

AMELIA OPIE: EXPONENT AND CRITIC OF THE  
NOVEL OF RADICAL PROPAGANDA

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## CHAPTER I

### THE RISE OF THE PROPAGANDA NOVEL IN ENGLAND

Amelia Opie, as a writer, was not fundamentally a propagandist; and only incidentally was she the author of so-called "problem" novels. Her productions were more in the nature of criticisms of the theories advanced by her contemporary propagandists than they were supplementary expositions of the radical doctrines fostered by the revolutionary school of writers. However, if one is adequately to understand the relationship of Mrs. Opie's works to those of the radical writers, one should have at least an acquaintance with the development of the English novel of propaganda, or the problem novel.

The English propaganda novel sprang from the social and political turmoil of France in the era of the Revolution, and was influenced directly by the written works of certain French literary men whose writings contributed to the impassioned upheaval of the French populace. Rousseau and Condorcet were notably influential in producing pamphlets and books that inspired their countrymen with the zeal to demand the treasured ideals of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Rousseau was more of a reformer than he was a novelist, but in

his fiction as well as in his political writings he was able to produce an emotional appeal that caused people to realize the meaning of democratic theories and of humanitarian ideals to the extent that they were willing to become aggressive in order to attain them. Rousseau's works, after 1770, inspired a deluge of propaganda novels that portrayed their authors' beliefs in the ability of man to approach nearer to the ideal of perfection, if he could only free himself from unjust laws and meaningless traditions that kept him enslaved in body and soul.<sup>1</sup> Condorcet, a zealous disciple of Rousseau, believed that man's advance could come only through the elimination of inequalities among peoples and classes, and through the perfection of the individual. The French Revolution proclaimed human equality, but it was not yet realized in actuality. Like Rousseau, Condorcet advocated universal education, but he was not willing to give the child as much freedom as was Rousseau, who believed in letting nature take its course, under the supervision of teachers, in developing the personality of the young child. Condorcet also championed that which, in a few years, was to be Mary Wollstonecraft's battle-cry in England -- equality of the sexes in education and in all facets of life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Morss Lovett and Helen Sard Hughes, The History of the Novel in England (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932), p. 130.

<sup>2</sup>H. N. Brailsford, Shelley, Godwin, and Their Circle (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Home University Library of Modern Knowledge Series, n. d.), pp. 22-23, 27-30.

It was inevitable that the new trends in the literature of France should be heard of in England, and this fact, together with the gigantic phenomenon of the French Revolution itself, produced deep-rooted impressions upon the literature of England. But even before these influences were felt from across the Channel, England herself was beginning to produce certain didactic writings with a loftier purpose in view than the pleasant entertainment of shallow and unthinking readers. One of the earliest English writers to depart from the role of a mere entertainer was Samuel Richardson, whose first published work appeared in 1740. He asserted that the underlying purpose of all his work was moral and religious instruction. Not by sermons or harangues but by the unfolding of events in the lives of his characters, he pointed out the consequences of sin, the rewards of virtue, and the influence of Christian personality.<sup>3</sup> His fiction was designed primarily for the purpose of inculcating prudence and self-control, and throughout all his works ran the distinct purpose -- edification.<sup>4</sup>

Henry Fielding was also a moralist, but in a way that was different from Richardson. Virtue, he believed, is its own reward through the medium of the peace that comes to a virtuous life; and vice carries its own punishment in the disturbed conscience of the wrongdoer. These concepts he frequently

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<sup>3</sup>Wilbur L. Cross, The Development of the English Novel (New York: Macmillan Company, 1909), pp. 37-38.

<sup>4</sup>Ernest A. Baker, The History of the English Novel (London: H. F. and G. Witherby, 1934), V, 95.

wove into the fabric of his narratives.<sup>5</sup>

Other writers contemporary with Richardson and Fielding were producing works with similar purposes. Hence the first didactic writings in England were characterized by the moral and religious motives of the authors, and not until the American and French Revolutions had sent new ideas coursing through the world did English literature take on the truly propagandist flavor. In the new trend, Thomas Paine was an eminent trail-blazer. Born in England in 1739, he took passage to America in 1774 at the age of thirty-seven, carrying a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin, whom he had met in London. He was penniless, lonely, and a failure. In Philadelphia he became the editor of the Pennsylvania Magazine, in whose columns he wrote revolutionary articles about duelling, marriage, international arbitration, kindness to animals, justice for women, and freedom of the slaves. His highly popular pamphlet, Common-Sense (1776), was instrumental in stimulating the American Revolution. During the war, Paine employed both a musket and his pen in the cause of American freedom; his militant pamphlets inspired the disheartened patriots, and most of his income was turned into the coffers of the rebels. In 1787 he returned to England and was welcomed by the ardent reformers. He arrived in time to answer Edmund Burke's Reflections on the French Revolution with his famous work, The Rights of Man (1791), in which he expounded man's

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<sup>5</sup>Cross, op. cit., p. 50.

right to revolt against tyranny and oppression. He included a number of resounding tirades against the royalty and aristocracy in England, and was able to find a publisher only through the assistance of Thomas Holcroft and William Godwin, leaders of the English school of radical writers. Paine fled to France to save his life, and in his absence was convicted of high treason. He helped to write the new constitution of France, pleaded for the King's life, and opposed the wanton executions. During a long term in prison, he wrote most of his The Age of Reason. Although he was unhappy and embittered in his last years, which were spent in America, he had been prominent in two great political revolutions and had launched a literary revolution in England.<sup>6</sup>

In the latter decades of the eighteenth century a new type of didactic novel began to make its appearance in England -- the so-called problem or propagandist novel. It was not only natural but virtually inevitable that so convenient a medium as the novel should come to be utilized by reformers and revolutionaries for purposes of propaganda and polemics. This became true particularly after the progress of the industrial revolution had brought about far-reaching and deep-rooted economic and social disturbances in the traditional quietude of English life. Also, in the course of time, the epoch-making events of the French Revolution across the

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<sup>6</sup>Brailsford, op. cit., pp. 57-69.

Channel evoked reverberations in England in the form of clashes of ideas and stirrings of sedition. In the midst of the industrial and political chaos of the time, social ideals were disrupted, and "a copious output of polemical fiction was the likeliest and not the least wholesome thing to happen."<sup>7</sup> As a result, a whole new school of novelists came into being, whose leaders were men -- Godwin, Holcroft, Bage. But there were notable women authors as well -- Mrs. Inchbald, Mrs. Opie, Charlotte Smith, Mary Wollstonecraft.

It is believed by some authorities that the women of the group set the style of the problem novel, because women as a class are sure to concentrate upon domestic fiction and to seize upon those phases of family and social relationships that offer opportunities for edification. Women are more sentimental and more moralistic than men, and are more likely to be censorious. Hence their insistence upon fine sentiments, elegant taste, delicacy, high principles, the sense of duty, the dependence of happiness upon character and conduct. Here lie the germs of the problem novel. In this type of novel, a definite subject always emerges, accompanied by related ideas and points of view. The problem novels of women more adequately present a "problem" because women often have a graver sense of significant issues involved, they feel their responsibility as authors more acutely, and they usually dislike the comic attitude, which they hold to be flippant,

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<sup>7</sup>Baker, op. cit., V, 228-229.

though in reality it may be more serious than their own earnest but more limited vision.

The eminent group of writers mentioned above, together with others who used the problem novel as a medium for expression, soon came to be known as the "revolutionists," or the "radicals," due to the fact that their interpretation of certain social, political, and moral tenets represented a drastic departure from the commonly accepted point of view. Many of their ideas came to them directly or indirectly from the cataclysmic upheaval in France, and all of their "revolutionary doctrines" stemmed directly from new concepts of individual freedom. Charlotte Smith, one of the notables among the ranks of the radicals, stated the purpose of the new school of novelists in the following manner:

There is a chance that those who will read nothing if they do not read novels, may collect from them some few ideas, that are not either fallacious or absurd, to add to the very scanty stock which their insipidity of life has afforded them.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in brief, the aim of the radicals was to make ideas palatable to the masses.

The radical group of writers entertained revolutionary concepts relating to the nature of society, politics, education, property, marriage, religion, and of practically all other existing institutions and customs.<sup>9</sup> All their thinking

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<sup>8</sup>Cross, op. cit., p. 88.

<sup>9</sup>Cara L. Boswell, "Mary Wollstonecraft: A Chapter in the History of Radicalism in English Literature," Unpublished Master's Thesis, Graduate Division, Department of English, Texas State College for Women, 1936, p. 21.

seemed to center about the fundamental concept of individual and social welfare -- an echo of the French Revolution and of social problems arising within England herself.

So nearly universal became the problem or propagandist phase of the didactic novel that almost every work of fiction in circulation near the close of the eighteenth century somewhere within its pages enlightened the reader as to what the story was intended to teach. Marriage and the relationships of the sexes were popular subjects, although radical ideas also were frequently expressed regarding government, social inequalities, personal property, and human relationships in general. One aspect of morality which received much consideration in the eighteenth century, both in and out of the problem novel, was the problem of the unwed mother and her child. Mrs. Inchbald, in Nature and Art, and Mrs. Opie, in Adeline Mowbray, depict the sorrows and miseries inherent in such a problem, and cause the mother to suffer for her error and finally to die in want and embitterment.

Another problem appearing frequently in the fictional works of this period was that of the proper system of education. A notable group of novels were devoted to the new educational theories fostered by Rousseau and his disciples. Invariably, two boys were contrasted from early youth through adult life; one was Rousseau's child of nature, embodying the latest theories relating to the development of the individual personality, and the other was the product of a misguided parental affection -- pampered, spoiled, "sissified." Most

representative of this group of problem novels were Henry Brooke's The Fool of Quality, Elizabeth Inchbald's Nature and Art, Thomas Day's History of Sandford and Merton, and Mrs. Opie's "Austin and His Wife" and the same author's The Two Sons. Although in all of these works, and in others of a similar nature, the youth educated according to Rousseau's precepts always turned out better than the youth of conventional up-bringing, in some instances the author implied that neither extreme of education was ideal for the development of an acceptable personality, but intimated that some middle course would tend to produce a happier result. In all these works the characters are contrasted artfully so as to prove edifying to the reader, and to emphasize the power of education in shaping personality.

Near the end of the eighteenth century two lines of thought about man and the universe were merging. One was that of scientific rationalism, which dealt rationally with problems of life, society, and human progress; man was capable of growth by the use of his senses and the development of his reason, which would bring him a wider knowledge and a better understanding of social laws; the perfectibility of both man and society could conceivably be attained. The other line of thought was the doctrine of the sentimentalists, which did not at all dispense with reason, but in addition emphasized the fundamental importance of feeling and of innate ideas; education was a means of safeguarding and developing man's innate virtue and capabilities.

These two conceptions, assisted by the general conditions obtaining at the time, fostered a series of popular revolutionary movements that were reflected in the contemporary novels. Embodying both ideals and practical reforms, these revolutionary concepts included the following: the establishment of democracy and the abolition of class privileges; humanitarian reforms, including better methods of caring for the poor, more humane treatment of prisoners, the liberation of slaves, remedial measures for the insane, etc.; a return to nature, being, in effect, a protest against the luxury and artificiality of the age; and educational reforms, including ways of emancipating the reason and will and the development of the innate virtues and abilities of the individual. Hence it is plain that humanitarian sentiments prevailed -- sentiments that were treated in such a manner as to arouse the emotions of the reader in the interest of human welfare and brotherhood. An attitude of fair dealing warred against class privileges and the abominable and partial penal codes.<sup>10</sup>

All of the above-mentioned phases of the revolutionary ideas of the era were prevalent in the works of the radical writers, each of whom was more or less intimately associated with William Godwin, the acknowledged leader of the radical school of literature in England. The Godwinian circle will be discussed more adequately in the following chapter, but a

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<sup>10</sup>Lovett and Hughes, op. cit., pp. 133-135.

detailed treatment of the radical theories will be reserved for later chapters in connection with the analysis of Mrs. Opie's works and with Mrs. Opie herself as an exponent and critic of the novel of radical propaganda.

CHAPTER II  
THE GODWINIAN CIRCLE

An intelligent examination of the works of Amelia Opie in terms of radical propaganda is necessarily dependent to some degree upon a knowledge of the lives and personalities of the leaders of the school of revolutionary novelists. This school may be justly termed "the Godwinian circle," since William Godwin was indisputably the leader and the most aggressive member of the group, and in most instances was the original proponent of the doctrines that his disciples sooner or later incorporated into their writings.

Godwin, whose life-span extended from 1756 to 1836, was "the philosophic representative of English radicalism in the Revolutionary era," and the motivating personality in a comparatively small literary group who put the political and social doctrines of the French Revolution into convenient fiction.<sup>1</sup> He has been called a "fanatical intellectualist." Although early in life he set himself up as a would-be reformer, he knew little of human life and of human beings. In his youth his mind was fed almost exclusively on books, with little thought given to that knowledge which might have come

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<sup>1</sup>Lovett and Hughes, op. cit., p. 142.

to him through other channels. All his life he was a voracious reader of theology, philosophy, and related subjects. He half-heartedly prepared himself to serve in the capacity of a minister, because his father was one before him and desired that his son should carry on his work. Godwin's few years in the pulpit, however, were not successful, and he resigned his charge to become a tutor. Soon he began to write political tracts for the Whigs, and before long his "indefatigable reading and reflecting, debating and self-examining" had led him into a state of "philosophical anarchism."<sup>2</sup> In London, where he now maintained himself by tutoring and hack-writing, Godwin began his long and sometimes controversial friendship with Thomas Holcroft. Together they attended the meetings of the revolutionary Society for Constitutional Information, and at this time Godwin in his diary recorded that his "heart beat high with great swelling sentiments of Liberty."

Beginning to take notice of social and political conditions, Godwin perceived the need of remaking society, and took upon himself the task of helping along the cause. He dedicated his life to the aim, "To do my part to free the human mind from slavery." He believed that all of man's trials and difficulties in society stemmed from the traditional enslavement of his intellect, and that if man's mind were free, his person would be liberated and he could make his life count for the most. Godwin saw man as a creature

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<sup>2</sup>Baker, op. cit., V, 244.

who was constantly struggling through chaos and hardship in an effort to attain a higher status and a more secure plane of existence. "The whole life of mankind," he declared, "is a race through innovation to perfection."<sup>3</sup>

Believing that if man could be made to perceive the nature of his social environment as a contributor to his ills, he would make constructive attempts to bring about changes for the betterment of himself and of society, Godwin conceived the idea of using fiction as a medium for social criticism. Fiction was read by many people who would never read a scholarly, thought-provoking work; hence if fiction could be made the vehicle for giving people easy doses of social philosophy, the result might be productive of some good and, in all probability, of no harm.<sup>4</sup> This concept pervaded not only the work of Godwin, but also that of his associates in the radical group. Godwin's writings, both fictional and polemic, encompassed practically all the controversies of his day -- for many of which he was personally responsible -- and exerted an enormous influence upon his and the following generation. For Godwin, although he quit the ministry and abandoned his orthodox faith, remained a preacher in one way or another for the rest of his life.

It is interesting to note that Godwin's first important writing was in answer to Edmund Burke's Reflections on the

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<sup>3</sup>Brailsford, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>4</sup>Baker, op. cit., V, 212.

French Revolution (1790), the same work that impelled Thomas Paine to write The Rights of Man. Burke's caustic Reflections mirrored the widespread unrest among the English conservatives and the aristocracy, who were greatly disturbed by the French excesses. King George commended Burke's book by saying that it was a volume that "every gentleman ought to read."<sup>5</sup> The English radicals answered Burke by flooding the presses with pamphlets and books which, in the main, were friendly toward the French experiment but which were also cryptic exposures of unwholesomeness in the English social and political framework. Among these radical publications was William Godwin's Enquiry Concerning Political Justice (1793), destined to be the most influential of all the radical works. Although purportedly a rebuttal to Burke, the book was more characteristically a medium whereby Godwin might air his own views regarding many things in general and some things in particular.

A year after completing Political Justice, Godwin published Caleb Williams, his first and greatest novel, and the outstanding novel to be produced by the radical school. The book seems to have been intended mainly as a story of adventure and mystery, and only incidentally was it to be a means of applying the author's ideas as already publicized in Political Justice. Godwin himself described the work as the logical offspring of the frame of mind in which the author found himself after having written Political Justice. Caleb

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<sup>5</sup>Lovett and Hughes, op. cit., pp. 142-143.

Williams was an attack on the prevalent inequalities of wealth and rank in English society, despite Godwin's assertion that such was not its primary purpose.

If Godwin was the nucleus around which revolved the radical novelists of England, he was not, however, the pioneer of the group; and Godwin himself conceded that distinction to another -- to Thomas Holcroft (1745-1809), of whom little is known. Holcroft seems to have been a more original and independent thinker than was Godwin. For this reason, Godwin and his work are probably over-emphasized in analyses of the literature of the time, while Holcroft, because of lack of information concerning him, is almost an anonymity in comparison. Holcroft, known chiefly by his four novels, is a truer representative of revolutionary idealism than even Godwin himself.<sup>6</sup> Before he attained recognition in London's literary and revolutionary circles, Holcroft had been a cobbler, a stable-boy, a strolling player, and a hack-writer. Being personally acquainted with poverty and injustice, he had experienced a poor boy's intense struggle for opportunity and education. In a trial for high treason, he was a victim of the unscrupulous persecution that the government and the press habitually directed against those who dared to think for themselves. Having had intimate relations with people in all walks of life, he had felt the strong surges of a deep-rooted current of unrest that pulsed beneath the outward veneer

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<sup>6</sup>Allene Gregory, The French Revolution and the English Novel (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1915), p. 49.

of English conservatism. Anna St. Ives (1792) and Hugh Trevor (1794-1797) are Holcroft's most famous novels as expressions of his revolutionary ideas. He believed that much of the evil that he saw on every hand in English society was the result of ignorance and prejudice. Improvement, then, would necessarily be slow; and education for the purpose of enabling men to see the unlovely phases of their lot was an essential forerunner of all reform.<sup>7</sup>

Another devotee of Holcroft and Godwin, both in philosophy and in fiction, was Robert Bage (1728-1801), who, in the first half of his life, had become a successful manufacturer of paper. Then, at the age of fifty-three, he began to experience such impelling literary aspirations that he began the first of his six novels, all of which possessed propagandist features that were in keeping with the radical theories of the time. His last and most noteworthy novel, Herm sprong, or Man as He is Not (1796), was written in the midst of England's reaction to the French Revolution. The book is a powerful criticism of European civilization from the point of view of a mysterious hero, Herm sprong, who, after spending the first twenty years of his life among the American Indians, returns to England, the land of his fathers. There follows, of course, the inevitable clash of cultures, ideas, and manners, for Herm sprong believes that in all situations men should do what they think to be right, whereas English society

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<sup>7</sup>Lovett and Hughes, op. cit., p. 148.

contends that the individual should conform to precedent by doing what others do.

Although there were other less prominent men who were members of the Godwinian circle, the three writers mentioned -- Godwin, Holcroft, and Bage -- were the undisputed leaders of the group, whose work set the pace for the lesser personalities who, for the most part, merely echoed the thoughts and theories and techniques of "the big three." Godwin, Holcroft, and Bage were often seen together in public places, and frequently they would gather in the evening for a session of talking and sociability, when, in one of their homes, they would discuss theories of politics, religion, morality, education, and government. Appearing with them on some occasions was a Mr. Johnson, a London publisher and bookseller, who published a large portion of the books written by the radicals. He was so interested in the new theories that he often accompanied Godwin and Holcroft to the meetings of the Society for Constitutional Information. It was in Johnson's home that Godwin first met Mary Wollstonecraft and, later, Amelia Opie, who was then Amelia Alderson.

At this time Elizabeth Inchbald and Charlotte Smith were already members of the Godwinian circle, and soon Mary Wollstonecraft and Amelia Opie were regularly in attendance when Godwin and his followers met for fellowship and discussion. Harmony appears to have prevailed among all the personalities included in the group, and intimate friendship combined with

common purposes to make for happiness and understanding.

