

Bulwer-Lytton and the Rhetorical Design of Trollope's *Orley Farm*

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ALTHOUGH Trollope considered it one of his best novels and George Eliot admired its intellectual power, in recent times *Orley Farm* has been frequently misread. Robert M. Adams calls it a "patchwork affair" which "does not prove its moral as novels must."¹ And Robert M. Polhemus's view of Lady Mason as a "deeply flawed woman" throws his interpretation off balance.² On the contrary, as Trollope's mock apology suggests, he regards her as a criminal, social victim and heroine: "I may, perhaps be thought to owe an apology to my readers in that I have asked their sympathy for a woman who had so sinned as to have placed her beyond the general sympathy of the world at large . . . But as I have told her story that sympathy has grown upon myself till I have learned to forgive her, and to feel that I too could have regarded her as a friend" (II, 404).³ However, beneath this disarmingly simple defence of Lady Mason as the novel's heroine lurks the ironic assertion that *Orley Farm* possesses a deliberate rhetoric designed to challenge the Victorian reader's blind allegiance to a narrow and rigid moral code, and this is the aspect of the novel that I wish to pursue.

But to gain a true perspective of Trollope's artistic achievement in *Orley Farm* one must begin by looking at the writing of Bulwer-Lytton, one of the most self-conscious craftsmen among the novelists of his generation and one of the most articulate students of fictional theory, who took up Trollope when he first entered London literary circles in 1860.⁴ *Orley Farm* was commenced immediately after this while Bulwer was working on a series of articles

which focus his thinking on the function of rhetoric in the novel. It was a subject which interested them both and the importance of Bulwer's theory to the completed design of *Orley Farm* is suggested by the striking way his comments are echoed by some of Trollope's remarks in his lecture, "On English Prose Fiction," and in his *Autobiography*. As declared moralists, who wish to avoid mere sermonizing, they share a distinctive approach to the question. Like Trollope, Bulwer is suspicious of novels which appeal only to the intellectual reader and maintains that their characters must embody compelling emotions with which a miscellaneous audience can establish sympathy.⁵ They also agree that the reader can only share the author's knowledge of his characters if their creator has first been sympathetically involved in their lives.⁶ But the rhetorical process is more complex than this, for the author's intellect is also at work in judging his characters. This is where the emphasis falls in Bulwer's early essay, "On Art in Fiction."⁷ And Trollope elaborates it in his *Autobiography*: "[the author] must argue with [his characters], quarrel with them, forgive them, and even submit to them. He must know of them whether they be cold-blooded or passionate, whether true or false, and how far true, and how far false. The depth and the breadth, and the narrowness and the shallowness of each should be clear to him."⁸ What Bulwer and Trollope outline is a creative paradox, an imaginative co-operation between sympathy and judgment. Its recreation in the reader's moral experience requires the employment of a deliberate rhetorical design because the feeling of sympathy implies the reader's "closeness" to the characters, which demands special uses of the point of view, while the act of judgment has a "distancing" effect, which is best achieved by the employment of different kinds of irony.

Orley Farm owes a great deal to Bulwer's theory. It would be difficult to exaggerate how subtly Trollope's creation of a rhetorical design, shaped by the complex interplay of sympathy with irony, informs all levels of its

structure. It is perfectly adjusted to the novel's unifying theme, the complex nature of moral judgment, for its central issue, how to judge the enigmatic Lady Mason whose trial forms the catalyst for Trollope's sardonic vision, engages all the major figures and the reader is immediately involved in the process. *Orley Farm* is Trollope's most powerful assault on the Victorian moral code, for which he felt such a high price was being paid in human misery. In this novel two distinct but fundamental aspects of the code are inseparably entangled — the Victorians' profound belief in the infallibility of the law as the custodian of public morality, and in the sanctity of womanhood as the regulator of moral conduct in the home. Lady Mason's guilt, which threatens both of these myths and automatically incurs punitive responses, is employed to demonstrate how the impossibly high ideals enshrined in them betray an unhealthy contempt for human frailty. Moreover, the inflexibility of the code, which masks its extreme fragility, undermines the private conscience and makes responsible judgments impossible.

