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Jessie Phillips: A Tale of the Present Day

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Jessie Phillips: A Tale of the Present Day

Frances Trollope (1842 - 1843)

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Jessie Phillips opens in those halcyon days of childhood, in those “village days” in Deepbrook when there are no factories. Industrialization has not yet spoiled the pristine landscape of human decency and community conscience. It is a time when money comes easily, and many young people go to the marriage altar with only cheerful expectations. All is well – in fact, all is too well. The reader knows such days cannot continue forever. Indeed, Trollope warns that the children are marrying “too young by at least ten years—losing thereby the happiest portion of existence, and doing all they could towards turning the pleasant village of Deepbrook into a very unpleasant one.” Besides typifying the pessimism in which Trollope usually portrayed marriage, the opening of the novel augurs the convulsions to come from a world that will change too fast. The symbolism is apparent in Trollope’s contrast of the “gay-looking, nicely whitewashed, flowery little village of Deepbrook” with the emergence of the “bare-faced monster”, the Union Workhouse.

One symptom of this social epilepsy was the drastic fluctuation of economics, allowing what had always been the laboring class to now transcend class and caste, a concern for Trollope, who did share some Tory sympathies. Just as likely, too, were the prospects of losing all one had once counted upon, an experience that Trollope also feared at one time when creditors were ready to cart off her husband, Thomas, to Fleet Street. In *Jessie Phillips*, we meet another Tom, the son of a woman who worked as a wet nurse to the young heir of a castle and now enjoys a generous annuity from the squire. While growing up, Tom tasted food served on a silver spoon and now he wants that silver spoon for himself. Like many industrious Victorians, he borrows and overextends himself, eventually landing up in debtors’ prison. His mother has to assume the upkeep of his five children and pregnant wife. Humiliatingly, she has to beg for assistance from the guardians of the parish. She is met with only derision that she, a woman of long-standing respect in the community, must ask for charity. All petitions are handled in such a way, as to comply with Benthamite policy, to make it so unsavory for the poor to expect hand-outs that they should prefer to find work instead. But Mrs. Greenhill is now retired from employment and is forced to take care of her son’s family, in a situation not of her making.

The second time she requests assistance, the board wants to put her and her family into the poorhouse instead of giving her a few shillings. Trollope censures the New Poor Law for rendering “the laboring poor of England helpless, hopeless, destitute” (1: 129). It is only after the passing of the Insolvent Act that Tom is finally returned to liberty so that he can support his family. This act seems reasonable to Trollope: How else is a man supposed to work off his debts and care for his family if he is in prison?

The squire of the parish, Dalton, has ten daughters and a son. The eldest daughter, Ellen, takes an inheritance from an aunt and relieves Tom of his debt when no one else will help. Her brother, Frederick, has turned out very spoiled, obnoxious, conceited, and self centered. He is bitter toward Ellen because their grandfather has left the inheritance to her unless Frederick marries and produces a male heir.

Also in this village is Jessie Phillips, a beautiful young woman who diligently supports her mother through needlework. It is her misfortune to fall under the charm of Frederick, who beguiles her into a relationship, assuring her that they will marry when he comes of age at 30. Before then, his father will never consent to a marriage between two unequals. Trollope takes a moment here to point out to the reader that this sort of business does go on: A man who promises to wed a maid is not socially or legally bound to keep that promise. In fact, the law protects him instead of the girl (1: 181-91). When Jessie discovers that she is pregnant, Frederick will have nothing to do with her. The village scorns her and refuses to hire her needle. Without recourse, Jessie enters the poorhouse. Trollope describes the deplorable conditions to a reading audience who has had no notion how unchristian the workhouse system really is. To the reader, Jessie is not a statistic they read about in a newspaper, nor is she a subspecies of street rat. She is a hardworking, wholesome country innocent whose morals have been compromised by a ne're-do-well aristocrat.