There is some reason to believe that Godwin at one time thought seriously of asking Amelia Alderson to become his wife. Whether Amelia or her father declined the offer, or whether an offer was actually made, is somewhat uncertain; but the relationship between the two seems never to have been warmer than a sincere friendship. In fact, many years later, Godwin's daughter, Mrs. Shelley, wrote of the relationship that had existed between her father and Mrs. Opie:

He was intimate with Miss Alderson, afterwards Mrs. Opie, but their friendship is purely such as is formed every day in society. He admired her beauty and sprightliness. She liked his conversation and respected his talents.<sup>8</sup>

For years, Godwin, an amiable, paunchy, retiring little man, lived the life of a bachelor; but eventually the intimate friendship between Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft melted into love, and they lived together for a time without a legal union. Mary Wollstonecraft seemed to offer no objections to carrying out a strict obedience to the conjugal principles advanced in Godwin's writings. In fact, she had already experienced both great happiness and excessive misery in France in a similar relationship with Gilbert Imlay, an American. Only the coming of a child induced Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft to "waive their theories and face for its sake a repugnant compliance with custom." So they were married, "and the

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<sup>8</sup>Quoted in C. Kegan Paul, William Godwin: His Friends and Contemporaries (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1876), I, 158.

insignificant fact was communicated only gradually, and with laboured apologies for the inconsistency, to their friends."<sup>9</sup> Even before she became intimately associated with Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft was the pioneer among the women radicals, among whom she ranked as pre-eminent. Early in her life she was forced to earn her own livelihood because of an idle, alcoholic, and improvident father. After she and her sister had spent some years conducting a school for girls, followed by a period during which she was a governess in a fashionable family, she turned to writing, and thus began under necessity the practice of the doctrine of economic independence which later became one of the foundations of her teaching insofar as women were concerned. Fundamentally, it was the pressure of economic necessity which was to force women into a campaign for freedom and opportunity. Mary Wollstonecraft was the trail-blazer of the movement, and in her writings gave women the instrument with which they were soon to carve themselves a place beside men in the social scheme. Although she was the author of many stories and novels that reflected her theories and philosophy, Mary Wollstonecraft was best known for a work of non-fiction in which she set forth her concepts of the rights and freedom of women: today her Vindication of the Rights of Woman, published in 1792, remains the work for which she is remembered.

One of the younger members of the Godwinian circle and

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<sup>9</sup>Brailsford, op. cit., pp. 150-151.

one who, as will appear later in this study, was more a critic than an exponent of radical principles, was Amelia Opie, the wife of the noted painter, John Opie. She was born in Norwich on November 12, 1769 (the biographical sketch in her Works, I, v, reports the year of her birth as 1771), the only child of Dr. James Alderson and his wife. Her mother died when Amelia was fifteen years of age, and thereafter Amelia assumed the management of her father's household. Dr. Alderson was the beloved community physician with a profitable practice, but much of his joy in life came from administering medical aid to the poor who could not pay him for his services.

Thomas Brightwell, who was Amelia's friend for forty years, remembered the young daughter of Dr. Alderson as a gleeful, mirthful, impetuous child; and believed that she would have been "more demure and decorous" had her mother lived, "but perhaps less charming and attractive." Brightwell recalled that to the end of her life Amelia had referred frequently to her mother with affection and veneration, usually in connection with some bad habit about which Mrs. Alderson had cautioned her daughter, or with some good one which the mother had fostered.<sup>10</sup>

During the twenty-eight years preceding her marriage, Amelia lived in her father's house at Norwich, except for occasional visits to London and elsewhere. When, after nine

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<sup>10</sup> Cecilia Lucy Brightwell, Memorials of the Life of Amelia Opie, second edition (Norwich, England: Fletcher and Alexander, 1854), pp. 1-3, 6-7.

years of happy married life, she became a widow, she returned to Norwich to live once more with her father. The description that Brightwell had written of her when she was several years younger was still, in the main, accurate:

Her countenance was animated, bright, and beaming; her eyes soft and expressive, yet full of ardour; her hair was abundant and beautiful, of auburn hue, and waving in long tresses; her figure was well-formed; her carriage fine; her hands, arms, and feet, well shaped; -- and all around and about her was the spirit of youth, and joy, and love.<sup>11</sup>

Very early in life Amelia gave evidence of possessing talents of a very superior order. While still a child, she composed poems, descriptive essays, and short novels, none of which, with the exception of a few poems, had been published prior to her marriage. Her marriage itself was a surprise to her friends, for, after meeting John Opie in London while she was visiting friends in that city, she declared that his chances for success in courtship were one in a thousand. But, ultimately, the one chance prevailed, and she became the wife of Opie in May, 1798. Although she had had numerous youthful infatuations, she had repeatedly declined marriage for at least two reasons: she was reluctant to leave her father, and no one had ever so completely won her heart as did John Opie.

The married life of the Opies was a happy companionship. Their habits and tastes were simple and inexpensive, and they were so inclined toward domesticity that they preferred to spend most of their evenings at home rather than

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

to join in society abroad. For relaxation after his day's labors at his easel, Opie enjoyed nothing better than spending the evening hours in conversing with his wife, in reading with her books of amusement or edification, in studying prints from the best ancient and modern masters, or in sketching designs for future pictures. He was ardently in love with his profession as well as with his wife, and his industry as an artist caused an acquaintance, Northcote, to observe that Opie, unlike most artists, did not paint to live, but he lived to paint. Throughout the day, he was always busily working in his studio, and not even the most pleasant society could long keep him from his canvas.<sup>12</sup>

At the time he married her, Opie knew that Amelia's favorite amusement was writing, and, after he became her husband, encouraged her in her ambition. He never quarreled with her for writing too much, but sometimes did express a regret that she did not write more and better stories. Amelia, encouraged by the interest, sympathy, and approval of her husband, soon began to take her writing seriously and to exert her ability with the utmost diligence, so that she soon became, in her own words, "a candidate for the pleasures, the pangs, the rewards, and the penalties, of authorship."<sup>13</sup>

In 1801, Amelia published Father and Daughter, her first acknowledged work, although shortly before her marriage

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 65-69.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

she had published an anonymous novel, The Dangers of Coquetry, which attracted almost no attention. This was not the fate of Father and Daughter, however, for this work was heartily received by the public, who warmly approved the tale. The author, in the preface, modestly disclaimed any desire that her book should be thought of by the ambitious title of a "novel," but declared, "Its highest pretensions are to be a simple moral tale." Three years later, in 1804, Mrs. Opie published her best-known work, Adeline Mowbray, or the Mother and Daughter, the object of which, according to Brightwell, was "to pourtray the lamentable consequences which would result from the adoption of lax principles on the subject of matrimony." In the spring of 1806 she published a collection of Simple Tales in four volumes. A reviewer, writing in The Edinburgh Review, pointed out what he considered to be minor faults in the work, but dismissed them hurriedly by saying that the characterizations were meritorious and incomparably superior in that they were "strictly true to general nature," and were "rarely exhibited except in interesting situations."<sup>14</sup>

At about this time Mrs. Opie's work was interrupted for a time, and the pattern of her happy life was irretrievably altered, when her husband became ill. Despite the best of medical attention, he lingered for several weeks and then died in the spring of 1807. Honored by burial in St. Paul's in London, he was lamented as one of the outstanding painters

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 79, 118, 126.

of his time. Soon after her husband's death, Amelia returned to Norwich to assist her father in his work and to continue her own literary labors. Thereafter, however, she paid an annual visit to London, where she had known so much happiness. Her only regret regarding her marriage was that she had had no children.<sup>15</sup>

In Temper, published in 1812, Mrs. Opie departed from the pathetic style of writing which she had previously used, and assumed more of the character of a moralist aiming at practical usefulness. An ardent admirer of her work wrote to her to the effect that there can be no greater pleasure than "to fortify the young in habits of virtue." Her correspondent then assured her that she, like Sheridan, would derive "inexpressible pleasure" from the thought that she had never written "one word derogatory to the cause of virtue." A year after Temper, Mrs. Opie issued her Tales of Real Life, a collection of short stories and novelettes that proved to be very popular; and in 1816 her Valentine's Eve appeared, depicting the superiority of religious principle as a rule of action.<sup>16</sup>

On her extended visits to London after her husband's death, Mrs. Opie was popular in the high social circles of the metropolis. Her letters from London sparkled with a profusion of names of lords, ladies, prominent literary figures, and even of royalty; and the predominant theme in her cor-

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 134-135, 139.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 142-143, 177.

respondence was that of elaborate functions which she had attended, levees which she herself held, and important personages whom she had met and with whom she had talked.<sup>17</sup>

At Norwich, the last years of her life were consumed largely with receiving visitors, reading, and writing letters -- an average of six each day. Her only important work during this time was her Illustrations of Lying, although she continued to produce poems and articles for publication in periodicals. During much of the time she suffered illness and pain, but continued to be cheerful and youthful in spirit, and to greet her many visitors with sincere pleasure. Brightwell wrote of her at this time:

Her love of fun, too, her merry laugh, her ready repartee, made one forget that she had numbered three-score years and ten. If we should ask, whence came this bright and joyous old age? we may trace it partly to natural temperament; her nature was genial, her temper sweet, and, until a late period, her health was excellent. But, great as these natural advantages were, more yet was owing to religious principle, and self-discipline. She was not kind and forbearing merely because her temper was sweet: she was so on principle; in obedience to the great command of the gospel, "Love one another!" Her readiness to pass by an unkind or slighting action, did not spring from easy indifference; none was more keenly sensitive to these things. When she was deeply wounded on one occasion, and could find no excuse for the offender, she looked sad and disquieted, and at length said, "I hope I shall be able in time to forget this." It pained her to think otherwise than well of any one; it was a real pang to be obliged to believe that he acted unworthily. She wept over the misdeeds of others, and rejoiced when they acted well and nobly. She was "tender-hearted" towards the failings of others, and would not believe

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 146-166.

an evil report. There was really nothing which roused her anger so much as for any one to spread a report to the disadvantage of another; it seemed an offence done to herself: and is not this the spirit of Christianity, akin to the "mind that was in Jesus?"<sup>18</sup>

This brief portrait, written by one who had known her intimately for many years, provides an index to many of the stories that she wrote, to many of the characters that she portrayed, and to many of the sentiments and maxims that are limned in her writings.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 367-368.

### CHAPTER III

#### AMELIA OPIE AS AN EXPONENT AND CRITIC OF RADICAL IDEAS CONCERNING MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL MORALITY

When the social philosophy of Amelia Opie is placed beside that of Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others of her contemporary leaders in literature, it seems so moderate in comparison as to appear essentially orthodox. Her parents, especially her father, had been interested in the various radical theories of the day, and she herself had been brought up amidst much discussion countenancing revolutionary doctrines; but in her youth, Amelia Opie had never been an enthusiastic convert to the new philosophies, and later, when she became intimately associated with members of the so-called "radical group," she accepted the various personalities as dear friends but did not rigorously adhere to their beliefs. In her writings are reflected, at times, her liberal political opinions, but these are always merely incidental to the main trend of what she has to say, for, as a writer, she was always primarily interested in domestic virtue and in religion. Although these consuming interests appear repeatedly throughout the scope of her writings, they are made the dominant theme of what is usually conceded to be her most characteristic work,

Adeline Mowbray, in which are graphically depicted the errors of one who would dare to defy the social customs of man.

If she was primarily interested in domestic relationships and in the problems arising from the association of men and women, Amelia Opie was but falling in line with the tendency of other women writers of her period. One of the literary features of the later eighteenth century was the large crop of so-called "lady novelists" who produced much of the literature in England at that time. The writings of the "lady novelists" were marked by traits characteristic of delicate femininity; sentimental attitudes were prevalent; and by their pervasive didacticism the authoresses proclaimed the high value of unimpeachable morality, and lifted hands in horror at any suspicion of laxness of opinion. A worshiper of the proprieties, the lady novelist saw to it that any violator of decorum came to an unhappy end. Even on those occasions when they caused their heroines to suffer under false accusations, they were hardly sympathetic -- the heroines should have been more cautious in avoiding the very appearance of indiscretion. Strangely, though, the lady novelist had a certain Christian charity toward handsome, rakish heroes if, in the last chapter, they should give promise of reforming. Domestic virtues were given a prominent place in the works of these writers, who thoroughly understood, and never tired of illustrating, filial and parental affection, wifely submission and fidelity, patience, good nature, economy, charity

to the poor, devoutness in religious observance, and a physical feminine weakness that would inspire a protective attitude on the part of men. Amelia has been called "perhaps the pleasantest" of all the lady novelists, both in personality and in literary style.<sup>1</sup> Throughout her long life she was sympathetic toward the progressive movements of her time, but in her writings she never lost sight of traditional morality, domestic virtue, and Christian traits of character, all of which she frequently utilized in her narratives.

Despite the fact that men are often unfaithful to their wives and neglect their children -- a condition which she portrayed many times in her works -- Mrs. Opie continued to regard marriage as a wise institution and one which should be held sacred. In this respect she was in direct opposition to Godwin, who advocated the abolition of marriage, and to his ardent followers, who echoed his ideas. A brief synopsis of Adeline Mowbray<sup>2</sup> will present opportunity to show in more detail the opinions of Mrs. Opie in relation to those of her radical associates.

Though the story of Adeline is purportedly fiction, it is to some extent biographical also, for it portrays, "in the vein of travesty," such a character as was Mary Wollstonecraft, foremost among the women radicals. Some of the chapters

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<sup>1</sup>Gregory, The French Revolution and the English Novel, pp. 191-192, 203.

<sup>2</sup>Adeline Mowbray, The Works of Mrs. Amelia Opie (Philadelphia: Crissy and Markley, 1848), I, 111-227.

in Adeline's life might have been lifted almost bodily from the dramatic life of Mary Wollstonecraft; and the entire story becomes, whether intentionally or not, a striking satire upon the female revolutionists and an eloquent commentary upon their theories when carried out in practice.

Adeline Mowbray, in her youth, became enthusiastic about the attractive theories of a young writer called Glenmurray, who vehemently attacked the "folly and wickedness" of the institution of marriage, and "drew so delightful a picture of the superior purity, as well as happiness, of a union cemented by no ties but those of love and honour," that Adeline, in her youthful enthusiasm for the new order of things, made a solemn compact with herself to act, when she had grown to adulthood, in accordance with Glenmurray's principles governing the relationships between men and women. Unfortunately, the heroine early came to the conclusion that the ideal marriage is one founded on rational grounds and cemented by rational ties, and in time she became the victim of this theory.

Adeline, influenced by Glenmurray's writings, declaimed against marriage as an "institution at once absurd, unjust, and immoral," and she asserted that she would "never submit to so contemptible a form, or profane the sacred ties of love by so odious and unnecessary a ceremony." Strangely, the young girl was encouraged in her attitude by her mother, who, different from most mothers even of her day, had an utter contempt for the institution of marriage, and preferred "no

other ties or sanction than those of love and reason" as a bond of union between the sexes. Parenthetically, it should be pointed out that this was not in any way Amelia Opie's idea, but simply her portrayal of the current theories of morality, particularly those prevalent among the radical school.

Mrs. Mowbray, however, received a terrible shock when Adeline expressed a desire to live with Glenmurray in such a relationship as he had suggested. Glenmurray had, by mere chance, become known to the Mowbrays, and Adeline had become infatuated with him. Mrs. Mowbray, horrified at Adeline's declaration of her bold desire, exclaimed: "Little did I think that you were so romantic, as to see no difference between amusing one's imagination with new theories and new systems, and acting upon them in defiance of common custom, and the received usages of society." Adeline's plan, declared her mother, would be "fraught with mischief to you, and horror to me."<sup>3</sup> If it were not so prophetic of tragedy, unhappiness, and misery, this scene between mother and daughter would be humorous. The mother, who had upheld the radical theories so long as they seemed abstract and impersonal, turned away from them in disgust when they were about to touch her own life and that of the daughter whom she loved. The theories were attractive in books, and were stimulating to think about; but when they were applied to real-life situations,

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

they lost all their glamour. The preaching of the radical doctrines might do no harm, but their practice would inevitably be fraught with tragedy.

Mrs. Mowbray, desperate in her effort to thwart Adeline in the realization of her plan, wrote a letter to Glenmurray in an attempt to dissuade him from pressing his suit to Adeline. In this communication she said:

I agree with you in all you have said against marriage; I agree with the savage nations in the total uselessness of clothing; still I condescend to wear clothes, though neither becoming nor useful, because I respect public opinion; and I submit to the institution of marriage for reasons equally cogent.<sup>4</sup>

Despite all the entreaties of her mother, however, Adeline went to live with Glenmurray without any form of marriage ceremony having been performed. For a time she was happy in her love, except for the incessant prickings of conscience. Almost at once she became the object of contempt and aversion among the women who knew her real situation with Glenmurray. She had incurred the dread stigma of breaking with social usage, and when her secret became known, she was avoided and despised. Even all her old and dear friends ignored and avoided her, and looked upon her with contempt when they learned of her "rational" union with Glenmurray. Seldom did she receive from anyone a word of sympathy, but there were many words of reproof and censure. At length she cried out in her misery: "Now I am indeed an outcast! Even my

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

oldest and best friends renounce me!" Once Adeline heard of a woman who had refused to employ a maid-servant who had worked in Adeline's home under the influence of her unholy alliance with Glenmurray. Repeatedly, in many trying ways, Adeline was humiliated for her way of life. A woman who visited her in an effort to convince her of her sin, recoiled in disdain when Adeline informed her that her way of life had been one of her own choosing.

Mrs. Opie skillfully presents Adeline's bitter retribution for her laxity, showing the world arrayed against her for her folly in having broken with precedent and custom. From misery to misery, from sorrow to sorrow, from agony to anguish, Adeline plunged ever deeper into despair and suffering until her life became a ceaseless embitterment; all her dreams vanished, and the ideals she once had cherished became repulsive to her. Her life was a mockery because she had dared to mock social usage.

Godwin, in all probability, would not have written such a story as Mrs. Opie wrote in Adeline Mowbray. To him, Adeline would have been wise, not foolish, in living as she did with Glenmurray; and he would not have made her suffer poverty and remorse, but would have given her happiness and joy as compensation for her emancipated actions. Godwin's most radical pronouncements were his emphatic denunciations of the marriage laws. He believed that a man or a woman belonged to whoever needed him or her most, regardless of any

relations already formed. He was firm in his contention that the ideal community would include the demolition of the family. He saw cohabitation as an evil, for it "melts opinions to a common mould, and destroys the fortitude of the individual." Two people living together can never have wishes that wholly coincide. This fact results in thwarted wills, bickerings, and misery. Since marriage is the closest form of cohabitation, and involves the rashest of all promises, it is an evil. He pointed out that most marriages occur in youth, when romance and love between young people produce circumstances fraught with delusions; it is regrettable, he averred, that a contract binds the marriage partners to make the best of an "irretrievable mistake," even after they have discovered their unhappy plight. Godwin commented sarcastically that the maxim of marriage is: "If you have made a mistake, cherish it."<sup>5</sup>

Many years later Mrs. Shelley, Godwin's daughter, recalled that her father had been "very averse" to marriage. He was unalterably opposed to any promise that would hold two lives together for a lifetime if such a permanent union was in any way disagreeable. Godwin responded to criticism of his theories by declaring that he had no fear of lust or license, should society overthrow the marriage bond. Men, he said, usually prefer one partner, and friendship refines the grossness of sensuality. He found in society many evils that

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<sup>5</sup>For a summary of Godwin's views on marriage, see Brailsford, Shelley, Godwin, and Their Circle, pp. 138-139.

were worse than open and avowed inconstancy.<sup>6</sup>

Amelia Opie, although she was intimate with Godwin and with many of his associates, could not share his view of marriage. On the contrary, it seemed to her to be shocking and immoral. Adeline Mowbray ably demonstrates her satiric intention to apply Godwin's theory of marriage in actual life-situations and to note the outcome. In this story, as in many others, Mrs. Opie stood aside to look with misgivings and with a certain subtle strain of sarcasm, upon the excessive and inconsistent doctrines of the enthusiasts.<sup>7</sup> Here she is not an exponent, but a severe critic of radicalism. She makes Glenmurray representative of the whole school of radical thought, flooding the presses with reams of social propaganda which, in some cases, sounded attractive and practicable. Mrs. Mowbray might well be the mouthpiece of Amelia Opie herself when she pointed out to her daughter that though the new theories might be enticing to one's thoughts, they were not at all suitable as one's philosophy of life.

