The Explicator

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vexp20

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Version of record first published: 05 Dec 2012.

To cite this article: Mark Zunac (2012): Rights and Right Conduct in Amelia Opie's ADELINE MOWBRAY, The Explicator, 70:4, 260-263

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2012.727913

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Keywords: Adeline Mowbray, conduct literature, conservatism and reform, Amelia Alderson Opie, revolution

One of the enduring and collateral legacies of the ideological debates in Britain surrounding the French Revolution is a tendency to ascribe to conservative texts motives having more to do with either unthinking devotion to an imagined past or, in the case of women writers, professional self-preservation than the earnest articulation of intellectual political ideas. Yet Amelia Alderson Opie’s Adeline Mowbray (1805) resists the classification of such texts as reflexively loyalist, as the author’s honest interrogation of English legal and social norms solidifies the reformist vision within those institutions from which they derive. Opie, by way of narrative commentary and the didactic depiction of her heroine’s flawed education, promotes her own unique methodology of natural rights, grounded in both theoretical inquiry and the corresponding laws of custom and experience.

The encounter between the theoretical nature of the Enlightenment and its opposition in Adeline Mowbray is personified by generational dissonance, as the philosophical ideals of the mother are enacted by the daughter as infallible moral and ethical standards of conduct. The beginning of the novel situates a young Adeline principally under the tutelage of her widowed mother, an enthusiastic proponent of the “abstruse systems of morals and metaphysics, or new theories in politics,” on which constant speculation has caused a “neglect of positive duties” (Opie 4). That deficiency, readers are told, has grave consequences, “[laying], perhaps, the foundation to herself and her mother of future misery and disgrace” (15). The distinction, though, between Editha’s and Adeline’s espousal of an ostensibly salutary
philosophy is that while the latter will apply it literally to her material circumstances, the former has merely regarded it as intellectually recreative: “these new theories, and these romantic reveries, which only served to amuse Mrs. Mowbray’s fancy, her more enthusiastic daughter resolved to make conscientiously the rules of her practice” (14). This dichotomy between the abstract speculation of the philosopher and the seemingly trivial though very real presence of domestic and public duty catalyzes the plot’s movement as Adeline is ultimately ostracized for actions prompted by her desire “to see society enlightened and improved” (127). More important, it identifies two of the main characters as the embodiment of the tension between untried policy as a means to revolutionary ends and those historically rooted institutions seen by many to preserve a natural, practically guided social order.

Accordingly, it becomes the progressive Opie’s intention to imbricate within the quest for greater rights a reaffirmation of positive duties as practical guides for conduct. The presence in the house of Mrs. Woodville, Adeline’s maternal grandmother, belies the transformative promise of Editha’s idealism and establishes “trifling yet important details” (11) and those “things that women commonly know” (9) as essential to navigating the very real dictates of custom and experience. Despite Editha’s immersion in “abstruse speculations” (14), it is Mrs. Woodville’s more parochial concerns that prove most readily applicable to the world Adeline eventually comes to inhabit. Editha’s reluctance to commence arithmetic lessons until she had invented “an easy method for learning [it]” (10) isolates a fatal flaw in the system. She is subsequently informed that in response Mrs. Woodville, “thinking it a pity that the poor girl should learn nothing, like, till she was to learn every thing, taught [Adeline] according to the old way” (10–11). The language used by Mrs. Woodville to conclude her statement reveals a locus for revolutionary debate, as it had set ancien régime ideals against modern and largely untested proposals as correctives for them. Yet the lesson here seems to have as its objective less a tone of status quo preservation than simply a practical response to an immediate need.