The intensely dramatic scene of Lady Mason's confession, which occurs in the middle of the novel, is designed to carry a heavy rhetorical burden and its multiple perspectives of sympathy and irony suggest the true complexity of moral scrutiny.⁹ A sympathetic effect is created by the profound realism of its psychological undercurrents. Just as, sold as bankrupt stock by her ruined parents and cheated by her husband, Sir Joseph Mason, she employed his commercial ethic to defeat him, so in relation to another father-figure, Sir Peregrine Orme, her potential husband, she sacrificially adopts his straight-jacket morality to save him from public disgrace. But she is not a moral chameleon. Her powerful response to both base meanness and high-minded generosity is in each case a splendid assertion of the primacy of the principles of equity and personal conscience in human relations. However, in the shocked reactions of the old baronet and his daughter-in-law Trollope strikingly reveals two powerful yet disparate

elements of neo-Calvinism in conflict in the Victorian world. A fixed code cannot be reconciled with the equally strong idea of the sanctity of the private conscience, and sympathy for Lady Mason is accompanied by an ironic distancing in judgment on Sir Peregrine Orme, who invokes blinkered notions of repentance and restitution. The subtle, ironic movement of the scene makes his social reflex the surrogate for the average reader's response to her sensational crime and flagrant breach of the feminine myth, while at the same time he is encouraged to identify with the warm response of Mrs. Orme. Although emblematic of saintly Victorian womanhood, Mrs. Orme makes a responsible judgment of the unique human dilemma which ironically runs counter to the canons of public respectability, and this is vindicated as the scene illumines Lady Mason's motives and foreshadows her agonising retribution.

Lady Mason's role as victim is the long-delayed but inescapable effect of her passion for equity and her cheating of the law to obtain it. Because she has never thought of her actions as anything but just and has never considered them from the point of view of public morality, the revelation of Sir Peregrine's moral horror is a traumatic experience. Paradoxically, Trollope's concern to secure our balanced moral judgment means that he is never entirely neutral or objective and Lady Mason's prostration in the fireless room, huddled in a shawl, suffering the chill of moral exclusion, makes a covert though powerful appeal as an emblem of her state of mind. It works in conjunction with a complex flow of sympathy — admiration for her sacrifice, fear as she contemplates the future and an element of physical suffering that sharpens our response to her mental anguish — which is effectively channelled through Mrs. Orme's instinctive gesture of human warmth and approval.

Mrs. Orme's indefinitely deferred judgment of Lady Mason marks her as the chief spokesman for Trollope's rhetoric of sympathy and this is balanced by Felix Graham's fitful role as ironist. By this means Trollope avoids

intrusive moralising, but he is careful that neither spokesman fully represents his moral vision. The fledging attorney is concerned with an abstract legal judgment of Lady Mason while Mrs. Orme is absorbed by the human need. One is concerned with justice, the other with equity. However, their main function is to present, from opposite points of view, cogent reasons why the reader must eschew simple, definitive judgments. Graham's idealistic stance emphasises that it is no good looking to the law for equity. Its double standards are most clearly in evidence at the emblematically futile congress. Graham's sympathy for the visionary speaker exposes the gulf which exists between its idealistic pretensions and the rooted cynicism of its participating lawyers, for Mr. Chaffanbrass's sneers form an appropriate commentary on Mr. Furnival's frantic attempts to get the case against his client quietly dropped. And in private the moral chaos of the system is aptly summarised by Judge Staveley's participation in the emblematic, fumbling chase of blind man's bluff at Noningsby: "Justice is blind," said Graham. "Why should a judge be ashamed to follow the example of his own goddess?" (I, 223). Graham, of course, confuses justice with equity because his faith in the law is divorced from his contempt for the system. But, like all the characters, in attacking one double standard he is trapped by another, for his sweeping condemnation of Lady Mason and her lawyers, which makes a submerged parallel with the harsh judgment of Sir Peregrine Orme, is only partly directed at the legal situation. As his theoretical attempt to train a wife implies, what he really loathes is Lady Mason's breaking a deeply-cherished myth. It is in this context that the irony of Judge Staveley's fatherly reprimand, "Graham, my dear fellow, judge not that you be not judged" (II, 122), which lies quietly at the heart of the novel's rhetoric, cuts through these moral ambiguities.