Mrs. Mowbray's sudden reversal of attitude with respect to marriage is reminiscent of the somewhat humorous capitulation of Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft in their effort to avoid social stigma. Repeatedly, in his writings, Godwin had asserted that it was not particularly important

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 139-140. See also Paul, William Godwin, His Friends and Contemporaries, I, 161.

<sup>7</sup>Lovett and Hughes, The History of the Novel in England, pp. 150-151.

that a child should know the identity or companionship of its father; the mother would care for the child, with the "spontaneous" assistance of her neighbors. He was advocating an extremely radical idea when he attempted to remove all thought of stigma from illegitimacy. So revolutionary indeed was the doctrine that, years later, Godwin himself tried to forget it when his own child was approaching birth as an illegitimate. Regardless of how much talking and writing he had done to remove all reproach from the child of unwed parents; he shrank from the fate of his own child, the victim of his philosophical folly, and refused to let it come into the world as a nameless waif. To avoid the occurrence of that which he had long countenanced, but that which had suddenly become repugnant to him, he entered into a legal marriage with Mary Wollstonecraft so that their child would be legitimate.<sup>8</sup> This was another instance of opinions that sounded attractive, but in life did not work out satisfactorily. What Mrs. Opie does so forcefully in Adeline Mowbray is to demonstrate the utter impracticability of the revolutionary philosophy regarding marriage; she shows that the practice of the radical theories is far different from the preaching. In domestic relations she is more than willing to accept the traditional and the commonplace customs, and to waive the revolutionary doctrines. In this respect she is by no means a radical, but a determined satirist of radical theory.

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<sup>8</sup>Brailsford, op. cit., pp. 150-151.

Mrs. Opie, in another connection, runs counter to the revolutionary idea of marriage when she causes a character in "The Mysterious Stranger" to say:

I think that, setting aside the restraints of religion and morality, a woman who yields her honour to the dictates of passion mistakes her object, if happiness be that object; for, even supposing that her lover be constant and affectionate, she has to bear up against the world's 'dread scorn,' and utter rejection by her own sex, -- a consciousness under which no woman can exist with comfort and peace of mind. Therefore, a woman who expects to be happy while suffering under the results of a state of guilt, is like an indigent man who gives great entertainments, and forgets that the day of payment for them must come, a day for which he is wholly unprepared and unprovided.<sup>9</sup>

Here Mrs. Opie reverts to the role of a moralist who is prone to ask the question, "Is momentary illicit pleasure worth its ultimate cost?" Her answer is definitely in the negative. She points out a fact that Godwin and his radical associates were unwilling to recognize in theory, but which they sometimes admitted in practice; namely, that when one breaks with tradition and social usage, a bitter pay-day is inevitable. Godwin unwillingly recognized the approaching pay-day when he reluctantly legitimized his unborn child. Godwin, however, was merely doing the thing that at the moment seemed expedient. That this was true is indicated by his explanation of his act:

Nothing but a regard for the happiness of the individual, which I had no right to injure, could have induced me to submit to an institution which I wish to see abolished, and which I would recommend to my fellowmen, never to practise, but with the greatest

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<sup>9</sup>Works, II, 87.

caution. Having done what I thought necessary for the peace and respectability of the individual, I hold myself no otherwise bound than I was before the ceremony took place.<sup>10</sup>

In Godwin's ideal society, there would be no marriage, and no stigma would be attached to illegitimacy. Social ostracism for sexual immorality would be unknown, for sexual immorality itself would be unheard of. The radicals and Mrs. Opie are poles apart in this matter.

Mrs. Opie admitted no double scale of values in morality. To her, what is moral for men is also moral for women, and husbands have no right to demand that their wives be chaste and virtuous when they themselves indulge in moral lapses.<sup>11</sup> In this contention she was echoing the implications of the radicals, for, although they may have made no definite assertion on this particular point, their precept of the freedom of the individual would easily embody this principle. Their concept of an ideal society, too, implied full co-operation in all phases of life between men and women, and the significant assumption of equality between the sexes. Here Mrs. Opie becomes an exponent of the radical view. But her motive is different, for whereas the radicals would abolish the double-scale moral code for the sake of sexual equality, Mrs. Opie would do so out of her dislike for anything immoral, and because of her aversion to the injustice involved, should a husband forbid his wife to do a thing that he, without any scruples, freely engaged in.

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<sup>10</sup>Quoted by Paul, op. cit., I, 235.

<sup>11</sup>"The Mysterious Stranger," Works, II, 87-88, 94.

A further insight into Mrs. Opie's moral philosophy is afforded in the comments of one of her characters in the story, Mrs. Arlington:

Purity cannot have any sympathy with im-  
purity, and . . . . innocence ought to shrink  
from any intimate association with vice. . . .  
From the indulgence of virtuous affections, and from  
them alone, can flow the happiness of life.<sup>12</sup>

The speaker continues by saying that virtue and purity are the most valuable possessions that anyone may claim, and are of far greater value than wealth and noble birth. . . Probably the first part of this comment is not inconsistent with the beliefs of the radicals, but that the latter part is not in keeping with revolutionary theories cannot be doubted. The adjective "virtuous" creates a chasm between the radical point of view and that of Mrs. Opie, for only the latter would be likely to declare that happiness can flow from the indulgence of virtuous affections, and from them alone. More radical members of the Godwinian circle would have said that from the indulgence of affections can come happiness; the term "virtuous" would mean little to them, but to Mrs. Opie it meant everything that was high and noble and desirable.

Mrs. Opie's story of "The Mother and Son" contains an intimation of a particular moral note that appears a number of times in her works -- her hearty disapprobation of the widespread custom of men to support "kept women" or mistresses in separate domestic establishments, and to divide their time

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<sup>12</sup>Mrs. Arlington, Works, II, 331-332.

between their own homes and the apartments of these "ladies." The radicals saw nothing to disparage in the custom, for their interpretation of society called for the universal acceptance of a sexual relationship that would give women the virtual status not of wives but of mistresses. Mrs. Opie, however, saw it as one of the most reprehensible customs of the time and repeatedly demonstrated in the lives of her characters that such a relationship could but end in sorrow and heartache for all parties concerned -- the husband, the wife, and the mistress.<sup>13</sup> Here, as in many other instances, Mrs. Opie is the austere moralist, painting in unlovely, despicable colors that which she would emphasize as being sinful and unwholesome. Adeline Mowbray is, however, her most striking example of the unfortunate social position of the mistress.

Mrs. Opie, like all the "lady novelists," believed that rigid attention to decorum was highly important in sexual relations and in all association between men and women. She took occasion frequently in her writings to point out certain matters that her characters, especially her heroines, should keep in mind. Of course, her ultimate purpose was to influence the thought and actions of her readers in the proper direction. Illustrative of this purpose in her works is the instance of the father who advised his daughter in this manner:

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<sup>13</sup>See "The Mother and Son," Works, I, 289-290.

. . . . you must know that no prudent young woman ever encourages the addresses of a man unless she is sure he means to marry her, and that a poor girl who is courted by a great lord must lose her good name whether she deserves it or no.<sup>14</sup>

That Mrs. Opie regarded decorum as highly important as an adjunct to morality is ably demonstrated by the fact that she puts almost identical words into the mouths of two widely different characters in two distinctly dissimilar stories. Editha Arundel, in "Murder Will Out," says, "I consider attention to decorum as one of the great bulwarks of female virtue";<sup>15</sup> and in Temper, Mr. Egerton comments, "I deem an attention to decorum one of the first bulwarks of female chastity."<sup>16</sup> Throughout the works under consideration in this study, chastity is upheld and lauded as woman's most important and attractive virtue. If this is true of women, Mrs. Opie is no less rigorous in her contention that men should be morally above reproach. She has more to say about the evil effects of woman's moral lapses than she does about those of men. The social standards of her time placed a greater stigma upon women who were not morally above reproach than upon men who were in the same category.

Mrs. Opie continually extols virtue and deplures marital infidelity; divorcees are made the objects of contempt and ostracism, and women who value their reputations will not

<sup>14</sup>"The Brother and Sister," Works, I, 351.

<sup>15</sup>Works, I, 400.

<sup>16</sup>Works, III, 28.

associate with them in any relationship whatever. The radicals, of course, would place no stigma whatever upon the divorcee; in their view she was as socially acceptable as anyone else. Easy separation from one's marital partner was an essential corollary of the revolutionary idea that a man or a woman belonged to the person who needed him or her most, irrespective of previous relationships. Mrs. Opie, with her unshakable conception of the sacredness of marriage, could not share this view.

She did, however, believe that certain of the marriage laws were unjust, especially those relating to divorce. She felt that a husband's infidelity to the marriage vows should be sufficient cause for the wife to consider herself divorced without recourse to legal action. In "The Mysterious Stranger" she unfolds this concept in the lives of her characters, causing a woman to leave her husband because of his unfaithfulness and, with clear conscience, to marry another man with whom she fell in love -- all without having obtained a legal divorce. Before long, however, her conscience begins to plague her and the realization that she has violated the marriage laws preys upon her mind until her life becomes utterly miserable. Mrs. Opie's implication in this story is not that the woman suffered because of her remarriage, specifically, but that the unjust marriage laws of her day interfered with her perfect happiness.<sup>17</sup> Here Mrs. Opie is

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<sup>17</sup>"The Mysterious Stranger," Works, II, 94-95.

in complete accord with Godwin, who vehemently denounced not only marriage as an institution, but also what he termed the injustice of the marriage laws; and also with Mary Wollstonecraft, who never attacked the institution of marriage in theory, but only the "intolerable" marriage laws of her time.<sup>18</sup>

"The Death-bed" is a powerful preachment against sexual immorality -- against marital unfaithfulness, to be exact. In this story a wife leaves her husband for no reason at all except that she has become infatuated with another man, and feels that she cannot be happy in her home with those who love her. Her family grieve for her and, for years, continue to hope that she will return. The man for whom she deserted her family soon tires of her and casts her out. She is too proud to return to her husband, though she longs to do so, for she realizes at last that she loves him as she will never be able to love any other man. Years pass, and she sinks lower and lower in sin, driven at last to a life of professional immorality to maintain her miserable existence. Finally she became so old and diseased that she could no longer find employment, even in the dens of vice, and she took to the road as a poor beggar. In the meantime her husband had moved into another section of the country and she unwittingly knocked at his door one day, asking for alms. Her husband, horrified, recognized her and took her in his arms,

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<sup>18</sup>Gregory, op. cit., p. 258.

while she sobbed piteously and pleaded for forgiveness. She soon died, and the grief-smitten husband made his daughter witness her corpse and admonished her to learn a lesson from her mother's wrongdoings.<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, as was brought out in connection with the story of Adeline Mowbray, the radicals would not have permitted such an ending to the narrative, but would have upheld the wife in her decision to leave her husband and would have seen to it that she found happiness in her new relationship. Mrs. Opie, far from entertaining such a philosophy, was eager to point out the tragic results of sexual impropriety. Incidentally, she causes the father to attribute his wife's desertion and pitiable state to the fact that the fundamental principles of religion and virtue had not been deeply imprinted on her mind in her younger years, and hence the proper development of her character had been neglected, with tragic results for herself and her family. The author is careful to show the father in his realization of this fact, and to commend him highly when he determines to imprint upon the consciousness of his young daughter all those religious and virtuous principles the lack of which had been her mother's ruin. In that day in England it was generally believed that a daughter would, in all probability, inherit her mother's vices; but Mrs. Opie expresses her scorn for such a theory, and sarcastically comments, "As if education were not every thing

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<sup>19</sup> "The Death-bed," Works, I, 239-240.

in the formation of character, and blood nothing!"<sup>20</sup>

In the matter of domestic relations Mrs. Opie was highly conservative in that she steadfastly upheld the prevalent idea that the wife should willingly be subject to the will of her husband and should be obedient to his whims and wishes. She seems always to be sincere in her presentation of this belief, which occurs frequently in her works. More than once she comments bluntly, or causes her characters, usually the women, to comment that it is the duty of a wife to obey her husband.<sup>21</sup> The fact that her feminine characters so frequently express this belief seems to indicate that she is trying to impress upon the women of her day their obligation to submit their wills to the dictates of their husbands in order to preserve the time-honored custom and practice of the subserviency of the woman. One instance is here cited as representative of many such occurrences; Lady Barbara had been requested by her husband to do a thing that was utterly distasteful to her, but she indulgently acquiesced by saying, "I am your wife, and I feel it my duty to obey your will."<sup>22</sup> On another occasion in a different story, the husband upbraids his wife by reminding her of her duty; Fendarves says to his wife: "You cannot but own a wife ought to obey her husband's will, when not contrary to the will of

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>21</sup>See, for example, "The Ruffian Boy," Works, II, 479.

<sup>22</sup>Love, Mystery, and Superstition, Works, III, 349.

God."<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Opie herself seems to be speaking here. Along with her acceptance of the concept of the sacredness of human marriage went her belief in the inequality of the marriage partners, as exemplified in her willingness to concede to the husband the right to expect obedience on the part of his wife. In this respect she took issue with Mary Wollstonecraft, who bitterly attacked the "intolerable" marriage laws, and could not look with favor upon any statute which made a woman her husband's property. She was an aggressive exponent of the equality of the sexes, and anything that smacked of the submission of woman was insupportable in her sight.<sup>24</sup>

Mrs. Opie, on the other hand, was willing to accept the social usage that was current in her generation, and, in addition, was eager to inspire others to accept it by employing the technique of causing misfortune to come to women who went counter to their husbands' wishes, and of bringing happiness to those who were willingly subject to their partners. But she was always careful to emphasize the fact that the husband's will should be in keeping with the will of God, and was not averse to bringing calamity upon the husband who went counter to divine precepts, and upon the wife who acceded to his wishes.

That Mrs. Opie in no way sought justification for her own sex as against the other sex, and that she was often a

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<sup>23</sup>A Wife's Duty, Works, III, 239.

<sup>24</sup>Gregory, op. cit., p. 258.

critical observer of woman's behavior, are further shown in her belief that the wife was in some measure responsible for the honor and fidelity of her husband. A striking illustration of this concept is the following: Helen Pendarves, during a long period of illness, engaged a plain but attractive nurse, who was her friend, to attend her. Upon her partial recovery, Helen, sitting one day by her window, discovered her husband walking in the garden with the nurse. Pendarves was reading aloud from a book, and they were both laughing and happy. Helen was horrified to see that they "romped" together when the nurse snatched away Pendarves' book and he, laughingly pursuing her, attempted to regain it. To Helen, this familiarity between her husband and her friend seemed to be a breach of propriety, and she mercilessly upbraided herself for having made it possible:

I found that I had been exposing my husband to the allurements of a coquettish romp; and though I acquitted both him and her of aught that was wrong, I still feel that no prudent wife would place the man she loved in such a situation. Many, many a wife, it is well known, has had to rue the hour when, at a period like this, she has introduced into her family a young and seemingly-attached friend.<sup>25</sup>

On another occasion, when Pendarves requested Helen to take a leading part in a play that some of their friends were producing in preparation for a gala social event, she reluctantly complied. Later, following the performance, a friend told her that he believed acting to be below her station and

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<sup>25</sup>A Wife's Duty, Works, III, 219.

degrading to her, and reproved her for "exhibiting her person on a stage"; whereupon Helen replied that her acting would indeed be degrading were it her own choice, but that since it had been a matter of necessity, it was to be differently interpreted, for "the fulfilment of a painful duty exalts rather than degrades."

"Duty!" exclaimed her friend.

"Yes," replied Helen. "My husband required me to act, and I obeyed."

Her friend accepted her explanation, and declared that her husband was to be blamed, rather than Helen.<sup>26</sup>

This occurrence also gives Mrs. Opie an opportunity to speak her mind regarding the impropriety of the acting in plays, a very popular diversion among the fashionable circles of England in her day. She saw nothing commendable in the practice, and thought it to be degrading and immoral, and fit only to engage the interest of the lower classes of society.

Mrs. Opie had some definite ideas regarding the ethics of marriage and the carrying on of the minor relationships of married life. In causing a character to say, "When perfect confidence between man and wife is once destroyed, there is an end to perfect happiness,"<sup>27</sup> she expressed a thought that was consistent with radical theory in that the radicals

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

held that mutual understanding and confidence were of more value in sex relations than was the marriage ceremony, and that if anything arose to destroy harmony, the intimate relationship should at once be broken off.

Although she deplored family quarrels, Mrs. Opie recognized the fact that occasional misunderstandings are well-nigh inevitable. They should, however, be private affairs, and should not be witnessed by anyone outside the family. Into the mouth of Mr. Egerton, one of her most likable characters, she put her opinion in this matter:

I am of the opinion that conjugal quarrels, like conjugal endearments, should never take place before company; and that those parents who quarrel with each other, and correct their children, before even their intimate friends, are positive nuisances in society.<sup>28</sup>

Another kindred observation is the following: "Mistaken indeed is the wife who thinks reproach can ever do aught but alienate the object of it."<sup>29</sup> And this: "There is nothing I dislike more than to hear a woman speak disrespectfully to the being whom she has sworn to honour. . . . There is nothing so offensive, certainly, as the bickering of husbands and wives in company."<sup>30</sup>

Although the radicals made common interests and love the basis for sex relations and for all association between men and women, Mrs. Opie deplored and advised against unequal

<sup>28</sup>Temper, Works, III, 136.

<sup>29</sup>A Wife's Duty, Works, III, 230.

<sup>30</sup>Temper, Works, III, 136.

marriages, even if love and other vital factors should tend to unite a man and a woman.<sup>31</sup> She repeatedly shows the likelihood that such marriages will turn out unfortunately, with resultant misery and unhappiness for all parties concerned. She causes her characters to talk gloomily about them, and makes one of them comment, "I never approved of unequal marriages."<sup>32</sup>

In the same manner, secret marriages are discounted, and those persons who marry secretly are shown to be the victims either of unhappiness or of conscience. One girl who married secretly and came dreadfully to rue the day of her act, cries: "Can that union turn out happy, which has not received the sanction of a parent? This painful question is continually recurring to me."<sup>33</sup> The radicals doubtless would not permit their heroines to suffer such qualms of conscience, for they had no scruples against secrecy in illicit cohabitation, and anything objectionable to secret marriages would not have occurred to them at all.

An analysis of the works of Amelia Opie, as presented in this chapter, limns her in the light of a conservative who, for the most part, believed the old ideas relating to marriage and sexual morality to be preferable to the excessively radical new ones. She is portrayed in her own writings as a proponent of established social usage and a critic, occasionally

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<sup>31</sup>Valentine's Eve, Works, II, 169.

<sup>32</sup>Temper, Works, III, 90.

<sup>33</sup>Madeline, Works, I, 66.

severe, of the revolutionary theories that were coming to the fore in her day. She took delight in using the medium of fiction for the application of some of the outstanding radical theories to life situations in order to expose the impracticability of the revolutionary doctrines. In no sense is she a humorist in the practice of her technique, although she occasionally assumes the role of a satirist who places her characters in reasonable situations and logically causes misfortune and unhappiness to come to them when they try to work their way out of their dilemmas by the use of radical theories. She does not shake her finger at the radicals in an I-told-you-so manner, but she appears frequently to be saying, in effect, to her radical contemporaries: You see, in life situations your theories do not work out so commendably as they do on paper.

## CHAPTER IV

### AMELIA OPIE AS AN EXPONENT AND CRITIC OF THE RADICAL THEORIES OF EDUCATION

At this point in the development of the present analysis of the works of Amelia Opie, it appears necessary to examine briefly certain of the educational theories of the radical writers before proceeding to look into Mrs. Opie's writings to discover her point of view relative to these concepts.

