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## **“He certainly was rough to look at”: Social Distinctions in Anthony Trollope’s Antipodean fiction**

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### **Abstract**

The following article concentrates on the representation of social class in Anthony Trollope’s Antipodean stories, *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil* (1874) and “Catherine Carmichael” (1878). Although Trollope was aware of the problematic nature of class boundaries in the Antipodes, he nevertheless employed the English model of class distinctions as a point of reference. In the two stories he concentrated on wealthy squatters’ attempts to reconstruct the way of life of the English gentry and on the role of women, who either exposed the false pretences to gentility, as in “Catherine Carmichael,” or contributed to consolidation of the landowning classes as in *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil*.

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When calculating his chances of marrying Kate Daly, a daughter of a bankrupt squatter, Mr Medlicot, a free selector in Anthony Trollope’s *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil*, remarks that “[t]he squatters [in Australia] are what the lords and the country gentlemen are at home” (74). He thus both acknowledges Kate’s superior social standing and makes an attempt at translating Australian social divisions into the English class system, with which he was familiar. Trollope’s Antipodean stories, including *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil* and “Catherine Carmichael: or, Three Years Running,” however, reveal the correspondence between the British and Antipodean class systems to be rather superficial. Whereas in England social divisions were relatively well established and sanctified by a long tradition, Australian and New Zealand society remained more plastic, with the boundaries between social groups uncertain and rather vague. The myth of the Antipodes as a land of new opportunities, where fortunes could be made by any man hard-working and persevering enough, contributed to the blurring of social distinctions between people of different backgrounds, be they adventurers or settlers who came to Australia to make their fortune and improve their position. Since the upward mobility was often seen in terms of economic advancement alone, Antipodean

landowning classes tended to be deficient in the cultural capital in comparison with the English gentry. It is hardly surprising since, as Trollope writes in his *Australia* [1873], some landowners were “butchers, drovers, or shepherds [...] but a few years since,” even if later they “form[ed] an established aristocracy” (84). Once they achieved financial success, they sought other ways to legitimize their position and made attempts at reconstructing the way of life they identified with the English gentry.

The aim of this article is to show the ways Trollope employs the English model of class distinctions to interpret Antipodean social relations. It concentrates on the representation of the group of wealthy Australian and New Zealand landowners, the ways they negotiate their gentility in conditions so different from the ones in Britain, and on the extent to which they can reconstruct the way of life of the English gentry. Trollope proves particularly sensitive to women’s role in determining social position, not only because they can skilfully deploy material signifiers of status but also because they are constructed as repositories of middle-class values. Good material position secured by men appears at best a very insufficient marker of class, which is ultimately determined by women who, in the two stories, either expose the false pretences to gentility, as in “Catherine Carmichael,” or contribute to consolidation of the landowning classes as in *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil*.

The landowning classes in the nineteenth-century Antipodes fall into two groups, squatters and free selectors, who compete for land and influence. The squatters form the wealthiest group, they are “men of property,” as Nicholas Birns indicates, “whatever [the term’s] undertones of arbitrary encampment in the context of traditional tenured landholdings” (11). In contrast to free selectors, often seen as “more roving types who approach the landholding game in a more scattershot and *ad hoc* manner” (Birns 11), squatters were seen as “aristocracy of the Australian colonies, both because of their wealth and their connection to the land,” so that the term “squattocracy” was applied to describe them as a group (Elliott 223).

Yet, the Australian and New Zealand squatters, whose lives are represented in the two stories by Trollope, constitute a group that is far from homogenous. Dorice Williams Elliott points to tensions “between newly arrived English emigrants with built-in gentility and those who were still attempting to attain it” (30), which is evident in fiction of the period, and to the differences between those in possession of cultural capital even if deficient in wealth and those who possessed economic capital without sufficient cultural capital. “Squattocracy,” then, includes people like Harry Heathcote, a man of good birth and a small fortune, who decided to leave England as a young boy to “make or mar his fortune in the new land” (*Harry Heathcote* 5), and who later became “well known west of the Mary river in Queensland” as the owner of 30 000 sheep, a magistrate, and a man “able to hold his own among his neighbours whether rough or gentle” (4). His