As such, readers know the novel cannot be read as a rigid reaction to those dangers, real or imagined, presented by the Revolution’s challenge to the establishments of the ancien régime and its English correlative. Shelley King and John Pierce’s admonition to be wary of “any evidence of conservative bias on Opie’s part” (xii) is apt, because it calls into question the means by which Adeline comes to renounce the theories inculcated by her mother. Nevertheless, it must not be understated that the detached, transcendent...
voice of the Quaker Mrs. Pemberton provides the most lucid analysis of Adeline’s actions as well as the most damning critique of the “pernicious doctrine”:

Poor thing! I understand thee now—Thou art one of the enlightened, as they call themselves—Thou art one of those wise in their own conceit, who, disregarding the customs of ages, and the dictates of experience, set up their own opinions against the hallowed institutions of men and the will of the Most High. (122)

Her placement of Glenmurray is similar, if not as forgiving, since it is the philosopher, “wise in thine own conceit, who presumedst sometimes to question even the existence of the Most High, and to set up thy vain chimeras of yesterday against the wisdom and experience of centuries” (160). The critique here is strikingly similar to that made of Editha by the narrator, who, in describing Adeline’s flawed education, exposes Editha’s acquisition of knowledge as an exercise in pedantry: Mrs. Mowbray “loved the information which she acquired, less for its own sake than for the means of displaying her superiority over other women” (15). The utopian vision is thereby rendered hollow as much by the author’s appraisal as by her heroine’s plight. Moreover, it is important that Mrs. Pemberton’s reproofs, though underscored by their religious tenor, are more notable for their patronizing treatment of Adeline and Glenmurray. In essence, the recurring presence of Mrs. Pemberton as a seeming stand-in for narrative commentary crystallizes the symbiosis and, indeed, mutual dependence of a practically guided education and the pursuit of a greater social good.

Yet perhaps most revealing throughout is that Adeline’s fervent adoption of radical social reform actually undercuts the autonomous effort to achieve respectability by casting aside normative English social codes. Her experiences on the continent as Glenmurray’s mistress, however virtuous that connection, confirm the point and elicit the philosopher’s regret for promulgating ideas “so alluring in theory, [but] so pernicious in practice” (149). This repeats Editha’s earlier response to Adeline’s elopement, as she was “shocked at hearing Adeline declare that her practice should be consonant to her theory” (28). The statement, then, reflects a tacit admission of the impracticability, if not invalidity, of Enlightenment reason as a guide for proper conduct. When so trivialized, the utility of Editha’s “romantic reveries” is intensely scrutinized and seems to validate Editha’s astonishment that Adeline was “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” (41). Adeline has taken the tenets of Glenmurray’s and her mother’s systems of beliefs to coincide with her material desire to be useful. Yet readers would recognize the ensuing paradox: that Adeline is granted less autonomy outside the bounds of marriage than had she acceded to Glenmurray’s entreaties and taken part in “that ceremony which she was pleased to call idle” (116).

Ironically, it is after Glenmurray’s death that Adeline’s only protection is a conscripted marriage to Berrendale, one that potentially validates her earlier renunciation of the institution as “at once absurd, unjust, and immoral” (28). Yet while this unhappy marriage may be read as a punitive, Providentialist justice, it nevertheless offers redemption and culminates the novel’s didactic current. It is in much this way that the affirmation of duty and the recognition of establishment traditions are presented as more viable means to social reform than fractious revolt. In fact, the very term revolution is taken back to its etymological roots, signifying, in essence, cultural renewal and, in this case, a literal rebirth. Having acknowledged her “fatal error of opinion” (237), Adeline charges her mother with the upbringing of her only child from her marriage to Berrendale, instructively channeling Mrs. Pemberton: “Oh! teach my Editha to be humble, teach her to be slow to call the experience of ages contemptible prejudices; teach her no opinions that can destroy her sympathies with general society, and make her an alien to the hearts of those amongst whom she lives” (259). This adjuration regarding her mother’s namesake symbolizes Adeline’s desire for social improvement, here achieved by an abandonment of those universalist principles neutralized by national boundaries. As Adeline concludes, “It is evident that on the education given to children must depend the welfare of the community” (237), encapsulating what for Opie was the importance of a sound educational system, one cognizant of the realities of English customary law but reliant on custom’s foundations to grant freedoms which, for writers like Opie, they had increasingly come to suppress.

Work Cited