The first revolutionary philosophy of education in modern times was that of Rousseau, the French literary genius who had, on paper, fought the French Revolution long before it erupted in the palaces of Versailles and in the streets of Paris. Rousseau was pre-eminently a social and political reformer, but in his vigorous championship of a democratic society he did not forget to disparage the prevailing system of education and to advocate one that would be democratic in nature. He advocated a thing unheard of in his day -- universal education. He wanted children to be liberated from a tyrannical institution that pounded knowledge into their heads in accordance with an unchangeable formula. One of the first men

to perceive in the child an individual personality, he desired the establishment of a school system that would permit nature to take its course, under the supervision of teachers, in developing the personal and social and intellectual qualities of the young child. Despite his democratic leanings, even Rousseau declined to encourage the education of women on the same basis with men; stating that women were "specially made to please men," he declared that the more they came to resemble the male sex, the less power they would be able to wield over men. In England, Mary Wollstonecraft, an ardent champion of equality in education for men and women, replied in answer to this objection on the part of her French contemporary: "This is the very point I am at; I do not wish them to have power over men, but over themselves."<sup>1</sup>

Rousseau's Emile, in which the boy Emile is brought up without restraint, under the theory that human nature is fundamentally good and that only man-made conventions cause evil, was the forerunner of a large class of propaganda novels in the latter part of the eighteenth century that were designed to reform the methods used in instructing the young. These pedagogical novels departed from the classic view of education and emphasized the place of nature and experiment in the child's development. The usual plot of these stories centered about two youths, one brought up under the conventions

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in Wanda Penn, "Maria Edgeworth: Fiction in the Service of Education," Unpublished Master's Thesis, Graduate Division, Department of English, Texas State College for Women, 1934, pp. 6-7.

of society and the other in the freedom of nature; and the advantages accruing to the latter were stressed in all instances.<sup>2</sup>

With Rousseau should be mentioned his disciple and countryman, Condorcet, who, in most cases, reflected the notions of his predecessor regarding society and government. Like Rousseau, he favored universal education, and even went a step farther to suggest that women should have equal advantages in intellectual development. He believed that man's advance could be accomplished only through the elimination of inequalities among peoples and classes, and through the perfection of the individual; and, to accomplish this purpose with the highest degree of efficiency, he suggested an educational system controlled and operated by the state. He worked out a complete plan for universal compulsory education, providing for full liberty for all teachers, a guarantee of their competence by the state, and free scholarships for worthy persons. He was not willing, however, to permit the child to have so much freedom as was granted to him by Rousseau.

It was inevitable, of course, that the theories of these French radicals should be felt in England; and, as might be expected, William Godwin was one of the first Englishmen to give serious consideration to the ideas from across the Channel. The more he thought about them, however, the less he

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 7-9.

liked them, and he soon began to voice vehement objections to any system of national education. State-regulated institutions, he declared, would inevitably stereotype all knowledge and bring about an undesirable permanence and uniformity in opinions among the populace. He was not willing to trust the government to foster wholesome opinions and attitudes through a system of state schools. He was certain that any plan of state-controlled education would strengthen tyranny, bring about an intellectually mediocre citizenry, and perpetuate an institution that was reeking with faults.<sup>3</sup> So far as the other ideas of Rousseau and Condorcet were concerned, Godwin appears to have endorsed them.

As has been previously mentioned, Mary Wollstonecraft's chief contention as a radical was for equal educational advantages for women with men. In this field she was the pioneer, and an influential one. She was the first woman actually to advocate for her sex a social and intellectual position that would place women on a plane with men. While others, prominent women among them, were accepting the social conventions of their time and regarding the female sex as inferior and subservient, Mary Wollstonecraft declined to concede woman's inferiority to man.

With the foregoing paragraphs as a background against which to evaluate the works of Amelia Opie, it is now possible

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<sup>3</sup>For a summary of Godwin's views on education, see Brailsford, Shelley, Godwin, and Their Circle, pp. 22-23, 27-30, 109-110.

to examine Mrs. Opie's fictional works with the purpose of discovering whether she upheld, tolerated, or rebelled against these radical conceptions of the nature, function, and method of education.

In comparison with many of her contemporaries, Mrs. Opie is quite insignificant as the author of pedagogical novels, since she wrote only two works that are patterned after the prevailing design for such novels, namely, the contrast between two persons who had been brought up under different systems of education. The stories here referred to are "Austin and His Wife" and The Two Sons.

The former narrative,<sup>4</sup> which is too short to be classed as a novel, portrays distinctly the results of two diametrically opposed philosophies of education in the training and later life of sons. Brograve and Austin, who were neighbors and business associates, each had a son. Brograve, in an effort to produce in his son a character and personality that would be exemplary and above reproach, used fear, tyranny, domination, and an indomitable will in the upbringing of his youthful son, who naturally resented his hard lot and the unreasonableness of his father. Austin, on the other hand, employed tenderness, love, and indulgence in his relations with his offspring, and permitted him a liberal allowance, whereas Brograve's son was given almost nothing to spend on his own initiative. Both fathers were ardent advocates of

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<sup>4</sup>"Austin and His Wife," Works, II, 54 ff.

their respective methods. Brograve was continually boasting that his boy would turn out better than Austin's, who had been spoiled and, in Brograve's opinion, excessively indulged. In their youth, both boys seemed to be developing high principles of character, although Brograve took delight in frequently reproaching Austin with tales of the misdeeds and arrogance of Austin's son. Austin likewise began to hear of transgressions on the part of Brograve's son, but was too much a man of honor to say anything to his neighbor about the rumors.

At length both boys grew up and went to London to serve as apprentices in preparation for their chosen careers. Soon the fathers began to have misgivings and suspicions as to their sons' behavior, for they began to hear rumors of conduct that was anything but commendable. Before long, what had been bruited about as idle tales became substantiated in fact. Brograve's son, free at last from the harsh restraints of his father, began to do the things he had always wanted to do, and, in his newfound freedom, became involved in questionable practices, and at length was brought to the miserable status of a low criminal. His misdeeds brought sorrow and disgrace to his father, who, in trying to save his son, was accused by him of being responsible for his behavior. Brograve, suffering under burdens of remorse and regret, saw too late that harsh restraint and an iron hand were not the proper tools for parents to use in fashioning the character

of their sons. Young Brograve at length absconded with a large sum of money stolen from his employer and fled to America, where he soon lost his life in a drunken brawl.

Austin's son also became involved in thefts, brought on by the inadequacy of his earnings to satisfy the desires that had resulted from excessive parental indulgence. Time after time he became involved with the law over the theft of money and valuables of one kind or another, much of which he spent lavishly on a woman with whom he had immoral relations. At length he met a tragic death in an attempted robbery of his father's house.

Similar in many respects to "Austin and His Wife" is Mrs. Opie's other pedagogical narrative, The Two Sons.<sup>5</sup> John and Ronald Douglas were brothers, John being the elder. He was too indolent, too proud, and too indifferent to learn anything, but his parents excused him by saying that he was too clever to need to waste his time in school. Indulgence had made him not only his parents' spoiled darling but the village terror as well. He had no respect for his parents, he talked to them as though they were dogs, and on more than one occasion he even physically abused his mother, until she was actually afraid of him and pampered him even more in order to keep him in a good humor. Since John was too handsome and arrogant and lazy to work, his father, on his meager earnings as an exciseman, supported him in idle comfort, hoping

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<sup>5</sup>Works, III, 269 ff.

that luck would enable John to find some rich heiress whom he could marry. Ronald, who had all the good qualities that his brother lacked, was nevertheless the innocent victim of his parents' harshness and unkindness. Just as they made every effort to indulge John in his every whim and mood, so they seemed to take delight in making life miserable for Ronald, who was eager to be a teacher but was forced by his father to become a carpenter's apprentice. In his spare time, however, and unknown to his parents, he continued his studies under the tutelage of the village schoolmaster and did not abandon his hopes. At every opportunity, he was abused by his indolent brother, and mistreated and imposed upon by his parents.

One day Ronald risked grave danger to save the lives of three men, and was feted and acclaimed by the citizens of his village, a fact which aroused the disgust of his parents and the jealousy of his brother. Two strangers, who were about to return to their home in India, were in the town and, being a childless couple, decided they would like to adopt Ronald. The parents, glad of a chance to rid themselves of this worthless child, readily agreed; and John was delighted. In India, Ronald was completely happy. His benefactors obtained positions and advantages for him, and he ultimately accumulated great wealth. When, after an absence of many years, he returned to England, and went once more to his native village, he could find no trace of his family except

that his parents had been forced to sell their home and move away because of John's dissipations; he also heard a rumor that John had turned his parents out of his home and that he was living in adultery. But Ronald could not learn of their whereabouts.

While driving one day in his carriage, Ronald, stopping to give alms to a feeble old couple who were begging, was horrified to recognize them as his parents. He took them into his palatial home and gave them every comfort. John meanwhile had become the leader of a band of robbers, and was captured by the servants in an attempted robbery of Ronald's establishment. John was amazed when he was accosted by his own brother, whom he thought to be still in India. The robber viciously blamed his parents' indulgence for his state and, among other things, declared:

    Their wicked indulgence made me what I am.  
They did not indulge you, Ronald, and see the difference! Curses on them! . . . . If they had not spoiled me, I might have been like you, and you like me!

Ronald, promising not to tell his parents of John's having been there and of his criminality, permitted him to escape. Later John and his band of robbers deliberately waylaid Ronald on the eve of his wedding. John was planning to kill Ronald before his marriage so that he, John, would inherit Ronald's property upon their parents' death. Ronald's father and servants, hearing the commotion before the house, ran to the rescue, and the father unwittingly killed John,

and died from the shock when he found that he had slain his long-lost son. The mother never was informed of the fate of her once-beloved John, and was content to remain in Ronald's home and to share in the happiness that came to him and his wife.

The educational implications of these stories, particularly of "Austin and His Wife," are readily apparent. Mrs. Opie, instead of causing the son who was educated according to Rousseau's concept of "letting nature take its course" to be the favored one of the two, precipitates an almost equal fate upon both boys, regardless of their method of training. Her purpose, of course, is to show that either extreme of excessive restraint or of excessive indulgence is to be discountenanced. She would choose a middle course of education, but unfortunately she does not say what that middle course should be. She is certain, however, that the radical ideas of education are not practicable. In The Two Sons she preaches a powerful sermon against the sin of indulging children. To her, such indulgence is nothing short of criminal, although it is upheld by the radicals in their contention that children should be allowed to develop in the way that seems natural to each person.

These two narratives are eloquent and pointed criticisms of certain radical views of the practice and purpose of education as an institution. Here, as in many other instances, she minimizes direct statements of her own ideas and

of the objectionable features of those that she opposes, and causes her strongest points and her most meaningful lessons to be those that come to the reader through the avenue of subtle and skillful implication. Mrs. Opie's method remains much the same, whatever the fort she is attacking.

In one novel,<sup>6</sup> two small children, a boy and a girl, come with their mothers to call on Mrs. Castlemain. The girl is impudent, dictatorial, rebellious, rude, clamorous, and spoiled, so that "it was very evident the mother had either not known or not practised her duty" toward the child. The boy, on the other hand, was under the "proper restraint"; he spoke when he was spoken to and not otherwise, and "the whole appearance and manner of the child argued . . . forcibly in favour of the good sense and propriety of the mother." Mrs. Opie, in the course of her narrative, comments favorably on "the evident good qualities" that the mother possessed as a parent, as contrasted with the decidedly uncommendable traits possessed by the mother of the rude little girl. The author makes it clear to the reader that persons are very likely to judge parents on the basis of their children's behavior. In the same vein, Mrs. Opie causes one of the characters in The Two Sons to remark: "Safer is it for a child to be thwarted and reprov'd, than to be petted and never contradicted."<sup>7</sup> Here she has in mind not only the thought of

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<sup>6</sup>Temper, Works, III, 91.

<sup>7</sup>Works, III, 270.

social approval for the well-mannered child, but also the child's personal welfare in all its implications.

The same thought, slightly more in detail, is voiced by still another character, kind-hearted Mr. Egerton:

To watch over the temper of a child, ameliorate it by salutary or proper indulgence, or control it by salutary restraints, is far, far more necessary to its future welfare, than to reprove a fault in grammar, or to correct an exercise.<sup>8</sup>

Mrs. Opie would not be so much a moralist if she simply made such assertions as this, or caused her characters to make them, without going on to illustrate the truth of her assertions. In innumerable instances, however, she demonstrates the value of her philosophy, not only in terms of education, but also in many other respects. Her favorite method is to cause a character to admit that discipline in his or her own life has been a salutary influence. Madeline<sup>9</sup> is an apt illustration in this connection. As a child she had rebelled furiously against her father's verbal chastisement in a matter that seemed to her insignificant; but when she became an adult, she readily acknowledged that her father's actions had been "proper" and beneficial. Regarding the worth of discipline in education, Mrs. Opie departs drastically from the radical point of view; the radicals would hardly countenance any discipline at all except that which might be administered by nature and by the processes of natural de-

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<sup>8</sup>Temper, Works, III, 36-37.

<sup>9</sup>Madeline, Works, I, 19.

velopment. Mrs. Opie, however, is not willing to trust nature alone with the upbringing of children, and firmly believes that parents should readily supply such disciplinary measures as nature may neglect to afford.

She goes a step farther when she intimates, on more than one occasion, that when parents do not assume the responsibility for the behavior and welfare of their offspring, these neglected children are likely to become the victims of one of two sorry fates: either they will die in their youth as victims of parental indifference and neglect, or else they will grow up to be menaces to society, so that the very existence of society will be threatened because parents will have failed either to see or to assume their duty. Children coming from such a situation, she declares, ". . . without morals or instruction, . . . would grow up to scourge the world by their vices, till the whole fabric of civilized society was gradually destroyed."<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. Opie, with striking simplicity and with a well-defined sincerity in her belief, causes her best-known character, Adeline Mowbray, to voice the philosophy of education of which she herself is an ardent devotee:

It is evident that on the education given to children must depend the welfare of the community; and, consequently, that whatever is likely to induce parents to neglect the education of their children, must be hurtful to the welfare of the community.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Adeline Mowbray, Works, I, 214.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

A parental tendency to practice excessive indulgence was one of the most deplorable errors in the upbringing of children, Mrs. Opie believed, and she lost no opportunity to display its worst results. The most striking portrayal in all her writings of the harmful nature of indulgence is found in Temper, a lengthy novel that carries the evil effects of indulgence through three generations. In the following scene Mr. Torrington requests his four-year-old daughter to shut the door, but she calmly continues to play with her blocks.

"Did you not hear what I said? Shut the door, for I am cold."

Still the child takes no notice of his request.

At this point the fatally indulgent mother, taking up the issue, says: "I will shut the door myself. Agatha is not yet old enough to understand the virtue of obedience."

The father counters: "But she is old enough to understand the inconveniences of disobedience, my dear Emma, if properly punished for disobeying."

Immediately the mother is distressed: "Surely it would be cruel to punish a child when she is incapable of knowing that what she does is worthy of punishment. When she is old enough to have reason, I will reason with her, and make her obedient and obliging on principle."

Torrington comments, with mingled sarcasm and amusement, that it is fortunate for society that the keepers of lunatics do not act on such a plan as Mrs. Torrington has

mentioned, and allow their charges to follow their own "propensities" until they are reasonable enough to feel the propriety of restraint. Whereupon his wife retorts that insane persons and young children are quite different individuals. Torrington has a ready answer:

"Undoubtedly, but not in the power of self-guidance and self-restriction. The man who has lost his reason, and the child who has not gained his, are equally objects for reproof and restraint, and must be taught good and proper habits by judicious and firm control and occasionally by the operation of fear."

"Could you have heart to beat Agatha?"

"If Agatha's good required it. If it were necessary that she should take medicine in order to cure her body, even you, Emma, would not hesitate, I conclude, to force the medicine down her throat."

"Certainly not."

"And is not the health of her mind of even greater importance? And should we hesitate to inflict salutary punishment in order to preserve that uninjured?"

While her parents have been talking, Agatha has gained possession of a pair of scissors, which she refuses to put down at her father's repeated command. He has the nurse put her to bed immediately without food or drink. From the nursery comes the sound of the child's enraged screams. Mrs. Torrington protests her husband's "harsh" treatment of her

"darling," but Torrington grimly informs her that he expects more from her than a selfish indulgence of her own natural mother's tenderness at the expense of the child's future welfare.

Mrs. Torrington reluctantly accedes to his request and promises to help him tame the wild temper of their pampered youngster. During the next few weeks great improvement is accomplished in Agatha as the mother assists her husband in being firm with the girl. But soon the father meets a tragic death, and thereafter the mother once more gives way to the child's whims because of a weak reluctance to cause distress to a being who so reminds her of her late beloved husband. Agatha, never frustrated in her selfish desires, becomes, as she approaches womanhood, the "tyrant of her mother and her mother's household, and the pity, the torment, and detestation of all the relations and friends" who visit at the house. The violence of her uncurbed temper increases and becomes an object of fear even to her mother. Domestic discord flares up over trifles, for both mother and daughter love to exercise power.

Agatha's rebellious temper leads her to marry, in the face of her mother's impassioned remonstrances, a man of whom next to nothing is known. Unhappiness, misery, and even poverty come to be Agatha's constant companions in her unhappy marriage as her life drags on toward its ultimate fatal situation. The reader who shares Agatha's anguish and misfortune

is never able to escape the feeling that the girl's sufferings are the direct result of her ungovernable temper, which was itself the effect of unwise parental indulgence and of improper education.<sup>12</sup> This is doubtless the feeling that Mrs. Opie, as a moralist, wished her readers to experience. If so, she has succeeded admirably.

But in other connections she paints the other side of the picture. If she is prone to show the evil results of ill-advised parental attitudes, she is also eager to depict the commendable outcome of wise training. Hence, in the portrayal of several of her most lovable characters, she observes that the character's virtues are the result, in the main, of the fact that he has not had his "naturally happy temper ruined by injudicious indulgence."<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Opie illustrates her philosophy of education quite as often by the exhibition of virtues as vices.

Her feeling that "injudicious indulgence" is sinful is, of course, in direct opposition to the radicals' theory that the child should have freedom to do the things that seem natural to him and, consequently, that he should be permitted to indulge his whims to his heart's content. What else could Rousseau have meant with his "let-nature-take-its-course" theory? Though this revolutionary idea might win many adherents among her contemporaries, Mrs. Opie was wholly uncon-

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<sup>12</sup>Temper, Works, III, 5-7, 125-126.

<sup>13</sup>A Wife's Duty, Works, III, 209.

vinced by such specious arguments.

While many of her contemporaries were still clinging to the belief that one's blood determines whether one is noble or base, Amelia Opie was aligning herself with the revolutionists in France and in England in her contention that proper education makes one noble, and not the fact that one is born of an aristocratic family; and that improper education makes one base, and not the fact that one is born in a peasant's hovel. It is not altogether correct, however, to say that she and the radicals were completely in agreement in this matter; for whereas she believed that equal education would produce a society of equals, the radicals, though they believed in and desired a society composed of equals, were not so emphatic in their contention that education was the one and only means of attaining it.

Just as Mrs. Opie felt that parents should assume responsibility for their children's secular education, so she believed that they should also be equally zealous for their moral training. This belief is adequately illustrated in the case of Anne and Laura Wallington, who are always bickering and teasing and arguing with one another, to the dismay of their mother, Lady Wallington. On one occasion, when their mother remonstrates with them for their violent tempers, they both declare that her indulgence of their every want in their youth has made them so. One of them asserts to her mother:

You talk of your exquisite maternal feelings, indeed! Your selfish ones, you mean, which would not let you be at the trouble of correcting us. Had you done your duty by us, we should have been grateful. If I am violent in temper, who made me so?