roughest neighbour, Old Brownbie, also calls himself a squatter, even though, as the narrator hastens to add, he is “a squatter of a class very different from that to which Heathcote belonged” since “[h]e had begun his life in the colonies a little under a cloud, having been sent out from home after the perpetration of some peccadillo of which the law had disapproved” (55). In other words, the narrator continues, Old Brownbie is a former convict transported to Australia who, after serving his term, settled in the colony as a squatter. However, although “[i]t must be owned on his behalf that he had worked hard, had endeavoured to rise, and had risen,” Brownbie’s past was never quite forgotten and “there still stuck to him the savour of his old life” (55). His five sons, described as “uneducated, ill-conditioned, drunken fellows, who had all their father’s faults without his energy” (55), also saw themselves as belonging to the same social group as Harry:

They were squatters as well as he – or at least so they termed themselves; and though they would not have expected to be admitted to home intimacies, they thought that when they were met out-of-doors or in public places, they should be treated with some respect. On such occasions Harry treated them as though they were dirt beneath his feet. The Brownbies would be found, whenever a little money came among them, at the public billiard-rooms and race-courses within one hundred and fifty miles of Boolabong. At such places Harry Heathcote was never seen. It would have been as easy to seduce the Bishop of Brisbane into a bet as Harry Heathcote. He had never even drank [sic] a nobbler with one of the Brownbies. To their thinking, he was a proud, stuck-up, unsocial young cub, whom to rob was a pleasure, and to ruin would be a delight. (57)

Whereas the Brownbies aspire to a degree of camaraderie with Harry Heathcote because in this way they would rise in their own estimation, Harry feels superior to them and he perceives any associations with them as a stain on his honour. By abstaining from the rather vulgar entertainment favoured by the Brownbies, he further underlines his own social and moral superiority. Possession of land, which distinguishes squatters from other social groups in Australia, therefore, is not a sufficient indicator of high social standing in Harry’s eyes, especially that it is not connected with respectability and not even with possessing ready money.

The Brownbies’s position might be seen as a result of the upward mobility – from a convict to a squatter – possible in the Antipodes. Yet, the novel makes it clear that the high rank once it is achieved is neither stable nor secure, so that any misfortune may threaten and destroy everything that a squatter managed to achieve and degrade him to the position of an ordinary worker. *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil*, in fact, shows the protagonist trying to save his land from the fire that could easily spread over his whole property in the hot Australian summer and destroy his life’s work. Harry can only dream of “some happy squatting land, in which there were no free-selectors, no fires, no rebellious servants, no

floods, no droughts, no wild dogs to worry the lambs, no grass seeds to get into the fleeces, and in which the price of wool stood steady at two shillings and sixpence a pound” (117). Trollope thus stresses the precarity of the existence of the squatters, who might easily fall from their elevated position to the very bottom of the social hierarchy. The fear of bankruptcy and possible downfall is, indeed, evident in the story which features the character of Mr Bates, “a man who had been a squatter once himself, and having lost his all in bad times, now worked for a small salary” (11), and which makes Mrs Heathcote “the orphan daughter of a ruined squatter” (6).

The class of free-selectors, represented in *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil* by Mr Medlicot, is similarly heterogeneous. Although initially Harry has a rather contemptuous attitude to Mr Medlicot, he finds out in the course of the story that he was much mistaken. Indeed, Mr Medlicot is a relatively wealthy man, so that he can buy a large portion of land and establish his sugar cane plantation together with a sugar mill. Although he knows he is not to be included into the class of squatters, who “regarded him as an interloper, and as a man holding opinions directly averse to their own interests – in which they were right,” he was also aware that “the small free-selectors, who lived on the labour of their own hands – or, as was said of many of them, by stealing sheep and cattle – knew well that he was not of their class” (27). In other words, Mr Medlicot was “not either fish or fowl” (27). His position, as the big employer and the owner of the sugar mill could perhaps be compared to that of the rising class of capitalists in England. In any case, both his appearance (so much resented by Harry who considered him a fop) and his behaviour signify his gentility immediately recognised by Mrs Heathcote and her sister Kate Daly.

