

## Critical review of *Barchester Towers*

Arthur Stupay

I am not sure how I came to chose to do a critical analysis of Barchester. I am completely unfamiliar with church practice and politics, especially Anglican Affairs. That said, I am usually more comfortable in discussing economics, politics and events impacting the fairer sex. Also, I did not have the time to put the book in some historical context, hoping some of you can.

This book was in the long list of popular writers in the English language of the mid- nineteenth century, like Dickens and Thackeray. As we all know, this was part 2 of a six-part series on Chronicles of Barsetshire. What is amazing is that he polished this manuscript off in six months. These 19<sup>th</sup> century Englishmen were prolific. One book that I did not read for my essay was one by Margaret Markwick, Trollope and Women, which probably would have helped.

As you have read, the book starts with a scene in Hiram's Hospital with the prolonged dying scene of Old Bishop Grant, with his son, the archdeacon, expecting to be appointed to the post of Bishop, by the Prime Minister. The process is like killing of cats we are told, which refers to the many ways to kill cats or to promise positions following a death of an official, like by Grantly/ This is all very Oxfordian and a delight, or rather something from the Master of Lazarus, a beggar in Luke.

In my days in New York politics, one would not expect the son to be appointed to job held by his late father, unless his name was Cuomo.

Then we move to the very successions in the as church positions are shifted about when one becomes vacant. I am particularly friendly to Dr. Stanhope, who spends years at a time in Italy, collecting a large church stipend and thus a tax-payer funded salary. The Signora, Neroni, the so-called cripple, a notably charming and deadly creature, is also fully engaged in the various plots. The image her of being carried about by servants is hilarious.

But what are the goals of the Signora, Stanhope, Grantly, Slope, the Bishop, with sizeable incomes to support their lifestyle, which ae spelled out in specific terms of at least 450 or 1,000 or 1,200 or more. It is better than some corporate pensions, and it is nearly impossible to be fired.

Maybe the best of the lot are Dr. Arabin, Dr. Harding and his daughter Eleanor or Nelly, who is a widow, possibly on the make.

I really enjoyed all the women characters, and there are many. There are those who are scheming, pathetic, hilarious, starting with Mrs. Proudie, and ending with the Signora Madeline Vesey Neroni. But the scheming of Dr. Stanhope's daughter was particularly Charlotte who was trying to arrange marriage for her brother, Bertie. Eleanor devastatingly responded to a possible marriage between them. After he says that he had hoped she would regard him as more than a friend, she answers severely, "Never, never. If I have ever allowed myself to do anything to encourage such an idea, I have been very much to blame, etc etc". A mess for the young fool Bertie. The same goes for Obediah Slope.

The love scene with Mr. Arabin is also cool, but it heats up and they even have a furtive kiss.

But I think a highlight is the power and "work" of the ladies: Mrs Proudie, Miss Thorne, Mrs. Quiverful, Madeline and Charlotte Vesey, as well as Eleanor are the real heroes and far more interesting in my view than the church officials. They all knew what they were doing.

There are aspects of church politics that we can leave for the discussion. Of course, it is not unique to the Anglicans, but is found in every denomination and religion. But the vestments, the marvelous cathedrals, and bible language are all part of the show and make for marvelous stories, But there is little biblical discourse here. Fortunately, there is no attempt to persuade. The aim was to tell a really good story on subjects we all know about: from sexual liaisons, interfering relatives, friends who have their agendas, politics, and marvelous humor, like the machinations of the Signora.

So what is wrong with a good-to-great story in the hands of a master, told with enthusiasm and energy.

Let's now discuss continue with the questions.

## **Questions for Discussion of Barchester Towers**

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1. There were many themes in the book, including male/female relationships, the role of women in church affairs, and church administration itself. Which aspects of the novel appealed to you?
2. What do you think of casual antisemitism, as expressed by Charlotte Stanhope (to Bertie): “Charlotte: “How do you mean to live then?” Bertie: “I must regard myself as a young raven”. Charlotte: “You will have enough to supply yourselves with gloves and boots, that is, if the Jews have not got the possession of it all. I believe that they have the possession of it all.” P.108
3. What do you make of the contrasts of the local clergy: Slope, Arabin and Quiverful (full of quiver, with 14 children)? Can they be effective church leaders?
4. What do you think motivated Trollope to write about Barchester: religious controversy, unusual community, intimate knowledge, potential popularity?
5. How does Trollope compare with Dickens or Thackeray (like *Vanity Fair*), and contrast them with the French or Russian writers of the same period? Or should we leave the Russians out?