Anne and Laura are not only continually quarreling with one another, but, at every opportunity, they take delight in finding fault with other people. When Sir William Dormer, a young and reputedly handsome nobleman, becomes a new resident of their neighborhood, they are eager to meet him. Sir William is, in certain respects, somewhat eccentric and, unknown to anyone, begins to pay anonymous visits to his neighbors in order to discover the type of people among whom he has decided to make his home. One evening Sir William comes to the Wallington home, disguised as a traveler who desires food and an hour or two of conversation before continuing on his way. In the course of the evening Anne and Laura become very talkative, and tell the stranger of their eagerness to meet their new neighbor. They explain that Sir William must be rude and ungracious, since he has not accepted the invitations that his neighbors have extended him to attend certain social functions. Only recently an elaborate ball was held in the community, to which he was especially invited, and everyone had anticipated meeting him there. The sisters assert that he did not put in an appearance, however, and declare that their interest in their new neighbor has considerably abated since the ball, for the young nobleman is evidently snobbish. They say all manner of unkind things about Sir William and reproach their cousin, Caroline, when she finds

many kind things to say about one whom she does not know, but of whom she has heard many favorable reports. Later the sisters are amazed and embarrassed when they learn that Sir William himself had been their anonymous guest. Caroline is highly favored by him and in time becomes his wife, to the annoyance and envy of her cousins, both of whom had once hoped to win him.<sup>14</sup> The entire narrative provides Mrs. Opie with another opportunity to comment upon the harmfulness of parental indulgence and the value of kindness and good manners. The radicals, of course, would not be particularly interested in the parental role in the development of character, since their concept of the individual freedom of the child would naturally preclude any such obsessing concern. Mrs. Opie, however, holds that the child becomes what he is because the parents are what they are; in short, the child's behavior is the direct outgrowth of his parents' attitudes and practices.

In further pursuit of Mrs. Opie's ideas on this point, one discovers, in Temper, an interesting conversation between Mrs. Castlemain and Mr. Egerton. Mrs. Castlemain expresses the opinion that "temper" is characteristic only of low-bred persons, and Egerton replies:

I am convinced that the conduct of the low and the high born, when under the dominion of temper, is commonly the same; that temper is the greatest of all levellers, the greatest of all equalizers; and that the peer and the peasant are, when under the influence of passion, equally removed from having any right to the name of gentleman.

Whereupon Mrs. Castlemain counters by stating that aristocrats

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<sup>14</sup>"After the Ball," Works, III, 363-374.

are more habitually genteel than the low-born, and that even in anger, the aristocrat's rank is manifest. Now Egerton reminds her that temper is strong enough to rout even habit, and that the highest-born often behaves like the base-born when influenced by temper.<sup>15</sup>

Mrs. Opie's theory of the utility of education in bringing about the ideal of human equality is clearly defined in the following paragraph:

It is the want of equal education that makes the great difference between man and man; and the bar that divides the vulgar man from the gentleman is not a paltry sense of superior birth, but a feeling of difference, a consciousness of different habits, ways of thinking, and manners -- the result of opposite situations.<sup>16</sup>

The same conviction is readily apparent in Mrs. Opie's remarks concerning Agatha that

. . . . not only her pride but her taste would be offended by constant association with one so much her inferior; and whose affectionate familiarity she might, however reluctantly, be at times forced to repel. For it is not pride alone, but a sense of fitness, that makes persons prefer living with their equals to association with their inferiors.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Mary Wollstonecraft was an ardent enthusiast for equal educational opportunities for women, Amelia Opie has nothing whatever to say on the subject, although she does occasionally imply that, in her opinion, equal educational advantages are not important and should not be made a great

<sup>15</sup>Temper, Works, III, 128-129.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

social issue. She is far from wanting to hold women back and to prevent their advancement, but, on the other hand, she is not enthusiastic about having them go forward. This is true not only in her concepts of education but also in her willingness to see women continue to submit their personalities to the wills of their husbands, as has already been shown in this study.

At the time when Mrs. Opie lived, parents religiously selected such reading matter as their daughters were to be permitted to read, and maintained a rigid censorship on all literature that passed into the hands of young girls. The matter of breeding determined the type of literature that should be permitted. That the girls were expected to be delightfully submissive to this condition is indicated by Adeline Mowbray when, on one occasion, she unwittingly looked into a book which she was "not even to be suspected of having had an opportunity to peruse." Upon discovering her error, she blushed with shame, hurriedly closed the book, and retired to her room to recover her composure.<sup>18</sup> Is this incident not an intimation that Mrs. Opie was unimpressed by the clamor for equal educational advantages for men and women? Since the reading matter of boys was not so strenuously supervised, she undoubtedly would not have placed so much importance upon such a minor thing as a girl's looking into the wrong book if she had favored educational equality, for such equality would

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<sup>18</sup>Adeline Mowbray, Works, I, 134, 136.

imply that girls should be permitted to read whatever they chose, just as was vouchsafed to their brothers.

Another instance of Mrs. Opie's views regarding the education of women is that of Madeline, who did not possess the fortune of a gentlewoman, and for that reason her benefactress at first doubted the "propriety of giving her the education of one." However, Madeline's thirst for knowledge, her unusual talents, and her commendable docility caused her benefactress to change her mind and to educate her as though Madeline had been her own daughter.<sup>19</sup> This situation clearly indicates that Mrs. Opie saw nothing wrong with the traditional custom of giving some women, because of their superior social status, a better education than was possible to others. In this incident is also a striking social implication: Madeline, though of peasant stock, is considered worthy of the best education available, in spite of her social position, for the simple and sensible reason that she possesses those characteristics that ordinarily appertain only to a gentlewoman. This illustrates once more Mrs. Opie's belief that blood alone should not determine social status.

She voices a warning, too, to those who, like Madeline, may be able to acquire an education above their natural expectation. After Madeline has received the best possible education, she comments that she would be giving "ill return" to her parents for their kindness in providing her with a

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<sup>19</sup>Madeline, Works, I, 9-10.

meager education in her earlier years, should she allow her present knowledge and accomplishments to "set me above the enjoyment of their society, and make me despise the comforts of my own home."<sup>20</sup> This is not only a warning against the dangers of egotism, but also an encouragement to the practice of filial loyalty.

Mrs. Opie does not look with complete approbation upon the efforts of girls to obtain an education. She finds much to criticize in the comparatively new facilities for the organized education of women, and is not at all convinced that women were to be the beneficiaries, from every point of view, of such educational opportunities as were then available to members of her sex. Whereas she commends her young-women characters who are able to acquire a good education, she always voices her misgivings when a girl, to accomplish this ideal, is forced to attend a boarding school at some distance from her home. She declares that such removals from home for educational accomplishment are usually unfortunate, since they ordinarily do not promote the happiness either of the one so removed, who must later return to her home, or of those who remain at home during her absence.<sup>21</sup> In her works are more than one instance of girls who were not content to remain at home after they had become acquainted with a different and

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

more glamorous world, and of parents and daughters who could not understand one another after the girls had been away for an education. In most of these instances, unhappiness and even misery result; and only rarely are perfect understanding and amicable relations established once more.

Thoroughly conventional is Mrs. Opie's disapproval of the "intellectual woman" -- the woman who is ever ready to make a display of her powers and accomplishments. Says Madeline:

It must be a fearful thing, I doubt not, to be a woman of intellectual superiority. . . . How thankful I am that I am not a woman of talents! I have always felt it necessary to conceal even my little talent for writing verses, lest I should call forth toward myself the ill-will which I saw excited by poor Mrs. Irwin's talents, and her unaffected, artless display of them.<sup>22</sup>

She is speaking here for Amelia Opie, who believed that even an educated woman should be meek, docile, and unassuming. There is nothing in her works to suggest that she in any way countenanced even a thought of equality for men and women in the matter of education. Despite the aggressiveness of Mary Wollstonecraft and of some of the other radicals to the contrary, Amelia Opie was willing for women to continue in the position that they had occupied for so long -- that of inferior beings who feigned ignorance and meekly submitted their wills to those of their husbands. She did not see enough evil in the prevailing social organization to warrant

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

such a total disruption as would doubtless be precipitated by a drastic change in the status of women.

Little is said either by the radicals or by Mrs. Opie regarding education for adults, although it is readily apparent that no one offered any objection to the commonly accepted truth, even in that day, that education never ceases, but continues endlessly from the cradle to the grave. The only reference made by Mrs. Opie to adult education is in this comment relative to Mrs. Mowbray: "She wanted to convert every drawing-room into an arena for the mind, and all her guests into intellectual gladiators."<sup>23</sup> Thus she seems to have recognized the educational significance of the salon.

One easily perceptible theme runs throughout Mrs. Opie's works -- the portrayal of strong filial duty. In almost every story is characterized someone who denies his own pleasures, sacrifices his own wishes and happiness, or endures great personal inconvenience in order to honor the wishes of his parents. This is especially true in matters pertaining to love and marriage: the son or daughter, usually the latter, does not marry the person with whom he or she is in love because that one is objectionable to the parents, or else marries someone who is not beloved because such a union happens to be the wish of the parents. Despite their suffering and unhappiness, Mrs. Opie's characters usually look upon

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<sup>23</sup>Adeline Mowbray, Works, I, 116.

their self-denial with a certain degree of satisfaction and pride that the wishes of their parents have not been disregarded. The radicals would spurn such submission to parental authority and would find nothing to commend in a young person who would willingly sacrifice his own happiness to the whim of his parents. To them, every person has the right to live his own life according to a pattern of his personal selection.

Although several phases of Mrs. Opie's philosophy of education have been briefly examined in this chapter, in no significant matter has she been discovered as an exponent of the radical theories of education. Rather, she upholds the conventional practices of her time in the matter of education, and sees no necessity for such new theories as the revolutionists were advocating. She emphasizes the value of integrity, the need for proper discipline, and the significant role of education in the preservation of human society. Nowhere does she cease to be the moralist. In fact, it perhaps is not incorrect to say that her total concept of the function of education can be discerned in the following quotation:

. . . . indelible indeed are those habits of falsehood and disingenuousness which children acquire, whose parents do not make a strict adherence to truth, the basis of their children's education; and punish all deviation from it with salutary rigour. But, whatever be the excellencies or the errors of parents or preceptors, there is one necessary thing for them to remember, or their excellencies will be useless, and their faults irremediable; namely, that they are not to form their children for the present world alone; -- they are to educate them not merely as the children of time, but as the heirs of eternity.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>"The Turban," Works, III, 431.

## CHAPTER V

### AMELIA OPIE AS EXPONENT AND CRITIC OF RADICAL SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEORY

The literature of a nation invariably reflects the social and political organization of the society that it depicts, but, taken as a whole, has more to say about the social than about the political; for something of the former must appear in the simplest story, whereas the forms of a country's political system are likely to be reflected only indirectly and remotely in literature. Members of the radical school in England, notably William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, were enthusiasts for reform in both the social and the political spheres. Amelia Opie, on the other hand, who never assumed the role of an avid reformer in any respect, portrayed in her fiction innumerable social practices and customs commonly found in her day, and almost completely ignored politics, possibly with the belief that political interests were for men, and that women should maintain an attitude of indifference toward such matters. Since she was conservative in so many respects, it is easy to believe that some such opinion may have been hers. At any rate, we must note the absence of all purely political discussion in her works. Her

readers were chiefly women, and for them she admittedly attempted to write of the social and moral questions of her time.

The only political event that served to arouse Mrs. Opie's excitement or even to challenge her interest, was the French Revolution. On the issues of this momentous event she held very strong opinions, half-radical and half-conservative in purport, as will be shown in the course of the present chapter. While Godwin and his associates were publishing denunciations of the old and eulogies of the new, Amelia Opie was content to let the storm rage past while she calmly sought out and transferred to paper those phases of English life that were generally accepted as simple and commonplace and stable. She could not see eye to eye with Godwin when he advocated the abolition of all religious, social, and political institutions, not necessarily because he found them to be abhorrent or decadent, but because they limited the freedom of the individual and placed restrictions upon his conduct. Mrs. Opie felt that the individual should be restrained and limited in his freedom and conduct, both for his own good and the good of society. The influence of convention, she thought, was important in this respect. Institutions and social usages might conceivably become obsolete, but she saw no reason why they should be overthrown. Why not reform them to the extent that they would function more acceptably in meeting changed conditions? Thus she was not opposed to

change, but she did possess definite scruples against knocking the foundations from under society and permitting mankind to flounder helplessly in the morasses of revolutionary theory. She could perceive no advantage to be gained by such a procedure, and repeatedly depicted the type of society that would exist, and the kind of people who would comprise it, if the radicals could only have their way. She was not aggressive in her denunciations of radical principles; she was merely a calm and unimpassioned critic who quietly plucked the attractive feathers off of the bird of radical theory, leaving it exposed in all its laughable ugliness. She was never a militant champion of any concept, but was mainly interested in showing the logical and practical defects in the radical philosophy. But occasionally she accepted a revolutionary doctrine and became one with the radicals to the extent that she could see something commendable in their beliefs.

In regard to social usages, Mrs. Opie was almost altogether a stickler for convention. Repeatedly, in her works, she emphasizes and dwells upon the principles of etiquette that were prevalent in her day; she seems to go out of her way occasionally to discuss the complex chaperonage customs, and to lift an eyebrow at those of her characters who ignored these conventions, who were indifferent toward them, or who deliberately violated them. Proper respect for decorum and for social usages is stressed at every opportunity. It was considered an impropriety for a young man and a young woman,

who were unmarried, to be alone together in a room. They might walk or drive together in the daytime, but never at night without arousing unfavorable comment.<sup>1</sup> It was not in good taste for respectable ladies to appear in public unattended, for by doing so they opened the way for improper advances and perhaps insults. A case in point is that of Adeline Mowbray, who visited her lawyer unaccompanied, much to his surprise, and suffered humiliation at his hands because of her breach of custom.<sup>2</sup>

A new concept that found ready acceptance among the radicals was that of sexual equality. Mrs. Opie seldom mentions this question, but when she does, it is not in the manner of an advocate who is zealous for a righteous cause. Her greatest concession to the radicals in this connection occurs in her story, "The Fashionable Wife, and Unfashionable Husband," in which she heartily commends Lord Henry for esteeming his wife "as nearly his equal in the scale of creation."<sup>3</sup> Thus Mrs. Opie seems to think sexual equality would be desirable, but that it is not so important an issue as to justify an impassioned campaign in its behalf. In almost every other instance where she refers to the question of sexual equality, Mrs. Opie readily accepts the prevailing notion of woman's inferiority. Occasionally, however, it is difficult to decide whether she actually concedes sexual inequality or whether

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<sup>1</sup>Madeline, Works, I, 45.

<sup>2</sup>Adeline Mowbray, Works, I, 187.

<sup>3</sup>Works, I, 256.

she, in seeming to do so, is becoming cleverly sarcastic relative to the recognition of such inequality. An illustration of this type occurs in Adeline Mowbray, where Berrendale, "being no advocate for the equality of the sexes," thinks it only natural and a matter of course that he should have better fare at the table than Adeline, his wife.<sup>4</sup> (She had resolved to eat only simple dishes when he had objected to the grocery bill, but continued to set rich viands before him, hoping in vain that he would notice and mention the difference in their fare and become repentant.)

Far from being an aggressive advocate of sexual equality, Amelie Opie accepted the widespread notion that women should be meek and retiring, especially in the presence of men. (This fact has been mentioned in other connections in preceding chapters of this study.) In one instance she refers to a young woman as being perhaps "too forward" in expressing an opinion on literature and on certain other subjects which usually were not discussed at all by women and still less by young girls.<sup>5</sup> This is by no means the only instance of such an attitude in the works of Mrs. Opie. Sometimes she seems slightly inconsistent, as, for instance, when she comments to the effect that "Louisa was pleased to be treated as a rational being," and almost in the next sentence launches into an explanation of the fact that women should

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<sup>4</sup>Works, I, 180.

<sup>5</sup>"The Orphan," Works, III, 446.

listen to the learned talk of men, but it was not "proper" for them to participate in it without invitation.<sup>6</sup> Although she finds something to commend in a girl who is "rational," she at the same time holds to the conventional belief that women should speak on learned subjects only at the invitation of men.

A natural corollary of this principle of the meekness and reticence of women was the prevailing attitude of men toward the other sex, which is as adequately mirrored in the following words of one of Mrs. Opie's male characters as anywhere else in her works:

I like . . . little, timid, fearful creatures, that look up to one for protection; fearful souls who scream at sight of a cow -- tremble at a flash of lightning -- and cannot even cross a kennel without help; for it gives one . . . such a sweet sensation of one's own superiority and importance, to see oneself obliged to offer one's protection to the dear tremblers.<sup>7</sup>

This attitude appears frequently throughout the works under consideration in this study. Many of the women appear as physical and emotional weaklings, helpless in the face of any severe trial, screaming and shrieking with little provocation, and readily fainting without cause. Mental disturbances and emotional upheavals unerringly provoke physical illness and seizures of unconsciousness. Women, in the main, are looked upon as china-shop delicacies to be handled

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<sup>6</sup>"The Fashionable Wife, and Unfashionable Husband," Works, I, 244.

<sup>7</sup>"Murder Will Out," Works, I, 394.

with care and to be regarded with tender solicitation if they are to be preserved. This concept may or may not represent Mrs. Opie's personal opinion. In utilizing it so frequently in her writings, she may conceivably be assuming the role of a reporter of existing social attitudes; but the fact that she nowhere ridicules women for exhibiting these characteristics seems to indicate that she has no objections to offer. Just how she compares in this matter with the male radicals is difficult to ascertain, although Godwin and his male associates probably upheld the prevailing attitude toward women, since such a point of view tends to enhance the self-importance and to buttress the egotism of a man if he feels that he is able to assume the role of woman's protector. There is no doubt, however, that Mrs. Opie and her friend, Mary Wollstonecraft, were widely at variance on this point. The latter, with all the vehemence at her command, deplored the assumption by woman of the part of a weakling who was ever dependent upon the greater strength of man. Such a belief was in direct contradiction to her principal contention as a revolutionary, namely, that inequalities should be non-existent between men and women in all of their relationships.

In the main, it can be confidently said that Amelia Opie willingly accepted the conventions of her day respecting the place of women in society and, unlike the radicals, was not interested in an aggressive effort to push women upward to an equal plane with men. She would have liked to see

the advancement of women, and their acceptance by men as equals, but she did not feel that such an outcome would be worth the necessary disruption of the existing social order. While the radicals were shouting their ideas of sexual equality, she was saying, in effect: Let us not create any disturbance, for there is nothing particularly objectionable in the present concept of the place of women in society.

One social condition that Mrs. Opie was eager to have modified was the prevailing belief, even among the lower classes to a surprising extent, in the inherent distinctions between members of the various social strata. Mrs. Opie was never willing to concede that a man was a better man if he happened to be an aristocrat than he could have been had he been a merchant or a clerk or a peasant. At times, however, she agreed that the greater advantages possessed by the upper classes often made them more exemplary persons than were those lower in the social scale. This idea was merely a concession to the influences of environment, and had nothing to do with whether base or noble blood coursed through one's veins. It was Mrs. Opie's opinion that a man is ennobled by his education and his temperament rather than by his blood. Her characters often inveigh against the prevalent notion that high-born men are necessarily better men, and more worthy of esteem, veneration, and emulation than those in lower station.<sup>8</sup> She is sarcastic of the nobility's

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<sup>8</sup>See, for example, Valentine's Eve, Works, II, 219.

feeling of superiority and their repugnance to "democratic principles." She effectively carries her point by putting words in the mouths of aristocrats that display their haughty egotism and render them despicable and revolting.<sup>9</sup> In Mrs. Opie's works, the aristocrats believe that noble birth is more important than noble virtues, and consequently condone loose living on the part of the upper classes and look askance at it when it is discovered among the common people. The misdeeds of the rich and the noble go unnoticed, while those of the base-born are, almost without exception, punished. Mrs. Opie's motive is unmistakable: she is unqualifiedly opposed to any intimation of a "double standard" that will permit one group of people to assume the position of hereditary superiors.<sup>10</sup>

Mrs. Opie's constant reiteration of the influence of social rank would be laughable if she were not so serious in her effort to expose the emptiness of convention. She gives many unappealing examples of the false pride of caste, but she reaches the limit of her bombastic sarcasm in Madeline, where the heroine unwisely marries a nobleman and discovers that she cannot even invite her people to visit her in her new home without her noble husband's consent; in fact, the invitation to her own parents must come from her husband and not from herself.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 182-183.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 183, 238-239.