The social mobility evident in the Antipodes made the boundaries of rank and class much more imprecise and fluid than they were at ‘home.’ Social distinctions in both stories by Trollope are further complicated by the lack of correspondence between economic, cultural and social capital as well as by the absence of signifiers of social position, which could be competently read by the English. For example, when Harry Heathcote is first presented to the readers, he is described as:

The young man who had just returned home had on a flannel shirt, a pair of mole-skin trousers, and an old straw hat, battered nearly out of all shape. He had no coat, no waistcoat, no braces, and nothing round his neck. Round his waist there was a strap or belt, from the front of which hung a small pouch, and, behind, a knife in a case. And stuck into a loop in the belt, made for the purpose, there was a small brier-wood pipe. (4)

The description points to the absent parts of clothing which would distinguish a typical country gentleman in England. To an English reader, therefore, Harry’s appearance might signal a man of a rather inferior social standing, so that the narrator is obliged to explain that “[a]s he dashed his hat off, wiped his brow, and

threw himself into a rocking-chair, he certainly was rough to look at, but by all who understood Australian life he would have been taken to be a gentleman” (4). Not only does the narrator thus signal the differences between Australia and England as regards social distinctions, but he also indicates that English readers must learn to adjust their conception of class and their idea of signifiers of social position in order to be able to read social standing of Antipodean characters properly. Paradoxically, Harry’s choice of attire is a sign of his conservatism rather than his slovenliness: he is described as “an aristocrat [who] hated such innovations in the bush as cloth coats and tweed trousers and neck handkerchiefs” (29). As Elliott indicates, Harry’s appearance signals that “he is not merely a supervisor or master, but an active participant in all the tasks necessary in running a sheep station,” an occupation which, “[f]ar from disqualifying him as gentry, as this kind of physical work would in England, it is part of his claim to that position in Australia” (31). Harry’s apparent disregard for gentlemanly appearance suggests that his gentility does not depend so much on the external appearance as on his character, but it might also imply that the task of upholding the genteel practices rests on women, who by dressing for dinner or keeping a family prayer signify their gentility (Archibald 84–86).

Rather than through his personal appearance or through his material position, which is in any case hardly secure in the Australian bush, Harry Heathcote negotiates his social standing and his gentility through domesticity. Indeed, as Elizabeth Langland shows in her *Nobody’s Angels* (1995), domestic ideology plays a crucial role in forming Victorian class relations and Victorian domestic women are “key players in consolidating power” of the middle classes and guardians of social borders (9). Consequently, “a mid-Victorian man depended on his wife to perform the ideological work of managing the class question and displaying the signs of middle-class status, towards which he contributed a disposable income” (Langland 9). In the Antipodes domestic ideology acquires yet another dimension. In her *Antipodal England. Emigration and Portable Domesticity in the Victorian Imagination* (2009), Janet C. Myers argues that domestic ideology, apart from being strongly implicated in the question of class and respectability, was also “inextricably bound up with conceptions of English national identity” (7). It could both “play a crucial role in creating unity within the dominant settler group in Australia” (7) and serve “as a corrective to the licentiousness and unbridled mobility” (9). Recreating an ideal home in the Antipodes becomes essential for emigrants who can thus construct their national and class identity.

Mrs Heathcote and her sister in Trollope’s story exemplify the struggle to maintain the ideal of domesticity in conditions so different than in England. Although they were probably born in Australia, they nevertheless see England as their home, and like other women of their class they attempt to “establish a ‘home’ in the Australian countryside by modelling that home on the British domestic ideal” (Archibald 81). Indeed, as Diana Archibald points out:

By faithfully reproducing the cherished cultural practices of England – no matter how nonsensical such practices appeared under the Southern Cross – women, in a sense, “exported” England to their new country, and used those cultural devices to construct “real” homes. Such, basically, was the argument of these ladies of Australia: since home is England, and the essence of England is its culture, then one can have a home outside England as long as one can properly maintain British cultural practices. (81)

