

“Love that is tainted with selfishness is no love”; Coincidence or
allusion in W.S. Gilbert and Anthony Trollope?

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In the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience* (1881), the theme of the unselfishness of love is a major plot device; of course, being Gilbert, in a completely absurd way. Here goes. Patience, the village milkmaid, has never loved anyone except her great-aunt and, when she was four, her friend Archibald Grosvenor, whom she hasn't seen since then. She asks Lady Angela to explain love to her. Lady Angela answers her, “Love is of all passions the most essential! It is the embodiment of purity, the abstraction of refinement! It is the one unselfish emotion in this whirlpool of grasping greed! . . . Love that is tainted with selfishness is no love.”

Aghast at the thought that she has never experienced this ennobling emotion, Patience resolves to fall in love with someone. Grosvenor then comes on the scene, immediately proposes to her, and she rapturously accepts. Then she realizes that, since he is “gifted . . . with a beauty which probably has not its rival on earth,” (his own self-description) and “perfection! A source of endless ecstasy to all who know [him]” (Patience's description), there can be nothing unselfish about loving him. Instead, she accepts the proposal of Reginald Bunthorne; since she intensely dislikes Bunthorne, trying to love him will be the height of unselfishness. At the end of the play, the situation becomes reversed. Bunthorne reforms and will henceforth model himself on Grosvenor. However, since he is now “a perfect being — utterly free from defect of any kind”, there can now be nothing unselfish about loving him, and so Patience breaks the engagement. Meanwhile, Grosvenor has transformed himself into a “commonplace young man”, so though Patience is “shocked — surprised — horrified”, she is free to love him, since that is now sufficiently unselfish.

Gilbert was very fond of poking fun at conventional moral formulas by having his characters either do completely ridiculous things because they think it is their duty or do exactly what they want with the justification that it is their duty; the plot here is a fine example of both.

One can easily imagine someone like Lady Angela saying what she says, more or less, but presumably no one in their right mind would interpret it in the way that Patience does, let alone act on it in the way that Patience does.

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A passage with two similarities, one meaningful but unsurprising, the other superficial but remarkable, appeared twenty-three years earlier. In chapter 6 of Anthony Trollope's *Doctor Thorne* (1858), there is the following banter between Frank Gresham, Patience Oriel, and Lady Margaretta. Frank is one of the two heroes of the novel; Patience and Lady Margaretta are minor characters who appear only occasionally outside this scene. (The conversation is purely in jest; neither Frank nor Patience is at all seriously interested in the other.)

“Miss Oriel was saying so much in praise of you before you came out,” said Margaretta, “that I began to think that her mind was intent on remaining at Greshamsbury all her life.”

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“I am ambitious, Lady Margaretta,” said she. “I own it; but I am moderate in my ambition. I do love Greshamsbury, and if Mr Gresham had a younger brother, perhaps, you know —”

“Another just like myself, I suppose,” said Frank.

“Oh, yes. I could not possibly wish for any change.”

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“Well, you see, I have not got any brothers,” said Frank; “so all I can do is to sacrifice myself.”

“Upon my word, Mr Gresham, I am under more than ordinary obligations to you; I am indeed,” and Miss Oriel stood still in the path, and made a very graceful curtsy. “Dear me! only think, Lady Margaretta, that I should be honoured with an offer from the heir the very moment he is legally entitled to make one.”

“And done with so much true gallantry, too,” said the other; “expressing himself quite willing to postpone any views of his own for your advantage.”

“Yes,” said Patience; “that’s what I value so much: had he loved me now, there would have been no merit on his part; but a sacrifice, you know—”

“Yes, ladies are so fond of such sacrifices. Frank, upon my word, I had no idea you were so very excellent at making speeches.”

“Well,” said Frank, “I shouldn’t have said sacrifice, that was a slip; what I meant was —”

“Oh, dear me,” said Patience, “wait a minute; now we are going to have a regular declaration. Lady Margaretta, you haven’t got a scent-bottle, have you? And if I should faint, where’s the garden-chair?”

Patience Oriel here is mocking a number of conventions; the copybook initial response (“I am under more than ordinary obligations to you”); the idea that she is supposed to faint from emotion; and the idea, much the same as in Gilbert, that a marriage proposal is “unselfish” and thus meritorious if the suitor is not actually in love with the woman he is proposing to. (In Trollope novels generally, including *Doctor Thorne*, there are numerous courtships that are selfish in the usual, sordid sense — that is, the man is not actually in love with the woman and is courting her for her money or position.)

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And then, obviously, the two women have the same, rather unusual, first name.

Is there a connection or is that just a coincidence? We know that Gilbert admired Trollope. In the “Heavy Dragoon” song in *Patience*, Anthony Trollope is mentioned as one of the “remarkable people in history” that would be an ingredient in creating a heavy dragoon. My guess would be that Gilbert would have enjoyed this passage from *Doctor Thorne*, though it is not his style of humor; except for Jack Point, Gilbert’s characters are rarely witty. Trollope died in 1882 and was active until his death, so he might have seen *Patience* or the earlier operettas; he would almost certainly have known about them. How much he would have enjoyed them, I can’t guess. I haven’t found any sign that Trollope and Gilbert ever interacted, but I haven’t looked very hard.

My conjecture is that it is not coincidence. I imagine it as follows: Gilbert is working on the operetta, first about two rival clergymen trying to outdo one another in mildness; then, to take advantage of the current literary fad, he changes them to two aesthetes trying to outdo one another in artistic sensibility. Obviously, they should be rivals for the same girl — there has to be some difficulty, so that there is a plot— it had better be an idiotic difficulty — and so he works out this part of the plot line. It then occurs to him that he’s seen a version of this joke before, and, with a little thought, he recalls the passage in *Doctor Thorne*. Well, he’ll tip his hat a little to the clever old man; his girl, like Trollope’s, will be named “Patience”.