

TWO SEPARATE PERSONS

Ethnicity and Identity in Trollope's Phineas Finn

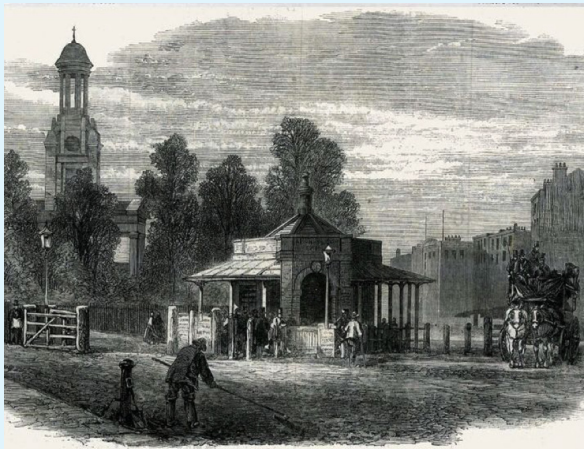
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THIS ESSAY EXPLORES ANTHONY TROLLOPE'S DECISION TO IDENTIFY PHINEAS FINN, OF HIS VARIOUS "PALLISER NOVELS," AS IRISH. MANY VICTORIAN READERS QUESTIONED PHINEAS'S ETHNICITY AND LACK OF STEREOTYPICALLY IRISH CHARACTERISTICS, AND TROLLOPE HIMSELF RENOUNCED THIS DECISION IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY. THE CHARACTER'S IRISHNESS, HOWEVER, SEEMS TO BE MORE THAN A GIMMICK TO DIFFERENTIATE THE NOVEL FROM SIMILAR TALES OF ASPIRING MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT; IN PHINEAS FINN, THE AUTHOR USES ETHNICITY TO INVERT THE NATIONAL MARRIAGE TROPE. TROLLOPE EMPLOYS GENDERED ETHNIC STEREOTYPES, CASTING HIS TITLE CHARACTER AS FEMININE IN HIS ROMANTIC ENTANGLEMENTS AND EVEN HIS POLITICAL BEHAVIOR, WHILE THE ENGLISH LADIES HE MEETS ARE DESCRIBED AS MASCULINE. BUT THE CHARACTER OF PHINEAS EMERGES AS MORE COMPLICATED THAN A FEMININE OR EMASCULATED ONE; IN HIS TENUOUS LOYALTY TO HIS DOCILE IRISH SWEETHEART, PHINEAS BECOMES A CONVENTIONAL MALE LEAD. HIS IRISHNESS, THEN, LENDS A DUALITY TO HIS CHARACTER THAT ENCOMPASSES MORE THAN MERELY TWO NATIONAL IDENTITIES; IT EMBODIES TWO ENTIRELY DIFFERENT KINDS OF MEN: ONE MASCULINE AND THE OTHER FEMININE, ONE A PHILANDERER AND THE OTHER LOYAL, ONE ENGLISH AND THE OTHER IRISH.

Phineas Finn is widely regarded as one of Anthony Trollope's most popular works. Published serially in *St Paul's Magazine* between 1867 and 1868, the novel satirizes the British parliamentary system through the adventures of its title character, an Irish picaresque, who experiences a number of ups and downs over the course of a tumultuous political career. While the novel, unlike several of Trollope's others, takes place in England, it is frequently remembered as one of his Irish novels, given the ethnicity of the protagonist. However, the nature of that ethnicity, particularly what Trollope intended to accomplish by writing his hero as Irish, remains controversial; while some regard Phineas's Irishness as inherent to his character and to the plot of the novel, others consider it secondary, even accidental. In order to analyze the significance of Phineas Finn's ethnicity, one must consider what aspects of Irish culture the character embodies, as well as what he might symbolize in the context of Trollope's work.