<sup>11</sup>Works, I, 108.

Another manner in which the influence of rank is exemplified in the narratives under consideration is adequately demonstrated in the case of Madeline, who commends the "courteous affability" of a "sweet girl" whom she has met; but decides that the girl's admirable traits are the direct result of her being a duke's daughter. Madeline comments: "I have usually found that the kindness and courtesy are in proportion to the rank."<sup>12</sup> Mrs. Opie is not necessarily being inconsistent here, for the implication is that the education and environment of the duke's daughter, or of any other member of the nobility, are likely to produce attractive personalities. Even this thought, however, is not found as a continuous thread throughout the fabric of her works, for some of her most unlovely characters have the noblest blood in their veins. Often, however, the lower-class characters are uncouth, base boors -- a fact used not to illustrate inherent inferiority, but to indicate the influence of the environment upon the character and personality of human beings.

The result of patronage by members of the upper class forms another interesting observation on the influence of rank, as depicted by Mrs. Opie. A striking example of this point is Madeline, who rose by leaps and bounds in the estimation of her acquaintances after her singing and drawing had been commended by people of high station. In this

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

connection the author permits herself a frank statement to the effect that people who are indifferent to the talents and accomplishments of their acquaintances suddenly become "warm and lavish in praise of them, when the great or the distinguished have happened to commend them!"<sup>13</sup>

Inevitably, the distinctions between social classes made for barriers between persons of different station in life. Mrs. Opie recognized these barriers, and even went so far as to have one of her characters say: "The way to be contented with your lot is never to go counter to it!" She continued this thought by implying that one who deliberately tries to eradicate social barriers is unwise. The way to make a man "discontented with his situation," she said, is "to give him tastes beyond his power to gratify." She causes Madeline's father to say: "As I, though the guest of Glencarron to-day, must still be the cottager of Burn-side tomorrow, it is proper that I should not partake of such fare to-day as may make me dissatisfied with my fare to-morrow."<sup>14</sup> Madeline herself is another illustration of Mrs. Opie's contention that it is unwise to attempt to scale such social barriers as existed in her day. Madeline envied her brother and her sister for their happiness in love: "I cannot love or marry in the circle in which I am now thrown. Happy Margaret! Happy William! You have not been taken out of

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

your own sphere, and taught those cruel refinements, and that delicacy of taste, which must ever keep me single."<sup>15</sup>

Although Mrs. Opie agreed with the radicals in her disapproval of a social order which countenanced drastic social distinctions, she was content to voice her objections in sarcasm and mild disapprobation, and she never, at any time, advocated such a violent disruption of society as would destroy the classes and place everyone on a plane of equality with his neighbor. Her strong tendency toward the acceptance of convention prevented her from openly decrying the social organization of her era, and was the chief source of the distinction between her and the radicals, who felt it their duty to shout from the housetops the new theories that they had called into being.

In relation to social classes, Godwin, when writing on the moral effects of the aristocracy, declared that it is impossible for men to be virtuous and happy until they possess all the distinction to which they are entitled by virtue of their personal merits. Mrs. Opie herself might well have voiced this opinion. With his next thought Godwin, however, took a step which Mrs. Opie would have been reluctant to take: the dissolution of the aristocracy, declared Godwin, would equally promote the interests of the oppressor and of the oppressed; the former would be freed from "the listlessness of tyranny," and the latter from "the

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

brutalizing operation of servitude."<sup>16</sup> Although Mrs. Opie's ideas might coincide with those of Godwin, she would never countenance the dissolution by force or law of any practice so ingrained in the thinking of the people as the institution of social stratification.

One social question which appears quite frequently in Mrs. Opie's works is that of almsgiving and the general attitude toward the poor and the unfortunate. Thomas Brightwell recalled that "the great leading feature" of Mrs. Opie's character was

. . . . pure, christian benevolence; charity in its highest sense. None that knew her could fail to observe this. Although her financial means were somewhat limited, her efforts to relieve the distresses of others were boundless, and she often employed ingenious methods to influence her wealthy friends to assist in her endeavours. She found a blessing in doing good. In her last letter to her friends, she urged "the remembrance of the poor, so as to be blessed by them."<sup>17</sup>

This attitude is of common occurrence in her works. Many of her characters of means exemplify her own charitableness, and the poor bless, honor, and reverence them for their goodness in alleviating the hardships of the less fortunate. Her characters derive pleasure, just as she did, from doing good. In many instances, kindness to the poor is lauded, and the lack of such magnanimity is deplored.<sup>18</sup> Kindness to the

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<sup>16</sup>Quoted in Lovett and Hughes, The History of the Novel in England, p. 143.

<sup>17</sup>Brightwell, Memorials of the Life of Amelia Opie, p. vi.

<sup>18</sup>Mrs. Arlington, Works, II, 325.

unfortunate is repeatedly approved and commended, and the beneficiaries often appear to express their sincere gratitude to their benefactor.<sup>19</sup> On one occasion, in referring to charity, kindness, and sympathy, Mrs. Opie comments:

These tender offices, these delicate attentions, so dear to the heart of every one, but so particularly welcome to the poor from their superiors, as they are acknowledgments of relationship between them, and confessions that they are of the same species as themselves, and heirs of the same hopes, even those who bestow money with generous profusion do not often pay.<sup>20</sup>

Hence charity, as she interpreted its meaning, is more than money, more than the cold giving of alms for the relief of suffering. The giver's personality should be manifest in the gift, for human sympathy and compassion are often worth more than alms.

Whereas the practice of almsgiving appears frequently in her writings, only one of Mrs. Opie's stories deals with kindness to the poor as its central theme; in the other narratives, this matter is purely incidental. In "The Black Velvet Pelisse,"<sup>21</sup> Julia Beresford, given money to purchase clothes for the purpose of adorning herself for an elaborate social function at which her father wished her to "outshine" all the other girls who would be in attendance, bestowed it on a poor family so that the father might purchase exemption from service in the army and thus save his family from being

<sup>19</sup>Lady Anne and Lady Jane, Works, II, 15-16.

<sup>20</sup>Father and Daughter, Works, I, 452.

<sup>21</sup>Works, I, 228-234.

committed to the work-house during his absence. Julia told no one of her action, but on the evening of the ball, her father was angry and mortified when she appeared in somewhat dowdy array, instead of in the finery that he had supposed she had purchased. He upbraided her mercilessly, for he had hoped that she would win the attention of a wealthy young baronet who was present; and the poor girl, still keeping her secret, was miserable. During the festivities of the evening a knock sounded at the door of the house, and the family to whom Julia had given the money appeared. Happy and well-dressed now, they had come to thank her publicly for her generosity. The fashionable company gathered about and heard their story, and Julia's father, understanding at last what had been done and the unselfish motive that had prompted the generous act, happily told how his daughter had forgotten her own desires in order to help others. The party was duly impressed by the occurrence, and honored Julia highly -- she whom they had previously looked upon rather contemptuously for appearing at the ball without new attire. To the happiness of her father, Julia eventually won the baronet, who had been deeply touched by her unselfish magnanimity. This story, and all the other instances of almsgiving that appear in Mrs. Opie's works, imply the survival of the medieval belief that charity and kindness never go unrewarded. Mrs. Opie never lets her good deeds go for naught; an ample reward is always in the offing.

Unlike Mrs. Opie, Mary Wollstonecraft was opposed to charity, believing it to be highly injurious both to the giver and to the recipient of alms; but she favored the giving of employment to the needy, as did Mrs. Opie, for she believed that the happiest people are those who are most nobly employed. Probably most of the radicals had the same notion as Mary Wollstonecraft regarding almsgiving; they would not be interested in bestowing alms upon the unfortunate, but would rather reorganize society upon such a basis as would make it impossible for anyone to be in want.

As is true of the works of many of her contemporaries, the practice of duelling appears rather frequently throughout Mrs. Opie's writings as a means of settling personal affronts or other questions of honor. The practice was a deplorable social custom which Mrs. Opie renders obnoxious by portraying its repulsive features and its horrors. She has ever a word of unfaltering condemnation for any man who takes justice into his own hands. She was opposed to duelling for two primary reasons: (1) it was diametrically opposed to the divine commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," and (2) it was often productive of disastrous and unhappy results -- physical suffering, misery, sorrow, widowhood, permanent disability, etc.<sup>22</sup>

In Adeline Mowbray, which is frankly a book of many inconsistencies, Glenmurray becomes the author of an impas-

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<sup>22</sup>Illustrations of Lying, Works, III, 470.

sioned book against the custom of duelling, but later, with almost no provocation, readily agrees to fight a duel. He is rendered miserable by the thought of his having become a party to such an abominable practice, and mercilessly berates himself for "presuming to instruct others by his precepts, when he finds them incapable even of influencing his own actions." He calls himself the "worst of all fools,"<sup>23</sup> presumably for having failed in the practice of that which he had preached.

One of the prominent characters in Temper, Henry St. Aubyn, was threatened with dismissal from the army when he declined to fight a duel to safeguard his honor. His defense of his attitude is eloquent:

Before I became a soldier, I was a man, a son, and a responsible being; and, as all these, I deem myself forbidden to fight a duel. As a man, and a member of society, I think it right to bear my testimony against a custom worthy only of savage nations; as a son, I think it my duty not to risk a life which is of the greatest consequence to a fond and widowed parent; and as a responsible being, I dare not, in express defiance of the will of my Creator, attack in cold blood the life of a fellow-creature.

When no persuasion could cause him to waver from his purpose, he was dismissed from his regiment in utter disgrace, after the commanding officer had upbraided him with insulting and improper language. Mrs. Castlemain, however, whose good will he treasured, commended him as being "rich in the best of all fortitude, that of being able to act up to his principles,

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<sup>23</sup>Works, I, 125.

unawed by the fear of shame."<sup>24</sup>

The writer has been unable to discover in the works of the radicals any reference to the custom of duelling, but she feels justified in advancing the belief that they were unalterably opposed to it, since their doctrines presupposed that men would come to live together in harmony, equality, and peace. It is likely that the opinions of Mrs. Opie and of the radicals coincided with respect to duelling, for all of them valued the human personality too highly to threaten it with destruction without cause other than the flarings-up of momentary and impetuous anger.

Another significant social problem on which Mrs. Opie expressed her ideas was that of the need for reformation of the criminal code and of prison conditions. In describing one of her characters, she implies her attitude toward capital punishment in a manner that is unmistakable:

Mr. Sedley was one of the few (would they were the many!) who think, that, excellent as our laws are in other respects, our criminal code wants a revision; who think that death is a punishment too severe for any crime short of deliberate murder; and who feel as men should feel for the frailties of their fellow-creatures, and are conscious, deeply conscious, that it is an awful thing to deprive a human being of that life which his Creator has breathed into him.<sup>25</sup>

Although, in "The Robber," Mrs. Opie commends the humaneness that gave the robber and intended assassin another chance -- as a result of which he becomes an honor to society --

<sup>24</sup>Works, III, 122-123.

<sup>25</sup>"The Robber," Works, I, 270.

she admits that persons would act "very unwisely and wickedly" who would advocate the pardoning of every great criminal. She declares that society must be reasonably sure of the inherent goodness in a criminal before acceding to his liberation. For murder, she would require the life of the proven criminal, but for no lesser crime. At the close of her story she voices her personal opinion thus:

I venture to express my wishes that the punishment of death was not so dreadfully frequent as it is. I wish that our legislators would not be so lavish of life, that important gift, which no one can restore; but would, contenting themselves with inflicting such punishment on offenders as does not preclude hope, put it in their power, by a revision of their criminal laws, to bid the trembling wretch repent and live.<sup>26</sup>

That she had a horror of imprisonment for small debts -- a practice in common usage in her day -- is adequately illustrated in Adeline Mowbray. She paints with a sympathetic understanding a pathetic picture of a poor family disgraced and cast out of their lodgings when the father and husband was incarcerated for debt. Their furniture was roughly piled outside their lodgings, and the family was in abject sorrow.<sup>27</sup> Such scenes as this are a disgrace to society, Mrs. Opie believed, and the unjust laws that permit them to occur are abominable and inhumane. Another similar practice that was upheld by the law was that affecting the families of poor men when they were called to serve their term in the army. If a father and husband was too poor to obtain someone

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>27</sup>Works, I, 170.

to serve as his substitute in the army, he had to go into training, and his family were forced to go to the work-house, where, being in delicate health because of their poverty, they would likely soon fall victims to bad food, bad air, and hard labor.<sup>28</sup> The harshness of some aspects of the English law was deplorable.

In her attitude toward prison reform, Mrs. Opie was a century before her time, and her ideas as expressed in the following quotation sound as though they might have been uttered in the twentieth century instead of the eighteenth:

Ethelind believed that a well-regulated prison -- a prison in which religious and moral truths were inculcated, and habits of industry enforced, might have reformed the heart, and ameliorated the temper of the culprit; and that when taught, that after having reconciled himself by penitence to his God, he might reconcile the world to him by a life of active virtue and benevolence, he might have been restored to society, penitent and reformed. But now, degraded, consciously degraded, in the eyes of man, and only too probably a stranger to his God -- without friends, without employment, without support in this world, or hope, or dread of another -- she feared that this poor victim of his passions was let loose upon society once more, probably with every bad passion strengthened, and every good feeling utterly annihilated.<sup>29</sup>

The criminal who is referred to in this quotation came out of prison a more hardened criminal than when he had been incarcerated, and he still, after fifteen years of confinement behind grim prison walls, was determined to have revenge for a

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<sup>28</sup> "The Black Velvet Pelisse," Works, I, 229.

<sup>29</sup> "The Ruffian Boy," Works, II, 465-466.

slight that had sent him into a life of hate and desperation. Such an outcome did not speak well for the conditions of English prisons and for the method of treatment of the inmates, but even today, in prisons the world over, men are made worse criminals by the very method that, purportedly, is to fit them for entry into society once more.

The radicals likewise had some things to say about the laws and prison conditions of their time. Mary Wollstonecraft, like Amelia Opie, was a firm believer in the influence of environment upon the formation of character, and asserted that if society would produce commendable personalities, it must reform itself so as to provide wholesome and compatible influences in which the individual might easily become the type of person desired. In this respect, as in many others, she was primarily a social philosopher and reformer, and gave only secondary consideration to the individual. Reform society, she declared, and the individual will of necessity be reformed. She believed that the same energy which transforms a man into a daring villain might have made him a useful citizen if the society in which he lived had been well organized. This was also the opinion of Mrs. Opie.

Godwin shared these views and, in addition, wrote against vengeful punishment as a just reward for law-breaking, and denounced coercion as a means of bringing about reform. Solitary confinement, he said, is "the bitterest torment that human ingenuity can inflict." Since man is a social animal,

virtue depends upon social relations, and is impossible of attainment if man is denied the society of his fellows. The results of solitary confinement are worse than possible contamination by fellow criminals. Capital punishment is excessive, since restraint is possible without it. Corporal chastisement is "an offence against the dignity of the human mind." Godwin asks with Socrates: "Do you punish a man to make him better or to make him worse?"<sup>30</sup> The answer to this question is, unfortunately, often that which is undesirable.

In Caleb Williams the hero's imprisonment gives Godwin an opportunity to expose the iniquities of the English penal system. His exposure is designed to open the eyes of the average complacent Englishman of his day, who was prone to exclaim: "Thank God, we have no Bastille! Thank God, with us no man can be punished without a crime!" Godwin, in the guise of fiction, invites an investigation of the actual conditions in English prisons, contending that acquaintance with the facts would reveal many English Bastilles no less atrocious and loathsome than their French prototype. The writer has discovered no instances of disagreement between Mrs. Opie and the radicals with relation to the criminal code and prison conditions. Here Mrs. Opie is truly the exponent of radical concepts, and not at all their critic.

Little is said in the works of this writer relative

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<sup>30</sup>Brailsford, Shelley, Godwin, and Their Circle, pp. 126-129.

to war. The only story in which war and its effects are dealt with at any length is "The Soldier's Return," which Mrs. Opie prefaces with the following general comments:

Is war an irremediable evil? Some will answer, No; and indulging their pleasing speculations, they will look forward with certainty to the time when peace shall assume unrivalled sway over the world. But, the cautious believer in experience only, asserts the fallacy of these delightful visions, and tells us that war is an evil which must for ever exist, that it is incident to humanity, and must continue to desolate the world till time shall be no more.

I feel myself wholly incompetent to decide between these opposite opinions. All I know with certainty is, that war is, in most respects, an evil.<sup>31</sup>

"The Soldier's Return" is a powerful preachment against war and its horrors -- not on the battleground, but among the parents and sweethearts of soldiers. Much space is given to the wreckage of the lives and bodies of combatants and of non-combatants. Mary, a character in the story who had suffered much from war, declares at the end of the narrative: "I always did and I always shall hate war, and all that belongs to it; and let who will desire it, my boys, except in case of an invasion, shall never, never be soldiers."<sup>32</sup>

It goes without saying that Mrs. Opie, in her objection to war, is in no way opposed to the radical point of view in this matter. The radicals, eager to bring about the

<sup>31</sup>Works, I, 331.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 345.

establishment of a society in which harmony, peace, equality, and brotherhood would be characteristics of all human relationships, could not possibly perceive anything commendable in war or in its evil after-effects.

In a discussion of Mrs. Opie's attitude toward the social customs of her day, it is necessary to include a few minor items that are mentioned frequently in her works but are not necessarily indispensable to an analysis of her writings in the light of radical theory. The most significant of these items appears to be the treatment accorded extravagance and indebtedness, which are frequently mentioned as the direct causes of misery, deceit, and heartache. A striking example is Mrs. St. Aubyn, who resorts to the petty theft of a five-pound note from her brother to satisfy an importunate creditor. Ultimately comes the inevitable discovery and the resultant humiliation.<sup>33</sup> In the novels and stories are many examples of the unfortunate results of extravagance and indebtedness, of the shameful deceit connected with keeping one's debts a secret, and of the always-unfortunate results of such practices. The narrative of Lady Anne and Lady Jane is a story of the misery brought about by unwise extravagance.<sup>34</sup>

Undoubtedly the radicals and Mrs. Opie are in agreement with respect to extravagance and indebtedness, for the

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<sup>33</sup>Temper, Works, III, 83-84.

<sup>34</sup>Works, II, 10, 17-18, 24-25.

radicals, above all else, desired the prevalence of those things in life that would contribute to social efficiency and to the well-rounded development of the total personality, and assuredly they would be unable to find anything commendable in extravagance and excessive indebtedness. They, like Mrs. Opie, were opposed to any practice that would result in misery and wretchedness of any form.

At a time when agitation for the liberation of slaves was just beginning to make itself felt, Mrs. Opie pointedly expressed her opinion in the matter. Her parents had been deeply interested in various humanitarian movements, and to these early influences Mrs. Opie ascribed her life-long zeal for the cause of negro emancipation. Only once in her writings, however, does she mention the matter: When a minor character makes a passing remark to the effect that all slaves are immediately free upon their arrival in England, Emma Castlemain exclaims: "Would they were so all the world over! or rather, would that the detestable traffic in slaves was everywhere put an end to!"<sup>35</sup> Needless to say, Mrs. Opie is here an exponent of the radical philosophy, for the radicals, who were agitators for human equality, could not in any way countenance the existence of human slavery.

An insidious social practice which Mrs. Opie mercilessly scored was that of gossip, which she believed to be

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<sup>35</sup>Temper, Works, III, 125.

destructive of character and productive of enmity, uncertainty, and distrust. Every person, she declared, is better than a gossiping world will allow him to be. It is an insult to one for one's friends and relations to believe implicitly and to propagate gleefully what they hear against one. The commendable thing to do is to be certain of the facts before condemning anyone for behavior that is purportedly questionable.<sup>36</sup> No discrepancy can be discerned here between Mrs. Opie's attitude and the radicals' concept of a happy and harmonious society.