In the poorhouse she is persecuted by prostitutes, although they share her predicament. She also encounters Mrs. Susan White, there because a fire began in a bakery and then burned down her house. Trollope wants to let her readers know that they are only one catastrophe away from the workhouse themselves. Although Mrs. White shows Jessie kindness, she believes that Jessie must suffer for her sins as a fallen woman. Meanwhile, Mrs. White has to endure a lot of suffering herself because the workhouse separates men and women, and thus she is not allowed to see her husband. Nor is she allowed to see her little son who is in a hospital recovering from his burns.

If this treatment is not obviously a transgression of biblical ethics, such as putting asunder and man and wife and treating the poor like condemned felons, then Trollope makes clear her derision of hypocrisy shown by Christians who support the New Poor Law, in the person of a pastor who has been paid liberally to preach on Sundays and pray for the heathens in the workhouse. This self-righteous money grabber refuses to spend even a few minutes to comfort Susan and Jessie, even though they beg him for solace. Then there is the doctor, the apothecary, who is supposed to tend to the inmates of the poorhouse, who is a drunk.

Jessie switches clothes with the village idiot, Sally, in order to escape from the workhouse and entreat Frederick to take care of their child. After giving birth in a cowshed, she leaves the baby in order to look for food. Frederick, who has been watching her from afar, knows the baby is in the shed. In what must have been perceived as one of the most inexcusable and shocking acts in all of literature that surpasses (and preempts) Hetty Sorrel's abandonment of her baby, Frederick, with his booted foot, stamps his own child to death, and dumps the tiny corpse into a litter box and covers it with ferns.

His sister suspects his guilt and tries to force him to confess. Callous brute that he is, Frederick persuades her and everyone else that she is insane. Good creature that she is, Ellen becomes so confused and distressed that this betrayal nearly kills her. Justice is served, however, when Sally knocks the profligate Frederick into the river. Ellen recovers and marries a lord, the truth comes out in a trial, and Jessie is declared not guilty. However, in order to conform to conventional morality she dies at the close of the book, although Trollope makes it clear what kills her is the Poor Laws and especially its bastardy clause which excuses men from having to provide for their illegitimate children. In *The Politics of Story in Victorian Social Fiction* Rosemarie Bodenheimer puts it quite succinctly: The women (characters in the novel as well as Trollope) "unmask the guilty secrets of the patriarchs, set out to rescue the victimized poor, and reap their rewards in the conventional form of marriage" (25). Ann-Barbara Graff also notes that all the while they act as "moral beacons to identify the hypocrisy at the root of the social evils" (56; Graff's chapter, "Fair, Fat and Forty" can be found in *Frances Trollope and the Novel of Social Change*).

Jessie Phillips was serialized with the expectation that that marketing practice would reach an optimum multitude. Trollope not only wanted the income from her novel, she wanted to provoke social change about the 1834 Poor Law. In her conclusion she urged for a New Poor Law, "to save the country from the rapidly corroding process which can eat like a canker into her strength.... It appears evident that much of the misery so justly complained of might yet be remedied, were a patient and truly tolerant spirit at work *in all quarters* upon the subject" (3: 323-24). As the novel appeared from December 1842 through November 1843, Trollope received an avalanche of mail that variously questioned her verisimilitude, gave her more information to strengthen her cause, or accused her of treating an indelicate subject for a woman. *John Bull* published this indictment: "Mrs Trollope has sinned grievously against good taste and decorum. The particular cause which she has selected for reprobation is the *bastardy clause* – not perhaps the best subject for a female pen." It seems ironic that a discussion of the Poor Laws and this clause in particular, which affected women the most harshly, was seen as unfit for the eyes of female readers. Regardless, less than one year after the first appearance of *Jessie Phillips*, the House of Commons passed the Little Poor Law. It included a new bastardy clause that held fathers financially responsible for their illegitimate children.

Listed as a "Nonsuch Classic", *Jessie Phillips*, as of April 2006, has become available through Tempus Publishing.

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