

## Mrs. Trollope's Artistic Dilemma in Michael Armstrong

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THE nineteenth-century social novel generally establishes a limited area in which to identify and perhaps offer solutions to a particular problem, often some aspects of the living and working conditions of factory workers, miners or, less frequently, agricultural laborers. It seems to have begun with *Oliver Twist*,<sup>1</sup> Charles Dickens' first attempt to treat at length such serious social problems as the adverse effects of the New Poor Law and the existence of criminal training-schools in the slums of large cities. Dickens' novel has survived because he was able to incorporate his social criticism into a work that has not only topicality but also artistic merit. It is this latter quality, by which a novelist transcends the issues to be discussed in his work, that ultimately determines a novel's durability. And it is this quality which poses the primary dilemma for a social novelist: how to propagandize without sacrificing the artistic integrity of the work.

Frances Trollope and Charlotte Tonna, who published social novels almost simultaneously in 1839-40, are significant for their commentaries on factory life despite critical recognition of their works' artistic deficiencies. Mrs. Tonna is important to us as a "social historian" because, in *Helen Fleetwood*, she is the first social novelist to use recorded testimony from Royal Commission and Parliamentary Committee reports (the "blue books") as dialogue in her fiction. Although recent critics claim little artistic merit for her novel, they do compare it favorably with Mrs. Trollope's *Michael Armstrong*, that "much inferior and far-fetched extravaganza"<sup>2</sup> significant nonetheless for reflect-

ing the author's detailed observation during her visit to Manchester factories.<sup>3</sup> In preferring *Helen Fleetwood*, these critics seem to be ignoring a major difference in the motivation behind the two novels. And while "motivation" is in itself not a justifiable criterion for critically judging a work of art, it often helps to explain why a given work takes the form or the approach it does. Mrs. Tonna's purpose was "unashamedly propagandistic": although she viewed "fabrication" distastefully, she wished to inform readers of *The Christian Lady's Magazine*, in which her novel was originally published, about the evils exposed by the blue books. Mrs. Trollope also intended to "draw the attention of her countrymen to the fearful evils inherent in the Factory system," as she states in her Preface. But she had another major purpose which influenced her choice of subject in the first place: she wanted to sell novels,<sup>4</sup> and she recognized that agitation for factory reform was seizing the popular mind. In other words, she wanted her story to have a social purpose and to appeal to a wider audience than Mrs. Tonna apparently chose to address.

In this purpose she was faced with the dilemma of the social novelist. Critics of *Michael Armstrong* too readily dismiss the work as an inartistic failure, and overlook the slight but very real success Mrs. Trollope achieves in resolving this dilemma. An examination of the artistic difficulties Mrs. Trollope encounters in this novel, and of her methods and success in solving them, will help to de-emphasize critical concern about the "social" aspects of the work and will increase emphasis on the "novel" as art. Where her desire to "tell a good story" conflicts with her social purpose, we must ask if she does violence to the one in order to do justice to the other.

*Michael Armstrong* has two plot strands. In the main one, the sadistic Sir Matthew Dowling owns many factories in the Lancashire manufacturing town of Ashleigh, in one of which young Michael and his lame brother Edward are employed. Pressured by a noblewoman, Mary Brotherton,

into taking Michael out of the factory and into his own home, Sir Matthew responds by plotting to place his despised charge in the more brutal and more isolated Deep Valley Mill, owned by Elgood Sharpton. Workers in this mill supposedly are "apprenticed," but actually are legally bound slaves until the age of twenty-one. With no parents and no authorities near enough to check on conditions, the young workers often sicken and die before their apprenticeship is to terminate. Michael manages not only to survive but to escape from Deep Valley, and the rest of the novel describes his ultimately successful quest to be reunited with his brother. In such a summary, this plot strand is easy enough to understand; it develops in conjunction with the minor strand, Mary Brotherton's attempts to learn about factory conditions.

But, we must ask whether Mrs. Trollope fails to integrate the two plot strands that she creates to convey her social message. Does she fail artistically in other areas? For example, does she find it necessary to emphasize social ideas by entering her pages in her own voice or by including lengthy dialogue which distracts attention from the major events of the plot? And does her social thesis preclude attempts to create developed characters?

Certainly, the characters in *Michael Armstrong* are types, rather than realistically complex individuals. Michael is the innocent young factory child whose destruction is planned by the consummate villain, Sir Matthew Dowling. Sir Matthew is evil throughout, and gleefully plots new ways by which to rob his young workers of their humanity; but Mrs. Trollope provides no motivation for such an attitude, and this is certainly a failing in characterization. For Sir Matthew is hardly believable either as a factory owner or — which he also is — as a family man with children of his own. His character may, in fact, weaken Frances Trollope's claim that her picture of factory life is true.<sup>5</sup> He owns many mills, is the wealthiest man in the vicinity, and forces his employees to work long hours.