In almost every story from Mrs. Opie's pen is mentioned the fact that parents -- fathers mainly -- chose the future husbands for their daughters and the wives for their sons. Sometimes the young people were permitted to choose for themselves, but, in the main, this freedom was not countenanced. Throughout these works there is abundant evidence that parents in Mrs. Opie's day had a closer knowledge of the social life of their children than is found in present-day society. Parents assumed not only the role of constant chaperones and advisers, but also that of somewhat autocratic supervisors of their children's social demeanor. But they were diplomatic in their efforts, and only frequently does a young person deeply resent parental interference in personal affairs. Even in the matter of the selection of a marriage partner, sons and daughters usually accede to the

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<sup>36</sup> A Wife's Duty, Works, III, 228.

parental will, though their love may be placed elsewhere. Mrs. Opie, however, does not encourage such interference on the part of parents, for in every instance in which a marriage of this type is contracted, it turns out unfortunately and unhappily. Love, upheld by freedom of choice on the part of youth, should form the basis of marriage, and not parental wishes. This attitude, of course, is directly in keeping with the radicals' opinions, for they certainly believed that love and mutual understanding should form the basis for relations between the sexes. They were even willing to abolish the institution of marriage in order to give love more freedom in the determination of human destiny.

Mrs. Opie's interest in liberal political opinions is indicated by the fact that she became a member of the Society of Friends, a religious sect closely identified with the radicals. Nevertheless, she almost never mentions politics in her works, and only in one story, A Wife's Duty, does she deal at any appreciable length with political issues. Even here her interest is half-social, for she writes about the French Revolution, which was as much a social movement as it was a political upheaval. Except in very rare instances she is content to refer to someone as a member of Parliament, or to mention political elections incidentally. In A Wife's Duty, however, she voices an opinion of what was going on in France at the time.

In this story, Helen Pendarves, going to Paris in

1793, refers to the city as "the metropolis of blood."<sup>37</sup> As to the Revolution itself, Mrs. Opie gives vent to her ideas by putting her thoughts into the mouth of Helen Pendarves:

Though I have never paused in my narrative to mention politics, still you cannot suppose that I was ignorant of what was passing on the great theatre of the Continent, nor that the names of the chief actors in it were unknown to me. On the contrary, I often beguiled my lonely hours with reading the accounts of the proceedings at Paris; had mourned not only over the fate of the royal family, but had deplored the death of those highly-gifted men, and that great though mistaken woman (Madame Roland,) in whom I fancied that I perceived some of the republican virtues to which others only pretended; and though far from being a republican myself, I could not but respect those who, having adopted a principle, however erroneous, acted upon it consistently. But with Brissot and his party ended all my interest in the public men of France, though their names were familiar to me, and aversion and dread were the only feelings which they excited.<sup>38</sup>

Later, when Helen was operating a bake-shop in Paris, she learned that some of her customers were Revolutionary leaders, and she comments that her heart died within her when she realized that she was in the midst of regicides and murderers. "I felt as if I stood in the den of wild beasts, and I wished myself again in safe and happy England."<sup>39</sup> Still later, when she learned of the brutal execution of some of the men who had come to her shop to purchase her wares, she sighed, "Poor men!" and deplored the methods that were being

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

utilized by the Revolutionists in the accomplishment of their purposes.<sup>40</sup>

In another story, Love and Duty, Mrs. Opie mentions the fact that in France the rack was used to extract confessions even from the innocent, who sometimes confessed to crimes that they had not committed to escape excruciating agonies. The rack often dislocated limbs and tore tendons loose so that bodily movement was unutterable agony, and victims were frequently permanently disabled even if they escaped death.<sup>41</sup>

Although Mrs. Opie, as indicated in the quotation on the preceding page, was not sympathetic toward a republic or toward republican ideals, the radicals were enthusiasts for republicanism. All of their thinking seemed to center about the fundamental concept of individual and social welfare -- an echo of the French Revolution and of social problems arising within England herself. In keeping with this outlook, the group agreed that, of all existing governments, the Constitution of the United States mirrored the best, for "whatever might be its shortcomings, it was without question a social contract."<sup>42</sup> Whereas Mrs. Opie regretted the miserable fate of the French royal family and of the most influential of the French courtiers, the radicals had no sympathy

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>41</sup>Works, I, 306-307.

<sup>42</sup>Cross, The Development of the English Novel, p. 91.

in this direction, and some of them even went so far as to intimate that England would do well to depose her monarch and the institution of the crown. In the matter of the horrors attendant upon the Revolution in France, however, Mrs. Opie and the radicals were in accord when they decried the miseries that perverted justice was bringing upon a people.

With respect to the social and political customs and practices that have formed the basis of this chapter, Mrs. Opie has been shown to be in sympathy with a majority of the radical notions relative to the items under consideration. Whereas in connection with marriage and morality and with education she was, in the main, a critic of the radical points of view, with relation to the social and political institutions she was far more often an exponent than a critic of the revolutionary theories of her time. She still maintained her fundamental conservatism, however, and continued to cling to her well-established veneration of convention. For this reason she was not an ardent exponent of radical philosophies even when she was sympathetic toward them.

## CHAPTER VI

### AMELIA OPIE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE VIEWS OF THE RADICAL GROUP REGARDING RELIGION AND CERTAIN PHASES OF MORALITY

Foregoing chapters of this volume have doubtless enabled the reader to formulate a distinct conception of Amelia Opie in her fundamental role of a moralist who set forth in fiction her somewhat mild but none the less definite convictions. She was predominantly interested in portraying the inevitable rewards of virtue and the inescapable retributions for moral lapses. In almost every one of her stories she preaches one or more sermons that are as convincing as any that ever sounded from a pulpit. In her own life she was conscientious in the observance of those principles of morality that were unassailable by the most rabid conventionalist. In 1825, when she became a Quaker, Mrs. Opie did not wholly give up her beautiful dress for the simple, drab attire of the Friends, but she did cease the writing of fiction, since she believed that the type of work she had been producing was too frivolous for one who had taken the Quakers' solemn vows. She even recalled a novel that she had already submitted to her publisher for publication and, at considerable

cost and inconvenience to herself, refused to give it to the public. So seriously did she take her vows that her Illustrations of Lying, a book of anecdotes that are highly moralistic in purport, was her nearest approach to fiction after she had joined the Friends. It is altogether plausible that she may have accepted, in part at least, the Quakers' doctrines long before she openly aligned herself with the sect, and that these principles produced within her thinking an abundance of moral concepts that found their way into her tales.

In Mrs. Opie's writings the relationship between religion and morality is close, and readily apparent. A number of references to religion have previously appeared in this study, but have occurred only incidentally in connection with the presentation of other factors in the works of Mrs. Opie. In the present chapter the writer plans to deal directly with certain of Mrs. Opie's concepts of religion and morality that have not heretofore been accorded adequate treatment.

An echo of the Puritanical views of her time appears in Mrs. Opie's concept of the value of personal hardship and self-denial. She causes some of her characters to look upon trials and suffering as favors from God, designed to prove the mettle of the human soul and character. The world itself is frequently regarded as a state of probation which, through sufferings and trials and obstacles, prepared the human being

for a happier and nobler life in a better world to come. In fact, the individual, if he be zealous in promoting his own welfare here and hereafter, will deliberately court severe trials in order to produce a challenge to collect within himself a formidable array of the Christian virtues that can be called forth at any time to enable the individual to sail serenely over the turbulent sea of his troubles, upheld and encouraged by the faith that beyond the maelstrom is a calm harbor in which he will come ultimately to rest.<sup>1</sup> This concept, of course, is a direct outgrowth of medieval asceticism, a philosophy which was centered about the belief that suffering, privation, and defeat on earth will bring men happiness, blessings, and victory in the world to come. Also easily perceptible in this idea is the Quakers' doctrine that misfortune is willingly to be endured because of its strengthening influence upon the human character. Needless to say, Mrs. Opie, in her own life, accepted this singular religious tenet and had no word of complaint when life was unkind to her. The radicals, of course, would have nothing to do with such a doctrine; since they were primarily interested in making life upon earth happier and more enjoyable, they had no desire to endure the unpleasant here, and had little serious thought of the hereafter.

A natural corollary of Mrs. Opie's view of the world

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<sup>1</sup>Valentine's Eve, Works, II, 287, 165.

as a place of probation is limned in her statement that "self-denial is the foundation of every virtue, and . . . on personal sacrifices is built the most acceptable benevolence to others."<sup>2</sup>

Something of Mrs. Opie's personal religious life is reflected in the manner in which her fictional characters frequently seek divine guidance when confronted with significant decisions and staggering problems, and even when going about the routine tasks of daily life. Particularly is this true in her longer novels, in which almost every one of her best-known characters displays a profound belief in a Divine Being who is capable and eager to assist men in the solution of their problems. By direct statement or by implication the author is often careful to leave the impression with the reader that the commendable traits of her characters accrue directly from their constant reliance upon divine guidance. In many instances moral and religious strength is graphically depicted; men and women are found often in the attitude of earnest supplication to God, seeking His assistance and pleading for a direct and clear revelation of His will; many times people discover the movements of God's hand in human affairs; and if misfortune comes upon them, they recognize it as a divine punishment for wrongdoing, whereas blessings are considered as rewards that inevitably come to men who acknowledge their dependence upon God. Mrs.

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<sup>2</sup>Lady Anne and Lady Jane, Works, II, 43.

Opie was sincere in these beliefs, and nowhere does she excuse herself for entertaining faith in a vital religion and in a personal God. Here she differs from most of the radicals, who believed the human personality to be complete within itself and to be independent of any higher Personality; hence they did not take much stock in the thought of man's submission to a Divine Will, or in that of God's intervention in human affairs.

Still a bone of contention in Mrs. Opie's day, just as it was in the lifetime of Jesus himself, was the question of the proper observance of the "holy Sabbath," or Sunday. Regardless of what the radicals or others might say about one day's being no holier than any other, Mrs. Opie was convinced that the Bible should be taken literally and that the Sabbath should be regarded with reverence and observed in a manner that would be conducive to a worshipful atmosphere. In Madeline she has a stinging rebuke for those who, in one way or another, provoke anger on the Sabbath, and reproaches them mercilessly for "tempting a fellow-creature to the sin of anger on the Sabbath day." On another occasion, when a young man invited Madeline to accompany him on a "pleasure-ride" in his new gig on the Sabbath, Madeline's father vehemently accused him of deliberately breaking the Sabbath by so much as thinking of taking an unnecessary drive on Sunday and thus keeping himself and Madeline as well as his coachman

from attending the house of worship.<sup>3</sup> In Mrs. Opie's books, anyone failing to attend divine service in the proper manner on Sunday is a fit subject for the curiosity and gossip of his neighbors and acquaintances, who always feel that they possess a right to inquire as to the reason for such generally unpardonable delinquency.<sup>4</sup> The "proper" thing to do was to attend church services on Sunday, and anyone violating this custom without justifiable cause was looked upon askance. The prevailing sentiment regarding church attendance is aptly revealed in these words of Madeline: "It is really a pretty sight to see my parents, with their children walking two and two before them, going to kirk on a Sunday."<sup>5</sup> Madeline's comment relating to the significance of the Sabbath and of church attendance is interesting, and constitutes an index to Mrs. Opie's thoughts on religion:

This is always to me the happiest day in the week. In the temple of the Almighty the pride of man is at once gratified and humbled; for there all persons are on an equality; and the rich and powerful, humbled in that presence, feel that they are no more in the sight of God than the peasant who kneels beside them; while the poor and the dependent are comforted, and raised in their own opinion, by the consciousness, that for them, as well as for their lofty neighbours, their Creator lives and their Redeemer died.<sup>6</sup>

Another type of religious expression that Mrs. Opie believed was as important as attendance at worship services

<sup>3</sup>Works, I, 30.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

in the churches was that of family and personal devotions. On the first evening following Madeline's return home after a long absence, her family assembled and knelt on the floor for family worship, a custom that had always been followed in this home. On this particular occasion the service was one of thanksgiving for Madeline's return. Madeline, her emotions strangely moved, wondered how she could have remained away so long from such a delightful family group.<sup>7</sup> On another occasion Madeline describes the service of worship in her family in the following manner:

. . . . How dignified even did my father appear, while he blessed his kneeling family! and when he gave out the psalm of David for us to sing, devotion had shed over his countenance and manner a chastened loftiness, the result of recent communion with the Most High, which banished all traces of low estate from his appearance, and I beheld him as the conscious and exulting heir of immortality!<sup>8</sup>

On still another occasion she made the following entry in her diary:

To the kirk twice today, and prayers, a sermon, and devotional singing at home. How pleasant is family worship! How delighted my father seemed while I sung the Psalms of David to the harp!<sup>9</sup>

Though her interest in religion was profound, Mrs. Opie realized that people could not always be occupied in services either of public or private worship, and believed that the commonplace demeanor of an individual serves as an

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

index to the amount and quality of religion that he possesses. In keeping with this idea, she causes Mr. Percy to say to Lady Anne: ". . . no one can be always praying, and I believe the Deity never receives more grateful incense than that of a cheerful spirit, and a mind willing to make the best of its situation."<sup>10</sup> In the same story a minor character voices the following opinion, which implies Mrs. Opie's belief in the influence of religion upon one's daily life:

. . . . The moralists of all ages have not only considered man as a bundle of habits, but the human character is made up of almost as many imperceptible particles, of which habits are the chief ingredient, as those which compose a mosaic pavement -- and it is on the purity, the brilliancy, and the strength of those component parts that the value of a character or the beauty of a pavement depends.<sup>11</sup>

Religion is seldom mentioned in Adeline Mowbray, in striking contrast to its frequent occurrence in Madeline. But Adeline's prayer for the dying Glenmurray is very sincere and moving, as are her expressed wishes that he and she might yet be permitted to worship together once more before the end comes.<sup>12</sup>

Little has been said of the views of the radicals with regard to religion and to public and private worship. But there is little that can be said, for, as has already

<sup>10</sup>Lady Anne and Lady Jane, Works, II, 14.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>12</sup>Adeline Mowbray, Works, I, 178-179.

been intimated, the radicals took little thought of religion, more or less ignored the premise of the existence of God, and mildly scoffed at the idea of worship. They held religion to be among the conventional institutions that had been outmoded by the progress of the time, and it, therefore, should be eliminated from human society along with government and marriage and other time-honored institutions that for centuries, despite the theories of the radicals, had been the avenues of human progress and the channels through which the advancement of civilization had come about. Hence the radicals had little time for religion, whereas Mrs. Opie regarded it as one of the most potent forces operating in human life.

She had certain well-defined ideas pertaining to the relationship between religion and the development of character and concepts of morality. In 1816, when Valentine's Eve was published, it adequately depicted the author's religious feelings at the time. Brightwell says of this novel: "The lesson it inculcates is the superiority of religious principle as a rule of action, and as a support under affliction and unmerited calumny." The heroine pronounces Mrs. Opie's conviction that "moral virtues are only durable and precious as they are derived from religious belief and the consequence of it," when she says:

Some suppose that morality can stand alone without the aid of religion, and even fancy that republican firmness will enable us to bear affliction;

but I feel that the only refuge in sorrow and in trial, is the Rock of Ages, and the promises of the gospel.<sup>13</sup>

Time and again in this novel and in other tales, Mrs. Opie reiterates her firm belief that moral virtues are "durable and precious" only if they are supported by and are the outgrowth of religious convictions. Without such a relationship between religion and morality, she holds that "all morals appear built upon a sandy foundation, and are liable to be swept away by the flood of strong temptation."<sup>14</sup> Religion, she believes, is the only safe guardian of morals and respectability.<sup>15</sup> That religion is a source of moral strength and of unimpeachable character is adequately illustrated by a character in Mrs. Opie's Tale of Trials when she declares:

To perform one's duty, at whatever risk and sacrifice to one's self, is always the safest, and even in this world is usually the happiest path; and powerless to destroy -- however they may threaten -- beat the waves of woe against the endangered feet of those who firmly and closely cling unto the Rock of Ages.<sup>16</sup>

Mrs. Opie advances a practical application of religious principles when she causes Catherine Shirley to comment upon the desirability of man's employing "the golden rule" as the guiding tenet of his behavior. She says, in part:

<sup>13</sup>Brightwell, Memorials of the Life of Amelia Opie, p. 177.

<sup>13</sup>Valentine's Eve, Works, II, 187.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>16</sup>Tale of Trials, Works, II, 459.

. . . . Do not the precepts, 'Do unto others as you would be done by,' and 'Be courteous one to another,' lay the foundation of that benevolence in conduct of which, after all, politeness is only the mimic? And were we all to regulate our lives by the Sermon on the Mount, would any of us indulge in harsh replies, in ungenerous sarcasms, or in aught that now creates dissensions amongst relatives and friends? not to mention, besides, the new and great commandment, that 'ye love one another.'<sup>17</sup>

A similar thought is expressed by the same character on another occasion:

. . . . I remember my father's woes, and my mother's wrongs. But that mother taught her child to forgive injuries; to return good for evil; and to endeavour to fashion her life according to that holy rule which teaches us to love our enemies; to do good to those that hate us; and pray for those who despitefully use and persecute us!<sup>18</sup>

Personal integrity, Mrs. Opie was certain, is not primarily the result of "mere moral axioms and political opinions." There is something beyond and above these things that exerts much influence in determining the worth of the human personality: ". . . . human beings must have purer and higher motives of action, more effectual incentives to good, and more powerful restrainers from evil."<sup>19</sup> The need for deep-rooted religious principles in the individual life is here clearly implied.

That Mrs. Opie recognized the fact that some among her contemporaries were indifferent to religion and were

<sup>17</sup>Valentine's Eve, Works, II, 186.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 277.

even outright scoffers, is illustrated in her description of two of the prominent characters in Valentine's Eve:

. . . . Their religion was a thing that they were contented to know that they possessed, without bringing it into every-day use, like family jewels not fit for every-day wear; its efficacy as a daily guide, as the impeller of good feelings and the restrainer of unkind ones, and as a purifier and regulator of the thoughts as well as actions, was never present to their minds; and any persons who should venture to make it evident that with them such an influence was perpetually present, they were consequently in the habit of styling methodists and fanatics . . . .<sup>20</sup>

In this instance she might well have been writing of Godwin and the members of his circle, for they in no way shared her high opinion of religion and her veneration of the Divine. Whereas Mrs. Opie was an enthusiastic proponent of religion as a vital component of human life, her radical friends could find no good word to say for an institution and for a Being whose functions in human affairs had become meaningless and obsolescent, and whose existence therefore was no longer desirable nor justifiable.

If Mrs. Opie in her works succeeded in presenting her religious convictions in a well-defined manner, she was able likewise to etch with skill her concepts of morality. Her only work dealing exclusively with moral principles is her Illustrations of Lying, which she dedicated to her father "with the pleasing conviction that thou art disposed to form a favourable judgment of any production, however humble,

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

which has a tendency to promote the moral and religious welfare of mankind."<sup>21</sup> She was here voicing indirectly her own hope that her writings might produce some influence for good in the lives of her readers. Repeatedly in her works she lauds personal honor and integrity, and venerates truthfulness, "without which no one can be respectable in society."<sup>22</sup> The radicals agreed with her in these points, for they favored anything that would contribute toward making the individual personality more nearly perfect, more efficient socially, and more capable intellectually.

Strict observance of conventional decorum in social relations is one of Mrs. Opie's strong points as a moralist. She never countenances any departure from what is generally considered "proper" and "correct" in social usage. In most respects she is liberal in her point of view, but here she is a rabid protagonist for conventional ideals. She sides with the parents when they disapprove of their daughters' learning to waltz, and she takes delight in causing the parents to reprove the girls mercilessly when they discover that their daughters have, in secret, learned to waltz. It is Mrs. Opie as much as the parents who condemns waltzing as "that Babylonish and Popish sin."<sup>23</sup> On this score she is by no means in agreement with the radicals, who believed

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<sup>21</sup>Works, III, 414.

<sup>22</sup>"The Revenge," Works, I, 373.

<sup>23</sup>Madeline, Works, I, 35.

in the freedom of the individual to make his own choices and to decide his own behavior. Persons who believed in "letting nature take its course" would naturally have no word of censure for one who might be guilty of a digression from conventional patterns of social ethics. Anything that smacked of conventionalism aroused their antipathy, and time-honored moral codes were no exception.