According to Trollope's autobiography, Phineas Finn ought not to have been written this way at all. As he explains:

It was certainly a blunder to take him from Ireland – into which I was led by the circumstance that I created the scheme of the book during a visit to Ireland. There was nothing to be gained by the peculiarity, and there was an added difficulty in obtaining sympathy and affection for a politician belonging to a nationality whose politics are not respected in England. But in spite of this, Phineas succeeded.¹



A SKETCH OF LONDON AS THE CITY WOULD APPEAR IN *PHINEAS FINN* IN THE 1860S (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

Whether Trollope intended to suggest that the entire novel ought to have been set in Ireland, or that his aspiring member of Parliament ought to have been English, remains unclear. It is also possible that he mentions this opinion to spark interest in an earlier novel towards the end of his career.

This acknowledgement has led Phineas's nation of origin to be hotly contested among readers and critics. For some, Trollope's comment has enabled them to largely ignore Phineas's Irish identity and instead focus on other aspects of his character. According to Patrick Lonergan's "The Representation Of Phineas Finn: Anthony Trollope's Palliser Series And Victorian Ireland," "Phineas's nationality has been ignored because of Trollope's statement that he believed it was a 'blunder' to make his hero an Irishman... it is disappointing that Phineas's nationality has been ignored or dismissed by literary critics."² Jane Elizabeth Dougherty contrasts this in "An Angel In The House: The Act Of Union And Anthony Trollope's Irish Hero," claiming that the opposite effect can be discerned:

Because Trollope himself called attention to the "blunder"... many of these critics have examined the importance of Phineas's ethnicity to the story... Clearly, critics have not yet reached a consensus on the tricky subject of the ethnicity of Phineas Finn, and its effects on the characterizations, composition, trajectory, and reception of Trollope's... novel.³

One can conclude, though, that Phineas's Irish heritage was originally intended to improve upon the novel's hero. According to Trollope's *An Autobiography*,

In writing *Phineas Finn*... I was conscious that I could not make a tale pleasing chiefly, or perhaps in any part, by politics. If I write politics for my own sake, I must put in love and intrigue, social incidents, with perhaps a dash of sport, for the benefit of me readers. In this way I think I make my political hero interesting.⁴

That is to say, the author felt that he could not write a wholly political novel for fear of alienating his readers, who chiefly sought amusement from his works. Rather, the *Phineas Finn* that emerged is more of a satire of political novels than a standard political novel. Writing the title character as an Irishman helps to set it apart from similar tales of ambitious men with Parliamentary aspirations.

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The problem with Phineas’s Irishness, to many readers, is that it does not seem particularly Irish. Unlike many other stereotypical Irish characters of the time, “he is neither lazy, nor improvident, nor dishonest, nor a drunkard, nor anything more than a nominal Roman Catholic, nor, in particular, violent. He doesn’t even have a brogue”.⁵ Thus, it would be possible for English readers to consider him Irish in name only, without any of the difficulties that typically accompany an Irish character.

Critics, however, have called attention to the character’s resemblance to a number of historical Irish politicians of the time. As Lonergan argues,

Phineas closely resembles at least six real Irish politicians, and is comparable to numerous others. This proves one thing conclusively: Phineas is similar to a large number of Irish people who actually existed during Trollope’s time. It is therefore obviously incorrect to describe him as insufficiently “Hibernian.”⁶

In his “‘Two Nations on One Soil’: Land, Fenians, and Politics in Fiction,” James Murphy adds, “Several individuals have been proffered as candidates for the real-life Phineas. The most likely seems to be Sir John Pope Hennessy (1834–1891), a Catholic who sat as a Conservative member of parliament.”⁷ Regardless of who served as the model for Trollope’s character, one must conclude that, given critical speculation of Phineas’s similarity to various historical Irishmen, his portrayal is somewhat realistic. One could conclude that readers and critics who call Phineas insufficiently Irish have failed to distinguish between the stereotype of an Irish character and the reality of one.