Yet, according to both the compilers of the blue books and such apologists for the manufacturers as Charles Babbage and Andrew Ure, large manufacturers in particular were most careful to protect the well-being of the workers.<sup>6</sup> The smaller employers, those who owned few mills, had to squeeze work out of their men in order to realize what they considered a decent profit. In giving Sir Matthew the wealth and position of a large master but the anti-social drives of a small one, Mrs. Trollope has created an atypical owner. Indeed, his characterization led one contemporary reviewer to charge that *Michael Armstrong* is "an exaggerated statement of the vices of a class, and a mischievous attempt to excite the worst and bitterest feelings against men who are, like other men, creatures of circumstances, in which their lot has been cast. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, and despite this exaggeration in her portrait, Mrs. Trollope's characters fit her purposes in *Michael Armstrong*, for they enable her not only to expose factory working conditions but to comment on them. The reader recognizes, for example, that whatever Sir Matthew approves of, Mrs. Trollope opposes. So it is with her attack on the ineffectiveness of factory legislation, an attack the periodicals began as early as 1833.<sup>8</sup> Sir Matthew boasts that "old Sir Robert Peel's bill was to all intents and purposes a dead letter within two years after it was passed," a statement which would merely show the law's ineffectiveness and the need for stronger legislation. However, Dowling adds that it was an "absurd bill for the protection of infant paupers," and that "it was the easiest thing in the world to keep the creatures so ignorant about the bill, after the first talk was over, that they might have been made to believe any thing and submit to any thing. . . . They must either do what the masters would have them, or STARVE" (xi, 121). Such an attitude provides clear delineation of his character while simultaneously reinforcing Mrs. Trollope's general concern for factory children.

In creating such a character as Sir Matthew Dowling, Mrs. Trollope was appealing to a known Victorian taste for melodrama. The melodramatic element in *Michael Armstrong* is in fact one major reason that the novel has sunk into oblivion. For Sir Matthew's evilness is devoid of any redeeming qualities; he engenders in the reader no sympathetic understanding and no desire to understand. Similarly, Michael's purity and innocence are cloying in their own way: born good, raised good, he survives all the machinations of Sir Matthew and remains the good-natured, kind, and innocent youth who finally — melodramatically, of course — achieves personal happiness. But Michael's character also enabled Mrs. Trollope to convey social criticism because he had the Victorian audience's complete sympathy, evoked partly by his good nature and partly by the evil that Sir Matthew does to him. Thus the Victorian reader was agitated by the factory conditions in which such good young boys had to work, and by the poverty in which they were forced to live. When Michael is temporarily rescued from Sir Matthew's clutches, he tells his rescuer, "I should very much like never to go to work at the factory any more" (ii, 16). He thus expresses the desire held by every factory child in the book, and helps enforce the author's social message.

Mrs. Trollope thus achieves some artistic success with her characterizations. She is less fortunate in the narrative techniques she employs to convey social information to her readers. Too often she intrudes into the story in her own voice in order to comment directly on events and on the living and working conditions of the young factory workers. Her intrusions are occasionally so long that her readers can lose sight of the major plot action. At times, too, her comments are not immediately relevant to their context. Of the several major examples of such intrusions, one can serve to indicate the magnitude of her artistic difficulty. Praising her young hero's moral character late in the novel, Mrs. Trollope addresses the reader at length about the

deleterious effects of factory work. She concludes her two-page digression by emphasizing the hopelessness of such workers' lives: "The factory operative alone, of all to whom God has given the power of thought, is denied the delicious privilege of hope. It is this which degrades their nature" (xxv, 282). But such a comment is irrelevant to her hero, she immediately admits, and thus confesses to a major narrative digression for her social purposes alone.

Occasionally, though too rarely to compensate for her more lengthy and less relevant ones, her intrusions are more organic. Perhaps her finest use of the technique is her early description of the inside of Dowling's mill: "All this [noise and impure air] is terrible. But what the eye brings home to the heart of those, who look around upon the horrid earthly hell, is enough to make it all forgotten; for who can think of villanous [*sic*] smells, or heed the suffering of the ear-racking sounds, while they look upon hundreds of helpless children, divested of every trace of health, of joyousness, and even of youth?" (viii, 80). This picture of suffering children, sufficiently tied to the immediate scene to be relevant to the story, emphasizes her basic social theme and is guaranteed to gain the reader's sympathy.