As Graham's role is undercut by the dichotomy between his public posture and his private life, so Trollope stresses the wholeness and integrity of Mrs. Orme's point of view

as her sheltered life is suddenly thrust into the public arena. These two figures are most strongly contrasted at the trial, where Graham's idealism crumbles into petulant frustration while Mrs. Orme courageously supports the wretched Lady Mason. Trollope's rhetoric of sympathy is at work in the intense moral relation between the two women, which serves to deepen our understanding of Lady Mason as the second trial duplicates the first. The present agony is felt more keenly as the past is more fully revealed. A widow, with a son Lucius's age, Mrs. Orme alone is competent to judge the nature of Lady Mason's temptation, the desperation of her desire to preserve her innocent son's good name, and the quest for equity which makes victory at the second trial a moral as well as a psychological imperative. Her refusal to do so gains a special significance. She recognises the fundamental incompatibility of public morality and private conscience. Unlike the idealists, Sir Peregrine Orme and Felix Graham, she rejects the static view of human character that an inflexible moral system implies, for she has seen how twenty years of lonely anguish suffered for her penniless son and her scrupulous act of conscience on behalf of Sir Peregrine Orme have ennobled Lady Mason.

The revelation of Lady Mason's inner nature develops the novel's central contrast between public and private judgment as Trollope's rhetoric exploits the ironic gap which exists between her public mask and her private face. Her mask is unwillingly assumed, worn with sorrow, and its unpeeling in the course of the novel is a sympathetic as well as an ironic process. Pity for her is felt most strongly immediately before she goes to the court in a scene of high irony when she breaks down before her son's priggish resentment but dare not let him learn the cause of her distress. Her subsequent movement from the private to the public ordeal elicits admiration for her sheer power of will as she carefully restores for the trial the impenetrably composed facade first assumed for the same occasion twenty years before. Inside the courtroom this mask allows

Trollope to explore the relation between the inward and the social worlds in greater depth. The central irony which the public mask reveals is that, despite the effective myth, public judgment, unlike the law, bears no relation to the rigid yet fragile bourgeois morality it is supposed to represent, but is a crude and frighteningly casual process. Public faces are intended to deceive and the packed courtroom at first believes Lady Mason innocent. For the spectators, however, the operation of the law is simply diverting theatre and when the evidence points plainly to her guilt they merely alter their mode of illusion and applaud her coolness for the accomplished mask of a heroine forger. For the larger world there is no double standard for there is no standard at all.

It is from this threateningly amoral world of the masses, of frank hedonists like the commercial travellers, Moulder and Kantwise, "pigs out of the sty of Epicurus" (I, 246), as Trollope calls them, that the middle classes retreat into defensively rigid codes. But, as Trollope shows so clearly, these unattainably high standards result in people erecting complex facades to evade the constant moral scrutiny of daily life. Worn as a matter of habit they are also a means of avoiding claims on one's humanity. This is what links such different men as the nostalgically conservative Sir Peregrine Orme and the abrasively radical Felix Graham. Their human reactions freeze into clumsy and inappropriate moral postures. In *Orley Farm* these masks are emblematic of double standards of behaviour and judgment. Sir Peregrine Orme and Felix Graham also share a blind faith in the law which means that at first they are easily deceived about Lady Mason. To the crafty lawyers, however, who know that the verdict of the courts represents justice rather than equity and for whom humanity's facades are their stock-in-trade, her guilt is transparently obvious. Yet they too are absolved from a responsible judgment, not by their beliefs, but by their professional roles. Legal etiquette forbids that they mention her guilt and the system of advocacy requires that they

conceal it. However, ironically, while as lawyers they uphold public morality, when their masks slip a little they are revealed as men who are bored by the dull propriety of Victorian marriage and it is as men, rather than as lawyers, that their interest and sympathy are aroused by the beautiful woman's secret guilt.