Dougherty expresses this conflict well when she explains:

There is little about Phineas that is obviously Irish, and yet it does favor him, at least in Phineas Finn. Phineas is a successful and sympathetic character... Phineas’s Irishness is and is not evident in the text, it is both crucial and incidental to Phineas’s characterization; the narrative trajectory of the Phineas novels is at once enabled and disabled by the ethnicity of their eponymous hero.⁸

Because Phineas represents a unique Irishman, one who supports the union between Ireland and Great Britain and feels welcome in English society, he can be read, not as a representative of his culture, but rather as an individualistic, particular representation of an Irish person.

In fact, the Liberal Party seems to seek exactly that individuality in their recruitment of Phineas Finn:

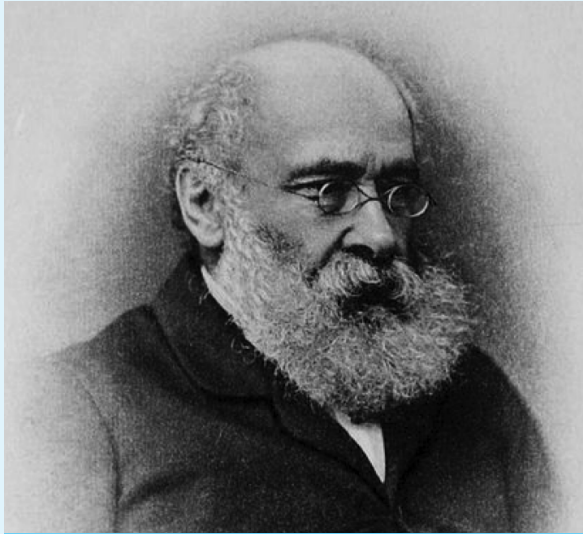
Then ‘the party,’ – by which Barrington Erle probably meant the great man in whose service he himself had become a politician, – required that the candidate should be a safe man, one who would support ‘the party,’ – not a cankerous, red-hot, semi-Fenian, running about to meetings at the Rotunda, and such-like, with views of his own about tenant-right and the Irish Church. ‘But I have views of my own,’ said Phineas, blushing again. ‘Of course you have, my dear boy,’ said Barrington, clapping him on the back. ‘I shouldn’t come to you unless you had views. But your views and ours are the same, and you’re just the lad for Galway.’⁹

Though Barrington’s requirements come across as incredibly specific, they reflect a particular kind of representation of Irishness by Trollope: one that acknowledges a diversity of Irish individuals. Though the stereotypical Irishman is described here in a potentially offensive manner, both Barrington and the author recognize that not all Irish people can be categorized that way. Rather, the Irish populace may have “views of [their] own,” whether in support of or against the Act of Union.

Murphy expresses a similar sentiment:

Though [Phineas is] an Irish Catholic he is not a formal nationalist per se and is a participant in the internal machinations of the British political party system. This reflects the politics of the 1850s and 1860s before the rise of the new Irish parliamentary party in the 1870s.¹⁰

Given the political upheaval of the era, following the Act of Union, which bound Ireland to the United Kingdom after a spate of rebellious activities in the late eighteenth



A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE AUTHOR, ANTHONY TROLLOPE, IN THE 1870s, (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

century, the character's loyalty is particularly notable. An outsider himself, Phineas nonetheless expresses great respect for his new position and in particular for the government he serves: "Phineas had many serious, almost solemn thoughts on his journey towards London... he was minded to be very earnest. He would go to his work honestly and conscientiously, determined to do his duty as best he might."¹¹

Like the author, then, the protagonist partakes in no rebellious actions throughout *Phineas Finn*, and even supports British rule, unlike many of his historical counterparts. According to Dougherty, "the text takes pains to absolve Phineas of any Fenian tendencies, and unlike the Fenians, Phineas has no interest in dismantling the union; instead he hopes to make the Union work for him, as it did for his creator Trollope."¹² This individualism helped the text "succeed," as Trollope noted in his aforementioned autobiography, despite his heritage.¹³

Alternately, many critics have come to interpret Phineas as a symbolic character, one who represents a version of the national marriage trope in the context of the Act of Union.

