

Kassie Baron

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Blood Libel: Gossip and Anti-Semitism in Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*

Augustus Melmotte, the central figure in Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*, is a ruthless financier of unknown origins. When he arrives in England he brings with him a wife, daughter, and rumors of vast wealth and the cunning used to acquire it. Trollope's depiction of Melmotte and his wife, Madame Melmotte, a known "Jewess," utilize stereotypical characterizations of Jews in order to create the Melmottes and a number of secondary actors. These stereotypes change based on whether the character in question is Jewish or just rumored to be Jewish, but in either situation Trollope alters and adds to these stereotypes to make these fictional people more realistic. Because of the anti-Semitism that follows through the literature of the period, these tropes were familiar enough to be readily recognized by contemporary readers. Though this is a satirical novel and a certain level of inversion of these motifs is expected in order to exaggerate their ridiculousness, Trollope does just the opposite. He shows that all the rumors that surround the Jewish characters and their exaggerated stereotyping are accurate reflections of their characters.

Novels of the Victorian period, and the social structures surrounding it, are well known for their less than sympathetic treatment of Jews. These "novelistic traditions" create the "paradigms that nurture racial hatred" and perpetuate these stereotypes. This literary anti-Semitism finds its roots well before the Victorian era and leaves a legacy that lasts long into the

future. In this way “anti-Semitism is seen as a disease passed down from generation to generation through the medium of the printed word” (Ragussis, 115). These novels are typically narrated by a “reasonably reliable nineteenth-century man of letters” who is able to convince his audience that “Jews really do deserve their fate” as villains and the repercussions their actions bring (Berman, 60). Jews become comedic or villainous depending upon the author’s prerogative and are rarely afforded the depth that would allow them to be appear as fully developed human beings. Despite the ejection of the Jews from England in 1290 and the miniscule subsequent population, Shakespeare’s Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice* becomes the “paradigm by which we [readers] understand and measure all other Jews” (Ragussis, 117). Until fairly recently Shylock has typically been played “by a comedian as a repulsive clown or, alternatively, as a monster of unrelieved evil” (Adler, 341). This dichotomy allows for two characterizations of Jews; this, when paired with the stereotype of the “greedy Jew,” forces a situation where the character is in “conflict between love and money” making a truly romantic storyline farcical or devious (Ragussis, 118).

These stereotypes stem from a long tradition of branding Jews as an “other” and giving them characteristics that exaggerate their social circumstances or traditional practices. The most obvious of these is the Blood Libel which refers to “a centuries-old false allegation that Jews murder Christians – especially Christian children – to use their blood for ritual purposes, such as an ingredient in the baking of Passover Matzah (unleavened bread)” (ADL). These rumors strongly persisted from Medieval times into modern times despite the fact that the Halakhic law that regulates Jewish behavior prohibits both human sacrifice and the consumptions of blood (Telushkin, 19, 712). The origins of this myth stems back to the longstanding erroneous interpretation of the *metzitzah* ritual during the circumcision ritual, or *brit milah*, when the rabbi

or *mohel* sucks the blood away from the wound. This practice was meant to stave off infection before the advent of modern antiseptics and none of the blood is ever consumed. This practice is still performed purely for its traditional value as a *mitzah* and then only by more orthodox sects.

This belief carries into modernity in such incarnation as *Foreskin Man* (Hess). In the second issue of the comic book, Foreskin Man fights off Monster Mohel who is attempting to get as many foreskins as possible and consume the blood from the wound in the name of *Yahweh*. This comic book was distributed as protest against the circumcisions of minors. Even though much of the stigma surrounding the *brit milah* has been dismissed, there are still these outliers that continue to hold to the stereotypes as true and perpetuate them ad infinitum.

The action of *The Way We Live Now* falls in between these two periods. The concept of the literal consumption of blood and lives shifts to the consumption of finances and livelihoods, utilizing the greedy stereotype in conjunction with the idea of ruthlessness and apathy in the financial sphere. These ideas again stem back to medieval times when most Abrahamic faiths, specifically Christianity, forbade charging interest of any kind; Jews were only forbidden from charging interest to other Jews. At the same time the church in England forbade “Jews to own land, to farm, to join crafts and guilds” ostensibly forcing Jews to rely on usury as a means of income (Boroson). This instigated the belief that that Jews were greedy, unscrupulous with finances, and leached their money only from the livelihoods of others, never from their own work while never producing something of value for the society in which they live.