The assumption of masks baffles the achievement of justice and equity, and stultifies human intercourse. More importantly, as the precise regulation of human conduct puts intolerable strains on the personality and the mask is increasingly used to evade self-scrutiny, it threatens the inward life. The ironic shock of recognition that in Joseph Mason, Lady Mason's persecutor, mask and face have become the same, distances us in judgment on his horrifying egoism. Ostensibly his mindless rigidity of outlook simply reflects the impersonal law of commercial equity which rules his life and to which he clings long after it has become absurd and destructive. But at a deeper level this is a complex facade employed to cover his flight from self-judgment. His paranoid concern with equity, which he confuses with justice, is really on obscure source of self-justification: "Justice, outraged justice, was his theme. Whom had he ever robbed? To whom had he not paid all that was owing? 'All that have I done from my youth upwards.' Such were his thoughts of himself" (II, 239). Clearly this mask has a different function and value from Lady Mason's and the moral contrast between the two protagonists is brought out by Mason's own "trial." It occurs in a technically fascinating moment, made powerful by the complex interplay of sympathy with irony, when Lady Mason enters the courtroom and confronts her accuser: "As she thus looked her gaze fell on one face that she had not seen for years, and their eyes met. It was the face of Joseph Mason of Groby, who sat opposite to her; and as she looked at him her own countenance did not quail for a moment. Her own countenance did not quail; but his eyes fell gradually down, and when he raised them again she had averted her face" (II, 248). This moment encapsulates

their past experience, confirms Lady Mason's moral superiority and secures our moral commitment to her. At the same time it also ironically foreshadows the function of the law in achieving equity. Mason is soon to be trapped by his obsession. The passion for justice which he has projected onto the law renders him the victim of its brutal and inefficient commercial system. He thus falls by the code he has lived by and this fleeting moment becomes emblematic of the way outraged natural justice brings about *nemesis* in the course of time.

Indeed, this is an important aspect of the rhetorical design of *Orley Farm*, which includes Trollope's vision of a natural moral order, firmly rooted in antecedent human experience, asserting itself through the fluctuating ironies of life. The conclusion of Lady Mason's trial reaches a point of moral equilibrium which embodies a synthesis of our contrary impulses to sympathy and judgment. Although her acquittal, which avoids the obvious injustice of a verdict in favour of vicious Joseph Mason, corresponds to our sympathetic knowledge of her innate nobility, the trial also engineers her retribution and public shame. The private principles of equity and conscience are vindicated while the public myths of legal infallibility and feminine purity are preserved. In the larger development of the novel the growth of our sympathy for Lady Mason is balanced by Trollope's achievement of an aesthetic distance so that we can judge life's victims with critical detachment. This depends on our awareness in *Orley Farm* of the quiet presence of the traditional tragic framework of *hubris*, *harmartia* and *nemesis*, an ironic pattern at its centre which gives shape to Lady Mason's life and which is governed by a natural moral law. It includes all the egoists within its scope and the precise form of their retribution has an ironic appropriateness. Trollope makes clear that Lady Mason's excessive love for her unworthy son is a form of egoism and that her passion for equity is tainted by her pride in revenge on an unjust social order. In reclaiming the land from Dockwrath when her son comes

of age, Lady Mason re-enacts her original crime and sets in motion the train of events which leads inexorably to her second trial. It is not the crime, but her refusal to accept the second chance which life offers to alter her moral direction, that brings upon her the very fate she has striven to avoid, the ruin and humiliation of her son.