The Act of Union legally assimilated Ireland into the United Kingdom. From the moment it was proposed – as a means of subduing Ireland, which had in 1798 exploded into violent rebellion – it was seen in the popular imagination as a marriage

between Great Britain and Ireland, with Britain as the groom and Ireland as the bride.¹⁴

This trope, commonly known as the national marriage, had already been well-established by the time Trollope adopted it. According to "Love's Labour's Lost: Romantic Allegory in Trollope's "Castle Richmond" by Bridget Matthews-Kane,

The popularity of other allegorical romances such as Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), Charles Maturin's *The Milesian Chief* (1812), and the Banim Brothers' *The Boyne Water* (1826) does make it likely that Trollope read them and was familiar with the conventions of the form."¹⁵

In most of these novels, a female personification of Ireland and a male personification of Great Britain are cast in a romance that leads ultimately to a happy marriage: one that is meant to represent the union of the two nations.

Most of the novel seems to make reference to that pattern, even as it perverts it. As Matthews-Kane continues,

One of the three main hallmarks of the national tale is a relationship between a British traveler and a Celtic guide that leads to a marriage symbolically uniting the two cultures. Trollope, who was well read in Irish literature, modifies this common plot device to make his own argument about the political situation in Ireland.¹⁶

Here, it is not the traveller who represents Great Britain, but the native London ladies, including Lady Laura Standish, Violet Effingham, and Madame Max Goesler, while Ireland, usually personified by a woman, is instead represented by Phineas himself.

This gender reversal leads to some fascinating characterizations in *Phineas Finn*, including the duality of its protagonist. Despite Phineas's seemingly Don Juan-esque tendencies, juggling the affections of four different women over the course of the story, he nevertheless seems emasculated by his national characterization. Far from a playboy, Murphy argues that Trollope presents Phineas as particularly feminine, in the way that Will Ladislaw of *Middlemarch* is feminized through his relationships with women: "Ironically, though, this results in the feminization of his own position... Phineas... is in some ways reduced to being a passive object of women's admiration."¹⁷ This emasculation is underlined by Phineas's being the

recipient of two different marriage proposals; he is thereby cast as the female role in his relationships with women.

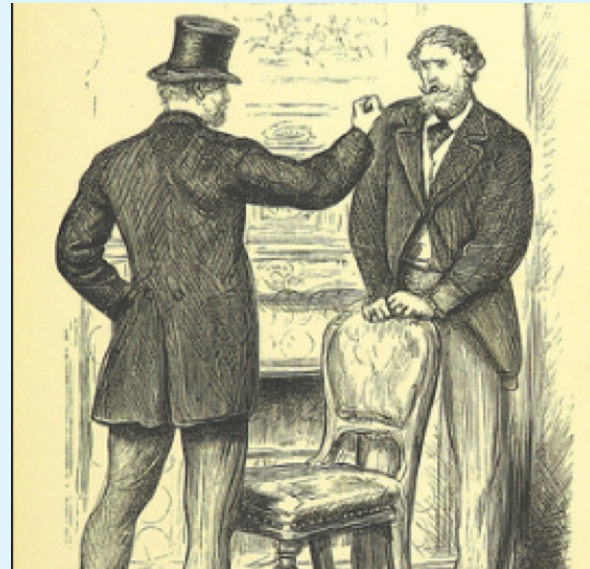
Trollope's descriptions of these characters further supports this unusual gendering. When Lady Laura Standish is introduced, for instance, the narrator utilized vocabulary conventionally used to describe men:

Lady Laura was six feet high... her figure was straggling, and... her hands and feet were quite large... There was something of nobility in her gait, and she seemed thus to be taller... Her hair was in truth red, – a deep thorough redness. Her brother's hair was the same; and so had been that of her father, before it had become sandy with age. Her sister's had been of a soft auburn hue, and hers had been said to be the prettiest head of hair in Europe at the time of her marriage... Her face was very fair, though it lacked that softness which we all love in women.¹⁸

Beyond the use of traditionally masculine terms, Trollope explicitly compares Lady Laura Standish to men, rather than to women. Thus, one can conclude that Lady Laura is meant to be read as a personification of Great Britain, in the same way that the *Wild Irish Girl* is intended to represent Ireland.