In spite of the external circumstances, which contribute to “the extreme difficulty, if not outright impossibility, even for the white, upper-middle-class ‘ladies’ of Gangoil, of achieving this ‘home’” (Archibald 81), Mrs Heathcote does her best to reconstruct English domesticity. In spite of its imperfections (Archibald 82–84), the Heathcotes’ home nevertheless fulfils its ideological function by constituting a refuge from the hardship of work on the farm and a feminine domain associated with physical ease and safety. Although the family life concentrates on the veranda, not allowing for proper compartmentalisation characteristic for an ideal English middle-class home, it nevertheless is presented in terms implying perfect domestic comfort:

The principal edifice, that in which the Heathcotes lived, contained only one sitting-room, and a bedroom on each side of it; but in truth there was another room, very spacious, in which the family really passed their time; and this was the veranda which ran along the front and two ends of the house. It was twelve feet broad, and, of course, of great length. Here was clustered the rocking-chairs, and sofas, and work-tables, and very often the cradle of the family. Here stood Mrs. Heathcote’s sewing-machine, and here the master would sprawl at his length, while his wife, or his wife’s sister, read to him. It was here, in fact, that they lived, having a parlour simply for their meals. (11)

The house is, then, rather modest and simple but gives the impression of cosiness, furnished as it is with all the sofas and armchairs. Indeed, the veranda becomes a perfect place for Mrs Heathcote to display her feminine virtues, with the cradle signifying her maternal nature, the sewing machine pointing to her industry for the sake of her family, and the books implying cultivation. Mrs Heathcote and her sister Kate Daly struggle to perform the role of domestic angels and to cultivate the manners and habits of a civilised society (like dressing for dinner), making their best to reconstruct the way of life of the genteel classes in England. Their attempt at maintaining what they see as polite good manners corresponds with their ‘civilising’ power, which subdues even the imperious Harry Heathcote, who “though he had assumed the bush mode of dressing, still retained the manners of a high-bred gentleman in his intercourse with women” (69).

The household without the presiding spirit of a genteel woman capable of bringing the best in men and subdue their brutish instincts necessarily implies a moral inadequacy of its inhabitants, and consequently, their inferior social

standing. The Brownbies’ ill repute, for example, is stressed by the description of their household evidently devoid of domestic comforts:

The house itself was a wretched place – out of order, with doors and windows and floors shattered, broken, and decayed. There were none of womankind belonging to the family, and in such a house a decent woman-servant would have been out of her place. Sometimes there was one hag there and sometimes another, and sometimes feminine aid less respectable than that of the hags. (57)

The absence of a respectable domestic woman seems to explain both the neglected state of the house and moral degradation of its inhabitants.

Like the Brownbies, Peter Carmichael in Trollope’s “Catherine Carmichael: or, Three Years Running” led a wifeless and rather lonely existence in a distant New Zealand farm for several years. In contrast to them, however, he proved to be a successful squatter whose hard work, thrift and perseverance helped him accumulate enough wealth to make him believe himself to be socially superior to his impoverished relatives and friends. Yet, although the narrator in the story gives him his due describing him as “a just man, in his way,” he nevertheless indicates that he was also “coarse and altogether without sentiment” as well as “hard of hand and hard of heart – a stern, stubborn man, who was fond only of his money” (495), thus pointing to his moral inadequacies disqualifying him from a pretence to true gentility. Consequently, Peter Carmichael’s plan to marry Catherine, a relatively well-born but penniless woman, comes as a surprise. It is not clear whether his decision is dictated by a sudden awakening of his sympathy for the young woman and his wish to help the daughter of his former associate, or perhaps by his desire to crown his material success by marriage and to improve his otherwise lonely life in the distant farm. Whatever the reasons for this marriage, Peter Carmichael seems to remain unaffected by it. Not only does he make it impossible for Catherine to create a truly domestic atmosphere in Warriwa, where they live, but he also resists her moral influence. His marriage, in fact, exposes his moral deficiencies rather than “civilising” or bringing the best in him.