Rumors affect not just Jews in society broadly, but also those characters in *The Way We Live Now* who are rumored to be Jewish. Roger Carbury, the representative of traditional, often outdated, values in the novel, allows rumors to influence his social behavior concerning the potentially Jewish Melmottes: “he was a gentleman – and would have felt himself disgraced to

enter the house of such a one as Augustus Melmotte” (Trollope, 61). Before he even meets Melmotte he has a base of purloined knowledge from which he draws conclusions concerning Melmotte’s character. These types of rumors affect not just the Jews in the novel, but also the three other distinct markets in the novel: the financial market, the publishing market, and the marriage market.

The financial market in the novel centers on “the Great Railway to Vera Cruz” and the board that controls it. The railway is a scheme dreamed up by Mr Fisker, an American and business partner of Paul Montague. He proposes that shares for a railway in America be sold to investors in England and the initial investors be paid off by the money of subsequent investors – no railway would ever need to be built in order to produce a large financial return for those who are in control of the shares. Melmotte becomes the head of the board because of his perceived financial prowess and is one of only a handful of people who know that this is not a legitimate business venture. Because there is no actual good or product being produced Fisker, the American man who initially proposes the plan, “unhinges the shares’ worth from the railway’s material base” (Clabaugh, 3). By divorcing the production of goods from the act of generating money, Fisker proposes a process by which shareholders are able to make money out of nothing. The end result of this Ponzi scheme ends up mirroring the criticisms that surrounded the Jews who practice usury. By allowing investors to take their pool of “ready money” and leave it to sit with the board and collect a larger return at some indefinite point in the future the scheme essentially allows investors to collect interest on their money so long as it stays out of their direct control – no actual work must be done and no goods produced – they are living off the money of others without doing anything in return.

The business of speculation becomes entirely founded on rumor. The success of the railway is determined by others believing that the railroad is already successful. Rumors of the success of the business are vital to ensuring their continued success in the future; therefore, unfounded statements concerning the railroads profitability were made in order to gather greater interest from potential investors and support from the public who will continue to generate positive rumors. For this reason, Melmotte ensures that other investors do not realize that they too have become the giant “swindlers” that he is rumored to be, and avoids any and all questions concerning the actual progress of the proposed railroad so they will remain unaware that they are in unscrupulous practices.

The publishing market is very remarkably to the financial market of the railway in consideration of its need for rumors to ensure success. The novel itself opens with Lady Carbury writing letters to three editors in order to promote her new book, *Criminal Queens*. In order to secure their promise that they will endorse her book in their papers Lady Carbury shamelessly flatters and flirts with these men, insinuating there “might be some mysterious bond between her and them” that she never plans to act upon (Trollope, 9). The book itself focuses on the personal details of what Lady Carbury considers to be “criminal queens” – Marie Antoinette, Mary Queen of Scots, Cleopatra, and so on – and essentially amounts to gossip about their lives and behaviors. Though Lady Carbury “would not probably say that the book was accurate” or even that it is well written, but she did put significant effort into its completion and is dependent upon its success to bring her income (Trollope, 11). Clearly, Lady Carbury does not expect to obtain this money by “producing good books, but by inducing certain people to say that her books were good” (Trollope, 19). For Lady Carbury, the rumor that she wrote a quality book is significantly more important than actually producing that book and she is willing to go to great lengths to

ensure these rumors will be spread by the right people. Once these rumors are spread, Lady Carbury can count on significant support from what would become her readership and the financial support that would follow.