Similarly, Phineas's eventual wife, Mary Flood Jones, comes across as excessively feminine. She remains docile and does not question Phineas throughout the novel, though he strongly considers breaking off their engagement and residing in London. According to the text, Mary is "one of those girls, so common in Ireland, whom men, with tastes, that way given, feel inclined to take up and devour on spur the moment; and when she liked her lion, she had a look about her which seemed to ask to be devoured."¹⁹ Thus, not only is Mary depicted as a stereotypically feminine character, but the narrator suggests that her character is a common one in Ireland, even that the stereotypical Irish girl is as lamb-like as Mary.

It follows, then, that Phineas Finn is feminized by his association with his home country. If the author wrote him as the representative Irish character and the women he meets as representative English characters, then Phineas necessarily plays the more feminine role. Indeed, many of the stereotypically Irish traits he displays, such as passion and emotionality, are also conventionally feminine, while Lady Laura's interest in politics can be read as more masculine.



A SCENE FROM THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT OF *PHINEAS FINN* (SOURCE: FLICKR)

Nonetheless, Phineas clearly identifies as a man and in various scenes he demonstrates a conventional kind of masculinity, as when he duels Chiltern for the opportunity to court Violet Effingham or when he rescues Robert Kennedy from thieves. As a result, his characterization becomes more complicated than mere emasculation: Phineas's Irishness lends a duality to his person. Patrick Fessenbecker explores this concept at length in his essay "Anthony Trollope on Akrasia, self-deception, and ethical confusion," which argues that several of Trollope's characters have undergone this experience of developing a double self.

In the case of *Phineas Finn*, Fessenbecker contends, this duality can account for the protagonist's seemingly illogical movement between women. He writes,

Anthony Trollope tended to reuse a particular version of the marriage plot... a version of the romantic triangle in which protagonists, usually male, commit to marrying one character but then find themselves drawn to a second... This... leads to a recurring consideration of a particular issue in philosophical psychology: moral philosophers have long been interested in situations where moral agents know what they ought to do, but do not do it.²⁰

“Not only do Ireland and Great Britain represent different genders, but also different kinds of relationships available to Phineas.”

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Throughout the novel, Phineas cannot seem to choose between the variety of women who have demonstrated their affection for him, despite such obstacles as Lady Laura's marriage and Phineas's promise to return to Mary.

His response, then, is to mentally split himself into more than one entity. Just as Phineas can be read as both masculine and feminine, he can also be read as faithful to two different sets of women, living in two different places. Trollope's novel supports this reading in several places, as when Phineas muses:

He felt that he had two identities, – that he was, as it were, two separate persons, – and that he could, without any real faithlessness, be very much in love with Violet Effingham in his position of man of fashion and member of Parliament in England, and also warmly attached to dear little Mary Flood Jones as an Irishman of Killaloe. He was aware, however, that there was a prejudice against such fullness of heart, and, therefore, resolved sternly that it was his duty to be constant to Miss Effingham.²¹

This sense of dual identity, then, permits him to carry on dalliances with multiple women. Not only do Ireland and Great Britain represent different genders, but also different kinds of relationships available to Phineas. One must note that his love for two different women does not just mean that Phineas Finn is attracted to both Violet and Mary. Instead, he exhibits two entirely distinct, fully realized personas, one Irish and one English, that lead two very different lives and are attracted to very different women.