Mrs. Trollope often conveys necessary information by reporting discussions between characters, but such a narrative technique creates a major artistic problem: the tedium inherent in pages of dialogue asserting the author's viewpoint on a social issue. When Mary Brotherton, a member of the upper class interested in the welfare of factory workers becomes a close friend of Mr. Bell, a local champion of factory workers, Mrs. Trollope fails to integrate their long discussions effectively into the rest of her story. The climax of her attack on the factory system occurs in chapter xix, which is almost entirely devoted to a discussion between the proselytizing Bell and his protegee. It is the culmination of earlier discussions between Miss Brotherton and other characters, but far surpasses them

in scope of material discussed, in length of passages, and in dullness. Wanting to get this propaganda into the story, Mrs. Trollope has chosen the method of explicit discussion, Mr. Bell answering Miss Brotherton's questions. She has set her story aside, and let the social concern override it.

Nonetheless, in a few other places in *Michael Armstrong*, Mrs. Trollope varies the discussion technique sufficiently to overcome these artistic difficulties and to reinforce her views indirectly. Mary Brotherton, for example, initially seeks answers to her questions about factory working conditions from some poorly informed people who echo arguments proposed by Andrew Ure and other apologists for the manufacturers: that factories provide employment for many people who otherwise would be unable to work (x, 96).<sup>9</sup> One of her acquaintances tells her that factory work, "such a blessing as it is to the poor," should not be considered unhealthy, for "There's numbers of [medical men] that declare it's quite impossible to tell in any way satisfactory that it can do 'em any harm at all" (xviii, 197). This idea is taken from the 1832 Sadler Committee Report, which passes no moral judgments about doctors who, when asked if injury would result from a child's standing for twenty-three hours in a hot and dusty room, replied, "I have no fact to direct me to any conclusion."<sup>10</sup> But some of the periodical writers who reviewed this report did disapprove of such answers, and maintained that harsh working conditions obviously would harm children. One was Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Ashley, writing for the *Quarterly Review* in 1836. Ashley had unsuccessfully sponsored a Ten Hours Bill in 1833, and in *Michael Armstrong* Mrs. Trollope was supporting his most recent bill before Parliament. She clearly reflects Lord Ashley's point of view in her many scenes of factory children in physical distress.<sup>11</sup> Thus she adds a complexity to the "discussion technique" means of conveying information to the reader: by exposing false points of view, she makes her own more immediately acceptable to her readers.

In particular, she shows by example that current working conditions harm children. Edward Armstrong, Michael's brother, lame when Mary Brotherton removed him from Dowling's mill, grows strong and healthy under her care (xxviii, 325). This event is part of the plot-action of the story which, tying together characterization and narrative technique, should provide the most telling examples of the author's artistic success or failure in combining social concern with an "interesting story." In *Michael Armstrong*, we have noted, Mrs. Trollope attempts to develop two plot strands: the adventures of young Michael first with Sir Matthew and then at Deep Valley; and the desire of the upper-class Mary Brotherton to learn about factory conditions and, as a result, to help both Michael and his brother Edward. Clearly the two strands are thematically related, but Mrs. Trollope's intense social message finally prevents her from unifying them.

For almost the entire first half of the novel, Mrs. Trollope does effect a good balance between her story of Michael's difficulties with Matthew Dowling and her story of Mary Brotherton's awakening to the realities of the harsh life of the factory worker. Dowling unwillingly takes Michael out of the factory and into his home, where he plots to place the youth in Deep Valley Mill; Mary Brotherton observes Michael's unhappiness with his position and with Sir Matthew, and determines to learn more about the conditions in which factory operatives — from whose labor her own father became wealthy — work and live. The emphasis is clearly on young Michael, the Mary Brotherton plot being subordinate to the title character's.

Nearly halfway through the novel, however, Mrs. Trollope begins to shift her emphasis. Michael is apprenticed to Elgood Sharpton at Deep Valley; after much false information, Mary Brotherton learns the truth about the evils of factory life and, missing Michael, instead takes his brother Edward out of the factory to be nursed back to health.



But Miss Brotherton is still concerned about Michael and, for most of the rest of the novel, searches for him.