Peter Carmichael’s ungentlemanly nature becomes evident when he is contrasted with his wife and her mother. Although the circumstances in which Catherine lived as a girl were very difficult, since her father was a gold-digger in New Zealand, she “showed traces of gentle blood from which she had sprung” (496). Indeed, her mother, a daughter of a laird, was “ever decent in language, in manners, and in morals” (492). Interestingly enough, she hardly had a proper home, since the family was obliged to move from one place to another, so that “[e]verything around the young Bairds was rough” and they were “frequently changing their residence from one shanty to another [and] the last shanty would always be the roughest” (492). Yet, if the lack of proper home and proper domestic arrangements affected Mr Baird, who “became more and more hardened”, the



women of the family retained “a taste for decency” (492). Her father’s “precarious and demoralizing trade of a gold-digger at Hokotika” (492) did not demoralise or degrade her. Neither does hard physical work seem to diminish Catherine’s claim to in-born gentility. Although she has no time for leisure activities pursued by young middle-class women, she nevertheless has a selfless spirit of an angelic woman:

Of the amusements, of the lightness and pleasures of life, she had never known anything. To sit vacant for an hour dreaming over a book had never come to her; nor had it been for her to make the time run softly with some apology for women’s work in her hands. The hard garments, fit for a miner’s work, passed through her hands. The care of the children, the preparation of their food, the doing the best she could for the rough household – these things kept her busy from her early rising till she would go late to bed. But she loved her work because it had been done for her father and her mother, her brothers and sisters. (496)

Not only does the story point to women as the repositories of middle-class values, which they struggle to maintain in the most extreme conditions, but it also seems to confirm the Victorian ideology in presenting them as morally superior to men, who are represented as more easily succumbing to circumstances forced as they are to fight their way to maintain their families. Moreover, Trollope’s story suggests that material factors, important as they might be, do not determine a person’s status. True gentility would make itself evident even in the harshest circumstances.

Indeed, Mr Peter Carmichael evidently fails both to understand that there are other than material aspects to social position and to recognize his wife’s moral superiority. His *nouveau riche* status is reflected in his domestic arrangements and his utter misunderstanding of the roles of a wife in an ideal middle-class household. When Catherine arrives at Warriwa, she finds her new home well preserved and solid enough but far from pleasant:

[Peter Carmichael] boasted that things were tidier there than she had known them at the diggings. The outside of the house was so, for the three rooms on to the wide prairie-land of the sheep-run had a verandah before them, and the place was not ruinous. But there had been more of comfort in the shanty which her father and brothers had built for their home down the gold-gully. (498)

Catherine knows that material wealth itself does not offer domestic comfort, or, as she phrases it, “[c]ould she have made herself happy with mutton she might have lived a blessed life” (498). Her new home is for her just a number of objects which do not have any significance for her since she does not feel they belong to her or that they have any meaning through association with a person she loves:

A woman can generally take an interest in the little surroundings of her being, feeling that the tables and the chairs and the beds and the linen are her own. Being her own, they are dear to her and will give a constancy of employment which a man cannot understand. [...] There was not much there for a woman to love; but little as there was, she could have loved it for the man’s sake, had the man been lovable. (497–498)

Catherine’s home, then, is for her not much more than a place to eat and sleep in, as well as transacting business with the farm hands, who could buy provisions stored in the house. Not only is the domestic realm not separated properly from the business of running the sheep farm, but Catherine herself is treated much like a farm worker. She is not granted any freedom in organising the domestic realm, she is not given the store-room keys, which in Victorian fiction function as the symbol of the power of the mistress of house, and even her own provisions are weighed for her just as for the farm workers.

Peter Carmichael’s marriage and domestic life are thus far from happy nor do they in any way contribute to enhancing his social position. He fails to understand that his wealth itself does not constitute any grounds for the status of a true gentleman since his economic capital does not correspond with his cultural capital, rendering it impossible for him to comprehend Catherine’s role as a wife. Both “Catherine Carmichael” and *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil* represent gentility as a moral and cultural concept rather than one simply based on economic position, and they construct social distinctions as maintained and determined by domestic women. Therefore, whereas Harry Heathcote is presented as a born and bred gentleman, whose wife manages to bring out the best in him, Peter Carmichael lacks a gentleman’s virtues, and his marriage can hardly affect his unrefined nature. In other words, whereas Harry’s wife in the novel helps establish his gentility, Catherine Carmichael exposes her husband’s moral and social deficiencies.

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