The marriage market is significantly more straight-forward than the financial and publishing markets. Here the rumor of vast wealth is the key factor, for a woman, in ensuring a desirable match or, for a man, in pursuing that match. When they arrive in England, Marie Melmotte becomes the most eligible bachelorette on the market. Marie, by various accounts, “was not beautiful, she was not clever, and she was not a saint,” rather it is the rumors of her father’s great fortune that makes her a desirable match for every bachelor in like social standing or above. For this reason Sir Felix Carbury must borrow money from his mother, Lady Carbury. He says, “If I can marry Miss Melmotte, I suppose all will be right. But I don’t think the way to get her would be to throw up everything and let all the world know that I haven’t got a copper” (Trollope, 25). Without the appearance of having money Sir Felix stands no chance of effectively courting Marie Melmotte; when he tries and it is discovered he has no money Augustus Melmotte will not approve of the match and claims he would never give Marie any of his wealth if she elopes with him (Trollope, 183). The importance of both money and heritage are incredibly important in the marriage market. As in Felix’s case, without the wealth to support a title, there is little chance that a courtship would be successful.

Heritage and title continue to be important for other characters in the novel. Instead of the importance of title, Madame Melmotte, Augustus Melmotte’s wife, is primarily concerned with her Jewish heritage and the rumors surrounding that because of it. She “was fat and fair – unlike in colour to our traditional Jewesses; but she had the Jewish nose and the Jewish contraction of the eyes” (Trollope, 31). Mr Alf, one of the editors Lady Carbury attempts to consent to endorse

her book, is also “supposed to have been born a German Jew” and Mr Cohenlupe is referred to as “a gentleman of the Jewish persuasion” (Trollope, 13, 73). In assigning these characters their Jewishness, Trollope assumes that certain things are then understood by the reader, e.g. what it means for Madame Melmotte to have the “Jewish contraction of the eyes.” Trollope uses Madame Melmotte to illustrate the role of the “Jewess” in the novel. Her “Jewess” is able to adapt to social changes more readily than the Jewish male. This eventually has greater implications for the financial sphere, again relying on the stereotype, that will be elaborated upon later.

Rumors or insinuations of Jewishness affect characters just as much as those who are explicitly Jewish. Other characters' perceptions are altered and, like Roger Carbury, they have no desire to be seen with these characters out of fear for their reputation. These rumors are perhaps the most clear in the case of Mr Melmotte. He is described as “a large man, with bushy whiskers and rough thick hair, with heavy eyebrows, and a wonderful look of power about his mouth and chin” (Trollope, 31). He is purported to have many characteristics that are indicative of Jewish heritage, and though he is not described as having the “traditional” nose and eyes like his wife, his general physicality suggests that he may be of Jewish heritage. This implies that he does not conform morally or ethically to his Christian counterparts; this is shown to be precisely true in his financial dealings and the insinuations of domestic abuse found throughout the novel. Melmotte is also frequently seen in the company of other Jews, particularly Mr Cohenlupe who “went about a good deal with Melmotte” (Trollope, 77). Through his descriptions and associations, Trollope makes a clear insinuation asserting Melmotte's Jewish affiliation.

Rumor plays a substantial role in building Melmotte's character. On page thirty-one he is said to be “regarded in Paris as the most gigantic swindler that had ever lived,” but thirty pages

later on sixty-one it is stated that “people said that Mr Melmotte had the reputation throughout Europe as a gigantic swindler.” These two passages concisely indicate how quickly rumors grow and become exaggerated. The importance of what “people say” is explicitly clear. These claims are not substantiated by any basis in fact or evidence, yet they carry great influence over those who are receptive to them. Throughout the course of the novel these exaggerated claims become corroborated by his actions with the railroad board. Trollope uses stereotypes to instigate these rumors and to create his characters, but he never allows for these rumors to be fictitious. Instead of relieving these character from the slander of these rumors they are all eventually shown to be true through the course of the narrative, in turn justifying these stereotypes as legitimate understandings of these Jewish characters.