Joseph Mason's scheming for vengeance under the cloak of justice achieves no more than simple equity in the return of the farm to him. His faith in the law, which appeared to enshrine his harsh ethical code, merely ensures his defeat. Its true function as the focus and preserver of popular illusion is demonstrated in Lady Mason's victory and Joseph Mason is left nursing the torment of an insatiable obsession. For his step-brother, Lucius, the ready espousal of public values also brings about private defeat and anguish. He, too, becomes the ironic victim of his own fantasies, for it is his conceit in his new gentlemanly role as a landowner that resurrects the old legal battle which calls his status into question. His *nemesis* comes in his mother's shocking confession immediately after the trial, which humbles him in the very moment of his triumphant vindication. Even Sir Peregrine Orme is brought within the scope of retributive justice for, although Trollope overtly protects the reputation of the weak, he also insists on their share in the common guilt. Sympathy for the saddened old man is subtly balanced by one of the novel's most poignant ironies. When, after a great struggle, Sir Peregrine has courageously succeeded in revaluing the moral outlook of a whole lifetime and has broken free of the imprisoning attitudes of Victorian mythology, it is Mrs. Orme, his paragon of Victorian womanhood, who invokes them afresh in resolutely opposing his marriage with Lady Mason. Her earlier presence in the courtroom at Lady Mason's side, a pairing emblematic of their shared convictions, concealed a potent irony which Trollope allows to surface late in the novel with devastating effect. In spite of her undoubtedly generous humanity, even Mrs. Orme cannot reconcile the contrary demands of the neo-Calvinist ethic, private con-

science and public standards, when an issue touches her closely. But, ironically, this in turn is a false dilemma employed to mask her true commitment because, while in forbidding the match she is overtly defending family morality, like Lady Mason she is really protecting the security of her son. Mrs. Orme's ironic capitulation, perhaps more than anything else in the novel, demonstrates the destructive power of the Victorian moral code and its corrupting function of cloaking squalid self-interest.

In many ways *Orley Farm* is Trollope's *Measure for Measure*, but especially in the way it raises rather than resolves ethical problems. Although it does not have a moral to "prove" it is clearly the product of a profoundly moral intelligence. By means of its multiple perspectives of sympathy and irony Trollope reveals how contemporary social mythologies grow out of a contempt for humanity and stresses the almost schizoid lives they compel people to live. Inflexible but fragile, the restrictive codes to which they give birth threaten true moral order yet contain within themselves the germ of retribution. In *Orley Farm* Trollope's rhetoric, emphasising that moral scrutiny is a delicate and complex process, urges a compassionate yet responsible judgment of human frailty. In this novel rhetorical design and moral vision are artistically unified because, as Bulwer-Lytton and Trollope suggest, they are intimately related in the act of imaginative creation. Indeed, the subtle rhetorical design of *Orley Farm* is probably what George Eliot admired when she praised its intellectual force, and may be what Trollope had in mind when he placed it among his finest novels.

NOTES

¹Robert Martin Adams, "Orley Farm and Real Fiction," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 8 (1953), 37.

²Robert M. Polhemus, *The Changing World of Anthony Trollope*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 79.

³Oxford "World's Classics" edn., 1951, repr. 1970, a double volume edn. Each subsequent reference indicates volume and page.

⁴See T. H. S. Escott, *Anthony Trollope, his Work, Associates and Literary Originals*, (London: John Lane, 1913), p. 182. Bul-

wer's wife, Rosina, was an old friend of Trollope's mother, and Trollope was a frequent visitor at Knebworth.

- ⁵Compare Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "On Certain Principles of Art in Works of Imagination," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 93 (1863), p. 552, with Anthony Trollope, "On English Prose Fiction as a Rational Amusement," *Four Lectures*, ed. M. L. Parrish, (London: Constable & Co., 1938), p. 124.
- ⁶Compare Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "The Sympathetic Temperament," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 92 (1862), pp. 540-1, with Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, ed. F. Page, (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 232-3.
- ⁷Edward Bulwer-Lytton, "On Art in Fiction," *Pamphlets and Sketches*, (London: G. Routledge and Sons, 1875), p. 352. This article first appeared anonymously in the first volume of the *Monthly Chronicle* in 1838 under the title, "The Critic."
- ⁸Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, p. 233.
- ⁹As Trollope makes clear, *Orley Farm*, although a "trial" novel, is not concerned with arousing suspense and his insistence on this point may have been an attempt to dissociate it from the sensationalism of Miss Braddon's contemporary success, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861).