Mrs. Opie's characters express disgust with intemperance and with the drinking of wine to excess. In the few instances where intoxication is portrayed in her works, it is depicted in such a manner as to appear loathsome to the better people who, in the narrative, come in contact with it; and its occurrence is always unattractive to the reader.<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Opie in this respect is not in opposition to the radicals, for they, believing as they did in human efficiency, would never countenance intemperance and would frown darkly upon its consequences.

Much is said in the works of Mrs. Opie about retributive justice; that is, the tendency of life to reward the good and to punish the bad. A majority of her stories sound more or less of this moral note. Often the characters are glad to pay for their sins in suffering. A striking example of this is Mrs. Arlington, who frankly states:

I gathered consolation from the excess of my misery, and was thankful that I was allowed to endeavour to expiate by trial the sins which I had committed; and this feeling saved and supported me.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Valentine's Eve, Works, II, 212.

<sup>25</sup>Mrs. Arlington, Works, II, 323.

"Henry Woodville"<sup>26</sup> is a dramatic story of justice and of reaping from life what one sows. Evidence that Woodville is a murderer becomes strong and unassailable, but a series of incredible events releases him from prison by means of a miraculous escape and causes the real criminal to reveal himself at the last moment when Woodville, who has once more been captured and imprisoned, is mounting the scaffold to go to his execution. This story is a fair example of the manner in which Mrs. Opie deals with retributive justice: in this and in almost every similar instance, fate spins a strange thread in the interest of justice both to the innocent and to the guilty. Mrs. Opie's treatment of this question is along lines akin to those advocated by the radicals in their precept that man is a free moral agent who should be allowed to learn from uninhibited trial and error, suffering from his mistakes and progressing as a result of his right choices.

Mrs. Opie has no sympathy for the person who wastes his money and warps his character in gambling and betting, and she spares no pains in depicting the deplorable consequences of excessive indulgence of these vices. A young wife is the victim of anguish, misery, and unhappiness brought on by wasting her financial resources in gaming, against her husband's wishes. She at length is driven to the point of suicide rather than confess her heavy losses to

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<sup>26</sup>Works, II, 385-411.

her husband. She chose death because she had heard her husband declare on one occasion that it is "better for a woman to die, than survive the esteem of her husband."<sup>27</sup> Mr. Percy, in vehemently disapproving of betting on the part of his ward, Lady Jane, says he considers "betting in a woman to be both indelicate and unfeminine."<sup>28</sup>

Many are the instances in which Mrs. Opie deploras gambling and betting, among men as well as women. She can find only censure for anyone who indulges in these practices even to the slightest degree, and she shows by example and precept that the beginning gambler and better does not long remain an amateur but soon becomes a professional or at least a hopeless addict to these vices. Mrs. Opie dramatically asks:

. . . . What is gaming, but a mental dram -- an alternation of hope and fear, which the disappointed and the wretched fly to, men and women, sated and sick of every thing, in order to give them that artificial interest which their feelings are become incapable of?<sup>29</sup>

In her point of view relating to gambling and betting Mrs. Opie is not opposed to the radicals, who would not encourage indulgence of these vices because of their detrimental effects upon the character and finances of practitioners. However, whereas Mrs. Opie inveighs against the practices, the radicals would be more likely to leave the individual to

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<sup>27</sup> "The Fashionable Wife, and Unfashionable Husband," Works, I, 258-260.

<sup>28</sup> Lady Anne and Lady Jane, Works, II, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

find out for himself the error of his ways through unhappy experiences.

A moral principle to which Mrs. Opie gives more space in her writings than to any other is that of truthfulness. One rather lengthy volume of her works is devoted entirely to illustrations of the evils of falsehood. In the opening pages of this book she quotes Godwin at length on the sin of falsehood and the virtue of truth. Calling him a "powerful and eloquent writer," she declares that with him "I have entire correspondence of opinion on the subject of spontaneous truth, though, on some other subjects, I decidedly differ from him."<sup>30</sup> This indicates at the very outset that Mrs. Opie and the radicals are in complete agreement where the telling of the truth is concerned. The radicals venerated the truth because it was conducive to harmony in social relationships, whereas Mrs. Opie was prone to look at it from the moralist's point of view; that is, she was interested in the evils resulting from falsehood and the advantages derived from the truth. Her opinion was strongly flavored by her religious convictions, whereas the radicals were looking at the social implications of the subject.

Mrs. Opie herself possessed an abiding reverence for truth, and it was only natural that she should have much to say on the matter. She went so far as to state that "a strict regard to truth is the rarest of all virtues."<sup>31</sup> A few

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<sup>30</sup> Illustrations of Lying, Works, III, 476.

<sup>31</sup> White Lies, Works, II, 352.

quotations from her works will serve to convey further indications of her regard for truth:

There is nothing which requires so much mental courage, and so much firm principle, as to be able to tell the strict truth without being led from it by temptation to lies of vanity, of interest, of pride, or of complaisance.<sup>32</sup>

. . . . All lying is contrary to the moral law of God; and . . . the liar, as scripture tells us, is not only liable to punishment and disgrace here, but will be the object of certain and more awful punishment in the world to come.<sup>33</sup>

. . . . A lie, when told, however unimportant it may at the time appear, is like an arrow shot over a house, whose course is unseen, and may be unintentionally the cause, to some one, of agony or death.<sup>34</sup>

To tell a little fib, a white lie, is thought even meritorious on some occasions: while a strict adherence to truth, on small as well as great points, exposes the person who so adheres, to be ridiculed, if not despised, by people in general. -- Therefore, he who can act up to his own sense of right, in defiance of ridicule and example, and also unstimulated by aught but the whisper of conscience, is capable of what I must call the most difficult of moral heroism.<sup>35</sup>

Mrs. Opie classifies lies into two major classes:

(1) active lies, which are outright falsehoods, and (2) passive lies, which consist of failure to correct a misrepresentation, of the withholding of the truth, or of failure to tell the whole truth, thus leaving a wrong impression. Mrs. Opie declares that she is convinced that "a passive lie is equally as irreconcilable to moral principles as an active

<sup>32</sup>The Two Sons, Works, III, 281.

<sup>33</sup>"The Stage-Coach," Works, III, 424.

<sup>34</sup>"The Bank-Note," Works, III, 433.

<sup>35</sup>The Two Sons, Works, III, 281.

one," but she admits that she is aware of the fact that most persons hold to a different view.<sup>36</sup>

In her introduction to Illustrations of Lying Mrs. Opie asks the question, "What constitutes lying?" and proceeds to answer her own query by stating that lying is the intention to deceive. She then lists and defines a number of types of lies, among which are lies of vanity, flattery, convenience, interest, fear, first- and second-rate malignity, benevolence, false benevolence, wantonness, and practical lies (those acted, not spoken).<sup>37</sup> The major portion of her book is composed of tales to illustrate the various types of lying, including several varieties not mentioned above. The next few pages of this chapter will consist of summaries of a few of these stories, included here with the intention of conveying some idea of Mrs. Opie's approach to the problem.

She regards the term, "white lie," as a general appellation indicating minor and apparently harmless digressions from the truth, but in her story, White Lies,<sup>38</sup> she refutes the widespread conception that such falsehoods are harmless and of no importance. The entire story is an exposé of the damage that little misrepresentations, exaggerations, and untruths occasion. Embarrassments, lost

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<sup>36</sup>Illustrations of Lying, Works, III, 415.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., pp. 414-415.

<sup>38</sup>Works, II, 347-385.

friendships, disrupted confidences, misery, unhappiness, and despair are limned as logical consequences of "white lies" that, at the time they were uttered, appeared completely innocuous. Truth in the end triumphs. An excerpt from a conversation in the story is illuminating insofar as it reveals Mrs. Opie's regard for truth and her concept of white lies:

"What harm is there in a little exaggeration, or even in a little white lying?"

"Every harm; as 'rien n'est que la vrai -- le vrai seul est aimable.' Besides, when once a lie is told, who knows what the consequences may be? and the line might also be read 'nothing is safe but the truth -- truth only is security.'"

"I am sure it is often very unsafe to tell the truth, and very rude too. Suppose I had told that spitfire woman she did interrupt us, and we wished she had not come?"

"That was not necessary. But it was equally unnecessary for you to tell her you were delighted to see her, and that she was an agreeable interruption."

"But what harm was there in it? . . . ." <sup>39</sup>

The passive lie of vanity is ably illustrated by the story, "Unexpected Discoveries."<sup>40</sup> Darcy Pennington, a young man with literary aspirations, was laughed at when he read his first stories and poems to his friends. They advised him to give up his dream of a literary career and to turn his efforts to some labor that would not be a disappointment to him nor a waste of his time. He went to London and entered a business firm, but continued his writing in his spare time, and was able to publish several successful works, which

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 348.

<sup>40</sup> Works, III, 424-427.

he issued anonymously. He was frequently thrilled to hear favorable comments regarding the talents of the unknown young writer, and he often attended public gatherings where his works were read and commented upon. No one suspected that he was the author. In his native city a certain newcomer became popular as a reader and literary commentator. On a visit to his home town, Darcy was invited to attend the reading of a work that was believed to have been written by the stranger, who, when someone had jestingly declared him to be the author, had neither admitted nor denied the assertion, but by his demeanor implied that he had actually written the work. Darcy, at the meeting where the stranger read portions of the work in question, discovered that it was his own latest and most popular book, and, to the surprise and joy of his townspeople, made himself known as the author. The stranger, embarrassed and angered, was laughed out of town. Here the passive lie of vanity turned out unfortunately for the one who had permitted it to gain widespread acceptance, and the truth was highly beneficial to Darcy, who had been victimized by another's untrue implications.

"The Stage-Coach"<sup>41</sup> is a striking example of the active lie of vanity. Annabel Burford, a wealthy young heiress, spent much of her youth with her grandmother, to comfort and solace her in a period of grievous bereavement. The grandmother fostered ideas of vanity, pride, and egotism in the

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<sup>41</sup>Works, III, 416-424.

young girl. In an unfortunate business relationship her father lost all his property and resources, and was forced to take the bankrupt law; all but two of his creditors, however, signed certificates of lenience. He and his wife moved from their palatial home to an humble cottage in the village. Just at the time when his creditors were about to approve his bankruptcy and to take him into partnership in their firm, Annabel returned home from her grandmother's.

Annabel, on the coach, talked loquaciously with three men who were her traveling companions, boasting of her wealth, affluence, and social station. She assured them that she was traveling by stage-coach by desire and not by necessity. After she had left the coach at her village, the men, who had become interested in her, made an inquiry and were amazed upon learning her identity. For two of the men were her father's creditors who were on their way to London to sign his certificate. Now, however, they refused to do so, and denounced Burford as a fraudulent bankrupt who still had ample means to live in splendor, according to the words of his own daughter. A letter of bitter reproof came to Burford, denying him the partnership and informing him of what his creditors had learned from his daughter on the coach. Annabel, confronted with the letter, confessed to her misrepresentations, and her miserable father hurried off to London to see his creditors in an effort to explain the situation. He had no money even for coach fares, and was deter-

mined to walk all the way to the city if necessary. On the way he fell ill, and by mere chance his two creditors stopped at the inn where he was confined. They, being convinced of his poverty and of his personal integrity, became his friends and took him into their firm. In time, the Burfords' situation was altered, and they were once more affluent; Annabel became repentant, and later taught her own children the virtue of truth.

The lie of flattery is illustrated by the story, "The Turban."<sup>42</sup> In this narrative Jemima Aldred was a lady much given to flattery, particularly as concerned her friend, Lady Delaval, who perceived her flatteries without pleasure and decided to teach her a "salutary lesson." One day, in the presence of a number of young friends, Lady Delaval made a turban, decorating it with all manner of lovely ribbons, flowers, and laces, until a gaudy, grotesque production emerged as a result of her efforts. Lady Delaval placed it upon her head and Jemima, who was present in the company, went into ecstasies of praise. Next, Lady Delaval placed the laughable headgear upon Jemima's lovely tresses, and Jemima, standing before a mirror, loudly admired herself and the turban, to the intense amusement of the company, who with difficulty suppressed their laughter. Next day, Lady Delaval invited Jemima to attend a lecture and program in which she had previously expressed an interest, but the

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<sup>42</sup>Works, III, 428-431.

invitation was proffered only on condition that Jemima wear the turban that she had so much admired. Jemima, dismayed, suddenly decided that she had a severe toothache, and railed against Lady Delaval for her unreasonableness. Lady Delaval later lectured Jemima on the value of sincerity, and let her know that she had not for a moment been deceived by flatteries.

As an example of the lie of fear Mrs. Opie tells the story of "The Bank-Note."<sup>43</sup> Lady Leslie delivered a letter into the hands of Captain Freeland, requesting him to mail it, as it contained a fifty-pound note and was urgent. He met some friends a short while later and forgot the letter. Next morning he thought of it when he met Lady Leslie on the street, but when she mentioned the matter, he assured her that he had mailed the letter, uttering a falsehood for fear of incurring her displeasure and the loss of her friendship. Conscience-smitten, he listened as Lady Leslie informed him that she had been sending the note to relieve the distress of some friends who were about to be evicted from their lodgings because of ill fortune. As soon as possible, Freeland hurried away to mail the letter. Then, feeling responsible in the matter, he made the journey himself to Lady Leslie's friends, finding them already homeless and ill. He obtained comfortable lodgings for them and confessed his negligence

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<sup>43</sup>Works, III, 431-433.

to them and to Lady Leslie, whose note came a day later.

In her story, "The Orphan,"<sup>44</sup> Mrs. Opie illustrates the lie of malignity. An unprincipled young man, jilted by a beautiful girl whom he wished to marry but did not love, defamed her character, temper, morals, and religious views to her successful suitor, who ceased his attentions to her. However, he was unwilling to believe what he had heard, despite the apparent sincerity of his informant. Eventually the truth came out, and the happy suitor renewed his addresses and soon was happily married, while the unscrupulous informant, suffering from embarrassment and chagrin, left the community.

For the most part, Mrs. Opie has been represented in this chapter as a writer of fiction who did not take much stock in radical theories concerning religion and morals, but was convinced that the traditional concepts were the correct ones. She was herself deeply religious by nature, and made no apology for assigning religious sentiments an important position in many of her works. Religion, to her, was a vital force in human life, and she would not listen to the radicals when they advocated the elimination of religion and of God from the thoughts of man. In the main, as concerned religion and morals, Mrs. Opie was definitely conventional, as opposed to the revolutionary doctrines of some

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<sup>44</sup>Works, III, 445-451.

of her contemporaries and friends. In one significant respect, however, she and the radicals were in complete agreement: they both perceived the value of honor, personal integrity, and truthfulness in all human relationships.

## CHAPTER VII

### SUMMARY

The eighteenth century was a period of social and political transition, an era of unrest, and a time of uncertainty, when man in the Old World and in the New was endeavoring to make his way upward toward a sphere of nobler and happier existence. In France the writings of Voltaire, and later, of Rousseau and Condorcet, were causing Frenchmen to look with dissatisfaction upon things as they were, and they were led, by reading the throbbing convictions of these master manipulators of words, to dream of things as they should be. In time, the thoughts of the French people were crystallized into deeds which brought about the far-reaching upheaval popularly known as the French Revolution -- a movement which slew conventionalism, outlawed autocracy, disrupted the age-old institutions of French society, established new concepts of social and political relationships, and elevated the common people to a place of importance in the state.

From France the ideals of the revolutionists were promulgated throughout Europe, and produced an abundant harvest of discontent and reorganization in society. Nor were

the wide expanses of the Atlantic a barrier to their progress, for in America the colonists took notice of what the Frenchmen were doing and themselves rose up and threw off the weight of oppression. Even in England a considerable proportion of the population listened with interest to the thoughts that came to them from beyond the Channel.

This was a period in history pregnant with new ideas, and one idea seemed to give rise to another until, particularly in France and in England, a whole new category of revolutionary concepts was erected to mirror the thoughts of the thinkers and the dreams of the dreamers. Of course, the one purpose was to defy the practices and conventions by which society had for so long governed its behavior and shaped its destiny. It was inevitable that two opposite points of view should be prevalent in such an age: one tended to accept the radical concepts, whereas the other upheld the traditional and clung to the established. There was, for a time, no middle ground.

In England the leading advocates of the revolutionary doctrines were writers of fiction, chief among whom were William Godwin and a group of authors who were his satellites and disciples. Despite the fact that some of their most significant productions were not fiction at all, but philosophical treatises on social and political subjects, the primary vehicle for the expression of their ideas was the so-called novel of propaganda, in which was incorporated one or more

of the great radical principles. That fiction was chosen for didactic purposes was due to the fact that many people would read novels who would have no interest whatever in a philosophical presentation of ideas. The propaganda novel was definitely and admittedly a fictional effort with a serious purpose, namely, to cause the reader to be favorably impressed with the radical principles that were distinctly perceptible in the fabric of the narrative. It was in the novel of purpose that radical propaganda exerted upon the masses its strongest and most far-reaching influence.

In this era, when some extremely important chapters in the history of ideas were being written, Amelia Opie made a singular and striking contribution to the total of human thought in her time. Unlike many of the radicals, she was mild and gentle in her contentions, and deeply philosophical in her outlook upon life. She was not a great writer, but fortunately she chose fiction as a means of lending expression to her ideas; her stories and novels were popular, and she enjoyed a wide audience of readers and admirers.

Fundamentally she was a conventionalist who, though she might perceive faults in traditional institutions and practices, could not believe these defects to be serious enough to warrant the total disruption of all that society had built up through a long process of evolutionary trial and error. For this reason she was not enthusiastic with regard to the propaganda that the radicals were dispensing

in their writings. She could not for a moment countenance any proposal or activity that would be destructive to that which mankind in general held in veneration. The radicals, she felt, were bent upon destroying the foundations of human society and erecting a new order founded in the shifting sands of impractical theory. Hence she was far more a critic of radical propaganda than she was an exponent. Her most potent contribution to the history of ideas lay in the fact that she created in her writings a bulwark of protection for human institutions against the assaults of would-be destroyers.

In her works, Amelia Opie stands forth as a conservative who, for the most part, believed the old ideas relating to marriage and sexual morality, to principles of education, to social and political customs and functions, and to religion and certain miscellaneous phases of morality, to be preferable to the exceedingly radical new doctrines. She appears in her own writings as a proponent of established social usage and a critic, occasionally severe, of the revolutionary thoughts and theories that were coming to the fore in her day. She took delight in using the medium of fiction for the application of some of the outstanding radical theories to life situations in order to expose the impracticability of the revolutionary propaganda. In no sense is she a humorist in the practice of her technique, although she occasionally assumes the role of a satirist who places

her characters in reasonable situations and logically causes misfortune and unhappiness to come to them when they try to work their way out of their dilemmas by the use of radical theories. She does not shake her finger at the radicals in an I-told-you-so manner, but she appears frequently to be saying, in effect, to her radical contemporaries: You see, in actual practice, your theories do not work out so commendably as they do on paper.

Mrs. Opie did, however, accede to a number of the precepts contained in the novels of radical propaganda, but most of them were of secondary importance so far as their implications for society were concerned. Notable among these examples was her complete sympathy with a majority of the radical doctrines relative to social and political oppression of the masses. Whereas in connection with marriage and morality, with education and religion, she was, in the main, a critic of the radical points of view, with relation to the social and political institutions she was far more often an exponent than a critic of the revolutionary theories of her time. She still maintained her fundamental conservatism, however, and continued to cling to her well-established veneration of convention. For this reason she was not an ardent exponent of radical philosophies even when she was sympathetic toward them.

Amelia Opie used her pen in an heroic effort to stem the surging current of radical propaganda that was thrusting

itself into the fictional literature of her day. She was in no way an advocate of the demolition of existing social institutions and customs, but was primarily concerned with upholding high standards and ideals of ethics, religion, and morality. She was eager to have society improve itself, but she could endorse neither radical propaganda nor actual revolution as a means of attaining the desired improvement. Nothing that was even momentarily destructive to the high and the noble could be in any way commendable. In these facts lay her significance as a contributor to the record of the course of human ideas.

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