Hebrew lineage is traditionally passed maternally to the children; because of this Marie Melmotte should, for all intents and purposes, be a “Jewess.” However, rumors abound and “there was considerable doubt whether Marie was the daughter of that Jewish-looking woman” (Trollope, 33). Because she is passably pretty and does not contain any of the markers indicative of a Jew and “having no trace of the Jewess in her countenance,” again the nose and contraction of eyes, people are unable to believe that she should be a member of that “othered” race and allowed for the rumor that she was not in order to avoid the sequestration of the inheritance that makes her so desirable (Trollope, 32). Like all other rumors in the novel this too is eventually substantiated: “Marie had in truth been born before her father had been a married man” (Trollope, 91). Relieved of the burden of Judaism, Marie is able to remain a prize on the marriage market. Because Trollope had her rumored to not be Jewish, as opposed to her father, she does not have to conform to any of the stereotypes that Trollope places on other characters, instead she is free to be a naïve woman average in almost every other way.

Every male, Jewish character becomes ingrained, in some way, in economic markets. Mr Alf, one of recipients of a letter from Lady Carbury, owns one of the morning papers. He can be very curt in addressing issues and, in fact, was not overly receptive to Lady Carbury's letter. He did allow for a review of her book to be published, but had set one of his "most sharp-nailed subordinates [to] set upon her book, and had pulled it to pieces with almost rabid malignity" (Trollope, 83). However, in the name of diplomacy, he does not take credit for the review in Lady Carbury's presence, though as the editor it would have been well within his purview to print whatever he desired. He is also described a ruthless and sarcastic, willing to be ambiguous enough to claim he was correct regardless of the outcome of the situation (Trollope, 229). In his manner he is just as callous and ruthless in the publishing market as Melmotte is in the financial sphere. Alf differs from Melmotte in that his curse is not maliciousness and greed, but rather pride and egoism. Despite this difference he still appears to wear the mantle of the villainous or devious Jew.

Mr Melmotte's association with the financial market differs significantly than that of Mr Alf's. His work is more dramatic and through rumor and stereotyping, comes to resemble a variation on the Blood Libel theme in a number of ways. When Roger Carbury thinks of Melmotte, he reveals, "People said of him that he had framed and carried out long premeditated and deeply laid schemes for the ruin of those who had trusted him, that he had swallowed up property of all who had come in contact with him, that he was *fed with the blood of widows and children*" [emphasis added] (Trollope, 61). Roger Carbury is using rumors of his financial dealings to draw conclusions about Melmotte's character. Based on what others have told him he comes to the conclusion that Melmotte is not to be trusted with money and that he is conniving, manipulative, and greedy. This is the stereotype that is passed on from the days of usury in

medieval times: the greedy Jew that lives off the work of other people and swindles them out of their money by charging interest.

This rumor goes beyond the basic stereotyping of the greedy Jew to push these statements into the Blood Libelous territory. By implying that this money comes from the “blood of widows and children” it becomes directly associated with the vampirism of blood libel, predatory and calculating attack on others’ money and livelihoods. Unlike the true Blood Libel rumor the blood consumed here is metaphoric representing the blood, sweat, and tears of hard work. Much like Melmotte’s negotiation between actual and rumored Jewishness, other rumors surrounding Melmotte negotiate a middle territory between the literal and figurative blood lust transforming it into something closer to financial ruthlessness. In the financial realm Jews become not just viciously greedy, but violently so. They are willing to sacrifice the lives of others for their own personal gain.

Trollope does offer a chance at redemption for the Jewish characters in the novel. Melmotte’s behavior might not deserve to be classified as superior to anyone else’s, but Trollope does also offer to the reader his redeeming qualities. Melmotte’s end comes after repeated embarrassment, but “even as Trollope details his ignominy, the swindler refuses to be ignominious. Staggering drunk, he doesn’t fall; Melmotte is still in control” (Park, 436). Even through his various embarrassments, Melmotte remains the ultimate authority over his life and refuses to relinquish authority over his decisions. After his many deceits and unscrupulous actions are revealed, instead of allowing himself to suffer the “indignities and penalties to which the law might have subjected him” he takes his life “by a dose of prussic acid” (Trollope 642). Melmotte refuses to let decisions be made for him; though he willing to bring indignity upon himself he would rather take his own life than have indignities forced upon him by others. Even

though it cannot truthfully be said that Melmotte acts in a manner that correlates to conventional virtue, he is able to deliver himself from total disgrace through “classical courage and self-control” (Park, 436).

