions shape circumstances to constrain Trollope's heroines, Morse demonstrates how Trollope's sophisticated use of tone and shifting narrative focalization build a critique of legal and social institutions that sustains itself across his works, expanding over the course of his long career. In these sections, connections to historical context, though valuable, are not as fully articulated as the astute and engaging readings of individual novels, which do an impressive job of showing how thoroughly Trollope critiqued conventions of class, race, and gender through the generic transformations he enacted on the English realist novel. However, in the final section on “Reforming Race,” Morse breaks new ground in a richly historicized discussion of Trollope and race, which reassesses Trollope as an analyst and critic of imperial dynamics at home, abroad, and in English literature from Shakespeare to Charlotte Brontë.

<4>Morse's arguments emerge from her excellent close readings of the novels and offer a convincing case for the radical cosmopolite she describes in her introduction. In her chapter on *The Small House at Allington*, Morse's reading of Lily Dale's abortive engagement to Adolphus Crosbie, the fashionable and socially ambitious London civil servant, reveals how this novel undoes tropes of idyllic innocence, fecundity, and unity that structure the pastoral, leaving only a sense of loss and nostalgia as post-Darwinian remnants of this genre. At the same time, Morse's analysis of the novel shows how it marks a shift from the country to the city in Trollope's novelistic concerns. The demographic shift from rural to urban life entailed a new form of modern consciousness, and Morse's analysis of Trollope's use of free indirect discourse demonstrates how he crafts a portrait of a self-divided “modern human consciousness” (19) in Lily Dale's and her fiancé's simultaneous awareness and denial of his inevitable betrayal.

<5>In the next chapter, Morse reads *Lady Anna* as Trollope's "interrogation of social class prejudice in the wake of the Second Reform Bill and the agitation for the Married Women's Property Act of 1870" (40), as well as a continued exploration of the racial themes he embarked on in *He Knew He Was Right*. The chapter is framed by extensive research into Trollope's family life and travel abroad while writing the novel, as well as a discussion of his political investments after his disastrous campaign for a seat in Parliament. In *Lady Anna*, Trollope reverses the usual conservative impulse of the courtship novel by "creat[ing] an egalitarian marriage plot in which a tailor might marry an earl's daughter" (52). But Morse goes beyond Trollope's revision of the marriage plot; using Maurice Hunt's study of *Othello* as an intertext of *Lady Anna*, Morse brings race to the fore to argue that in *Lady Anna*'s love for Daniel Thwaite Trollope "reshap[es] the marriage plot along cross-class and covertly interracial lines" (67), and in doing so challenges the usually conservative closural power of marriage.

<6>In "Reforming Gender," Morse continues the reevaluation of Trollope's gender politics she began with her monograph *Women in Trollope's Palliser Novels* (1987). Morse offers a nuanced reading of *Sir Harry Hotspur of Humblethwaite*, in which Trollope shows how the legal institution of primogeniture and gendered conventions of female modesty and desire intersect to destroy the landed gentry and the tradition of *noblesse oblige* they are meant to uphold. The following chapter of this section counters critical studies that condemn Trollope's commodification of women's bodies in the marketplace of Victorian novels. Instead, in Morse's reading of *Ayala's Angel*, "Trollope illustrates how women are considered property by their society and how the voicing of their desire is a necessary form of resistance" (92). In the novel, Trollope opposes both vulgarity and taste to authentic desire, which the heroine must learn to recognize and avow by the end of the novel. While Lady Tringle's "taste" reveals a "true vulgarity of soul" in her reduction of Ayala to a composite of aesthetically lovely objects that will enhance her own status (94-5), Ayala's over-refined aesthetic taste leads her to misread her desire for her true mate, Jonathan Stubbs, whose decidedly un-aesthetic name signals his down-to-earth value. Through Stubbs's "quintessentially" English though "vulgar-sounding" name, Morse reveals how Trollope "defends the novel against Arnoldian charges of vulgarity, as he argues that the novel is a locus of ethical value in English culture" (106).

<7>Morse's final section challenges the dominant view of Trollope as an "unconflicted imperialist" (114) through readings of *He Knew He Was Right* and *Dr. Wortle's School*. In the chapter on *He Knew He Was Right*, Morse presents a powerful argument for understanding the story of Louis Trevelyan's "masculine will to power" (111) as Trollope's revision of "imperial narratives in which the dark-skinned Other is excessively passionate, goes mad, or is demonized — and ultimately dies" (118). In the next chapter, Morse argues that in *Dr. Wortle's School* Trollope uses bigamy, the old standby of the sensation novel, in conjunction with the figure of the Creole woman to "engag[e] race and colonial issues ...[and] displac[e] racial fears with more

recognizable sanctions” (134). In both chapters, Morse provides a wealth of historical research into, for instance, the history and significance of Creole women in Louisiana, the British West Indies, and nineteenth-century literature from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851-52) to Dion Boucicault’s wildly popular play *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana* (1859). Morse firmly substantiates her claims for Trollope’s sustained critical engagement with the institutions of empire and slavery, so that it becomes impossible not to see these novels as “reimaginings of the nexus of gender, race, power, and empire” (115). Morse’s study not only offers valuable analyses of lesser-known works, but also demands that we reimagine Trollope and his place within the field of nineteenth-century English realism.