The shift occurs at this point, for Mary becomes interested in factory reform in general through Mr. Bell. Mrs. Trollope uses their acquaintance for the long question-and-answer session in chapter xix that we have examined. The second half of the novel becomes increasingly episodic as Mrs. Trollope alternates rapidly between Michael's adventures and Mary's learning. Since the sections concerning Mary Brotherton's desire to learn about factory life have little action in the first place, the increased attention paid to her decreases the emphasis on the real "story" of the novel, Michael's, and is for social-issue purposes only. Further weakening the novel's structure in the last quarter of the book, Mrs. Trollope compresses time greatly: Michael escapes from Deep Valley where he has worked for three years (ch. xxv); his brother Edward, under Mary's care, has recovered (ch. xxvi); Michael is rescued from a suicide attempt by a farmer who gives him work until, at age eighteen, Michael visits Ashleigh where he attends a meeting for factory reform and hears Mary Brotherton and Edward (ch. xxvii). Mrs. Trollope then slows the pace from the hectic passage of seven years in three chapters as she winds up the melodrama: by chapter xxx Matthew Dowling is going insane; he dies in the next chapter; and Mrs. Trollope uses her final two chapters to tie loose ends together and to ensure that Michael will live happily ever after. It is an absurdly quick conclusion to the two plot strands which diverge widely in the second half of the book.

Mrs. Trollope seems to have recognized her difficulties, although she is unable to avoid them. In Mary Brotherton's reference to Michael as "a hero of romance" (xxii, 377), Mrs. Trollope acknowledges the episodic and romantic nature of the second half of the novel. It is her way of admitting that her characters do not develop, do not change: Michael is always the pure and innocent hero, Sir Matthew the evil

manufacturer. It is her means of explaining away — if not excusing — her own authorial intrusions and certainly the long question-and-answer discussions between characters. It is her acceptance too of her digressive, episodic plot, especially in the second half of the novel.

Nonetheless, we must recognize her early successful integration of her two plot strands and, just as importantly, the variation of the discussion technique which she introduces in Mary Brotherton's quest for knowledge. By Mary's insistent questioning, and more especially by the inadequate answers she receives early in the novel, we see her in the process of developing ideas about factory work and workers. As she questions the stereotyped generalizations she receives, we become as involved in the process of learning as she is. It is artistically unfortunate, to be sure, that Mrs. Trollope found it necessary to abandon this method of development in favor of the more typical — and more tedious — propagandizing, through Mr. Bell's responses in chapter xix. But it is to her credit that, at least for a time, Frances Trollope saw, recognized, and attempted to resolve the artistic difficulties inherent in the sub-genre she chose.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>At least Louis Cazamian, *The Social Novel in England*, transl. by Martin Fido (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 4-5, 124, 164-5, offers convincing arguments for Dickens' having begun with that novel, despite his early claim that the nineteenth century social novel "emerges" with Bulwer-Lytton's *Paul Clifford*. Cazamian is making an implicit distinction between the "social" novel, which deals with more general social problems, and what may be termed the "social problem" or "social issue" novel, which takes fewer and more specific problems as its domain. But he has used the term "social" novel for both, and I have adopted his terminology.
- <sup>2</sup>Ivanka Kovacevic and S. Barbara Kanner, "Blue Book Into Novel: The Forgotten Industrial Fiction of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 25 (1970), 156-157, 163-164. All information about *Helen Fleetwood* in this paragraph is from this source.
- <sup>3</sup>W. H. Chaloner, "Mrs. Trollope and the Early Factory System," *Victorian Studies*, 4 (1960), 160; Cazamian, p. 236.
- <sup>4</sup>Chaloner, 159.

<sup>5</sup>Frances Trollope, *The Life and Adventures of Michael Armstrong, The Factory Boy* (London: Henry Colburn, 1840), ch. xvii, p. 186. Subsequent references will be included in the text.

<sup>8</sup>Andrew Ure, *The Philosophy of Manufactures* (London: Charles Knight, 1835), pp. 342-343, 358; J. R. McCulloch, "Babbage on Machinery and Manufactures," *Edinburgh Review*, 56 (1833), 331.

<sup>7</sup>Cited by Chaloner, 165.

<sup>8</sup>[John Wilson], "The Factory System," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 33(1833), 425.

<sup>9</sup>Ure, pp. 17-18.

<sup>10</sup>Anthony Ashley Cooper, "The Factory System," *Quarterly Review*, 57 (1836), 404-406.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 397-398.

## Chess

He sits all day and plays his game of chess.  
 Alone - a champion of retirement.  
 This round is won, this last decade of sums  
 Shrinking his time into a silent square.

He knows he is the master of success  
 After those years of metal, hooks and knives  
 That stiffened fingers, shrunk his bones, his neck,  
 Clawing his days into a spine of care.

He wears a mandarin's impassiveness.  
 But now - for a most concentrating move:  
 His eyes are sharper and his Queen secure -  
 'Check Mate' he roars across the empty chair.

Lotte Kramer