Mr Melmotte’s Wife, Madame Melmotte also offers a sort of redemption for Jews in the novel. When Mr Longestaffe approaches Mr Melmotte for money to support his family Melmotte replies, “I think not, Mr Longestaffe. My wife would not like the uncertainty” (Trollope 99). This statement indicates that Madame Melmotte, a “Bohemian Jewess,” has enough background in finances to recognize good and bad investments. Though it could be a simple attempt to shift blame to his long-suffering wife, it nonetheless relies heavily upon the stereotypical financial sensibilities of Jews and, presumably, “Jewesses” (Trollope 24). The novel itself “pits the Jewish man of commerce against the ethos of feudal England, but seeks to accommodate the Jewess within it,” out of a belief that the Jewish woman is more accepting of cultural change than the Jewish man (Valman 136). Madame Melmotte does not offer any unique perspective on social or moral behavior, rather she becomes the vessel through which Trollope articulates the need, if not the course, for a kind of redemptive form of financial discourse that would be more willing to adapt to modernity while still maintaining the modesty that and empathy that the male Jew, through Melmotte, is seen to lack.

The final character that could be seen as offering redemption for the portrayal of Jews in the novel Mr Brehgert, who is “absolutely a Jew,” becomes the ethical center of the novel and the most upstanding character presented (Trollope 461). Trollope does not abandon any of the traditional stereotypes in his creation of Brehgert. Initially when he is introduced he is described as “a fat, greasy man, good-looking in a certain degree, about fifty, with hair dyed black, and a beard and moustache dyed a dark purple colour” (Trollope 460). In this description he appears as

a grotesque caricature of a man. Trollope pairs this with his occupation as a banker, creating the foundation for the humorous/villainous Jew as a romantic interest for the callous Georgiana Longestaffe. However, by the end of the novel the reader has forgotten about Brehgert's purple beard in light of his almost flawless behavior. Even through Georgiana's appalling treatment of him – telling her mother “the worst at once Mr Brehgert is a Jew” – Brehgert maintains his affection and promises to make her happiness the “study of [his] life” (Trollope 499, 605). The marriage is only broken off when Brehgert admits to Georgiana that due to his financial situation he will no longer be able to afford his house in town, solely for which Georgiana was planning to marry him. He reveals this in order to give her every chance to “recede from [her] engagement,” instead of holding her to the contract now that his financial circumstances have changed.

Recognizing “her own value as a Christian lady of high birth and position giving herself to a commercial Jew,” Georgiana at no point considers that Brehgert may want to recede from his own engagement and pressures him to keep the house so that she could garner the benefits from their match (Trollope 608). Brehgert recognizes Georgiana's sentiments and, in consideration of her feelings, calls off the engagement himself. Though Georgiana was “unwilling to reject the Jew, the Jew has rejected her. As we [the readers] applaud her comeuppance, we may reflect that in *The Way We Live Now*, a novel containing many Jews, not all of the admirable, the Christians show up very much worse” (Park, 438). With Georgiana and Brehgert as the prime example, it becomes clear that the Jews in the novel may be harshly stereotyped grotesqueries, but ethically they frequently behave better than their Christian counterparts.

Trollope's use of Jewish stereotyping in the novel frequently crosses over into the realm of the anti-Semitic motifs so prevalent in Victorian Literature. He is able to alter the trope just minimally enough that they are still identifiable by readers while giving these character enough

positive attributes to make them human and realistic. By offering these characters redemptive qualities, he does not lessen these tropes' effects, rather he creates realistic characters that readers can easily identify and identify with. Trollope presents these stereotypes through libelous rumors of the slightly manipulated Jewish bloodlust trope in order to mirror the way these stereotypes are perpetuated, through hearsay and exaggeration. Blood Libel is altered to align with the financial field in order to fit with a more realistic setting and contemporary social structure. However, by creating these characters in such a realistic manner, Trollope does more to reaffirm these stereotypes than detract from them. Trollope offers a situation wherein the characters realism only enhances the assumption that these characteristics are indeed inherent to Jewish characters and that the rumors are, in fact, true.

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