Fessenbecker attributes the development of this double self to Phineas's sexual drive, declaring that “the primary cause of Phineas's self-deception is his desire: he convinces himself of the possibility of a dual life because this allows him to achieve the multiple sexual relationships for which he yearns.”²² However, one can also explain his behavior in terms of *Akrasia*, meaning that he is able to distinguish between right and wrong but cannot act on it. Trollope's speaker shifts the blame away from his protagonist and onto fate or circumstance when he comments that “Phineas was a traitor, of course, but he was almost forced

to be a traitor, by the simple fact that Lady Laura Standish was in London, and Mary Flood Jones in Killaloe.”²³ His Irishness, then, is interpreted as a weakness here, that draws him back to Mary when he yearns for a union with Lady Laura or Violet. Simply by travelling to London, he has put himself in moral danger, as he cannot control his romantic or sexual urges.

While Fessenbecker and others insist that Phineas is not an inherently bad person, but rather one affected by his surroundings – “he is not consciously duplicitous; the text makes it clear he does not intend to hurt Mary. But he does in fact behave badly toward her, and does so by convincing himself it is possible for part of him to act without all of him acting” – Phineas's behavior suggests otherwise.²⁴ That he thinks of Mary with great frequency over the course of the text demonstrates that he does remember her, and does acknowledge his feelings for and promises to her. Yet, he cannot bring himself to abandon his English admirers, and indeed seems devastated when they do not want to marry him. For instance, although he fears “despair and utter banishment” upon Lady Laura's rejection,²⁵ he nevertheless assures Mary of his loyalty just pages later with, “If you knew, Mary, how often I think about you.”²⁶

In short, Phineas Finn seems too complicated a character to be defined by ethnic background alone. However, this controversial background does help describe his duality of character: both masculine and feminine, both philanderer and loyal long-distance lover, both English and Irish. That Trollope would continue to develop the character in a sequel speaks to the fascination inherent in Phineas, and suggests that, despite the author's later claims to the contrary, his Irishness plays a vital and intriguing part in how he is characterized. As merely an English member of Parliament, this protagonist would become much easier to interpret, and therefore significantly less interesting to read. Thus, far from a stereotype or a rash authorial decision, Phineas's ethnicity seems a calculated decision to better comment on duality of character, the difficulty of making moral decisions, and the relative femininity and masculinity of characters and traits.

ENDNOTES

1. Trollope, *Autobiography of Anthony Trollope*, 1922, 274-275.
2. Lonergan, "The Representation of Phineas Finn," 2004, 147-148.
3. Dougherty, "An Angel in the House," 2004, 133.
4. Trollope, *Autobiography of Anthony Trollope*, 1922, 274.
5. Dougherty, "An Angel in the House," 2004, 140.
6. Lonergan, "The Representation of Phineas Finn," 2004, 149.
7. Murphy, "Two Nations on One Soil," 2011, 140.
8. Dougherty, "An Angel in the House," 2004, 133.
9. Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, 1973, 6.
10. Murphy, "Two Nations on One Soil," 2011, 140.
11. Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, 1973, 23.
12. Dougherty, "An Angel in the House," 2004, 139.
13. Trollope, *Autobiography of Anthony Trollope*, 1922, 274-275.
14. Dougherty, "An Angel in the House," 2004, 134.
15. Matthews-Kane, "Love's Labour Lost," 2004, 130.
16. Matthews-Kane, "Love's Labour Lost," 2004, 117-118.
17. Murphy, "Two Nations on One Soil," 2011, 141.
18. Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, 1973, 32.
19. Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, 1973, 19.
20. Fessenbecker, "Anthony Trollope on Akrasia, Self-Deception and Ethical Confusion," 2014.
21. Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, 1973, 330.
22. Fessenbecker, "Anthony Trollope on Akrasia, Self-Deception and Ethical Confusion," 2014.
23. Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, 1973, 145.
24. Fessenbecker, "Anthony Trollope on Akrasia, Self-Deception and Ethical Confusion," 2014.
25. Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, 1973, 140.
26. Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, 1973, 145.

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