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Adeline Mowbray, or, A Woman's Defense of Sexual Freedom and Independence

Adeline Mowbray, o, El alegato de una mujer a favor
de la libertad sexual y la autonomía personal

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ABSTRACT

The beginning of the nineteenth century in England was very contentious with regards to women's social and political position in society. Taboo issues such as heterosexual relationships outside of marriage were considered controversial and associated with immoral actions. In *Adeline Mowbray* Amelia Opie brings to life a character that serves as a positive example of the intellectual woman who questions the idea of female sexuality and what it means to be a "proper lady", and at the same time advocates for the freedom of the individual. Opie demonstrates how Adeline's unwed union with Glenmurray is an honorable and moral relationship based on mutual respect, decency and faithfulness to each other. Lastly, the author goes to great lengths to prove that Adeline is not a defender of lax principles or libertinism, but that she is preoccupied with philosophical ideas of individuality and self-assertion as they apply to women.

El comienzo del siglo XIX en Inglaterra fue muy controvertido con respecto a la posición, tanto social como política, de la mujer. Temas tabú como las relaciones heterosexuales fuera del matrimonio eran considerados polémicos y asociados con comportamientos indecentes. En *Adeline Mowbray* Amelia Opie da vida a un personaje que retrata el prototipo de la mujer intelectual que cuestiona tanto la idea de sexualidad femenina como el concepto de "proper lady", y al mismo tiempo defiende la libertad del individuo. Opie demuestra que la unión entre Adeline y Glenmurray es una relación honorable y escrupulosa, basada en el mutuo respeto, decencia y fidelidad de ambos. Por último, la autora hace todo lo posible para demostrar que Adeline no defiende principios inmorales o el libertinaje, sino que, por el contrario, está preocupada por cómo las ideas filosóficas relacionadas con la individualidad y autoafirmación tiene aplicación en el caso de las mujeres.

Keywords: Eighteenth-century English Literature, marriage politics, women's sexual liberation, women's independence.

Compliance and docility in women are the appropriate terms to describe eighteenth century England, a male dominated society. It is interesting to observe how feminine self-assertion, as well as women's rejection of marriage, have been immediately attributed to sexual promiscuity, and that their refusal to adapt to the customs of England's society, which restrained women down to frivolity and trivialities, was not seen as a public statement dealing with sexual politics but as corrupting their reputation as pure women. Studies written on the subject have shown how women are rendered speechless by society and "forced into a culturally produced rather than natural subject position [...]" simply because they are caught in-between "the need to conform to the feminine ideals of submission and silence, and their desire to participate in the traditionally designated masculine modes of activity and expression" (Ty, 1993: 47). As a result, women's heterosexual relationships outside of marriage are only associated with licentious actions, separated from all virtuous moral codes.

Hence, it comes as no surprise that at the turn of the nineteenth century Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray*, the subject upon which I rely my study, transgresses the repressive patriarchal system with regards to gender inequalities, by advocating for a change in the status quo of traditional marriage that oppressed women. At a time in which it is all about preserving the rules of modesty and decorum, *Adeline Mowbray* meditates upon the situation of those unmarried women in society that engage in extramarital affairs. By showing how there is no place for a cultural shift in such patriarchal societies, and that the defiance of established boundaries leads only to the "fall" of feminine characters, the author illustrates how out-of-wedlock affairs were conducted in eighteenth century England.

Nevertheless, in an era in which, as Elizabeth Kraft has put it, "to inhabit the role of the feminine is, politically speaking, to inhabit the lesser, the inferior role" (2008: 33), Amelia Opie's novel manages to highlight essential aspects such as social renovation, individual freedom, and female sexuality. Therefore, my essay will prove how Amelia Opie's 1805 novel *Adeline Mowbray* touches upon the position of women in early 19th century England's conservative (patriarchal) society by portraying the lamentable consequences of feminine self-assertion, sexual transgression, and a free female sexuality. The author does that by positioning the prodigal daughter Adeline as

a licentious and “fallen woman” that violates the laws of chastity and rejects the social respectability that the institution of marriage confers.

In light of all these arguments, the purpose of my dissertation will be to examine how Adeline’s unconventional way of life defies the moral codes of her time, but at the same time how this does not convert her into a libertine. The question is simple: Why should Adeline be seen as a vicious “fallen woman,” with an immoral conduct? Aida Diaz gives quite a clear answer to my question in her essay “Adeline Mowbray, or, The Bitter Acceptance of Woman’s fate” by stating that “society is not yet prepared for such advanced theories on marriage” (2010: 198). Thus, Adeline’s need for philosophical independence goes against conventional morality making her fantasy of women’s rights a bitter non-existent reality.

In order to comprehend what *Adeline Mowbray* attends to, we need to look past the obvious themes of marriage versus adultery. That is why my essay is going to consist of a generic illustration of the patriarchal system that governed the eighteenth century English society, so as to comprehend the position and possibilities of women in that period. Then I will narrow my scope to consider the politics of marriage and of female sexual transgression, and finally I will end with my analysis of Adeline’s life and the debate upon her “unorthodox” life.

Critical reception of *Adeline Mowbray*

The end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century in England was characterized by the downfall of the revolutionary “Jacobin” movement, which advocated for freedom and equality, and symbolized a return to, as well as an empowerment of, the conservative British patriarchal system. This was the context in which Amelia Anderson Opie wrote “her most political novel” (King and Pierce, viii) *Adeline Mowbray*, a tale which provides a case study about, as Roxane Eberle notes, “progressive ideas that heterosexual relationships can and should exist outside of marriage” (1994: 127). As a result, the clash between those unconventional types of relationships and the English legal and social norms cannot concur in their representation of models of proper conduct for women.

Although Opie’s fiction is scarcely known or read nowadays, her writing technique made her be considered one of the representative women authors of that period. Her texts are famous for addressing social and political issues, but nonetheless she does an extremely good job at blurring the boundaries with regards to her own position on the matter she approaches. Because of the radical change of philosophy that the author undergoes after her marriage with John Opie, many critics are doubtful whether to assign her in the group of those in favor of or those against the “Anti-Jacobin” movement. This prepared the way for an abundance of interpretative works made by scholars and critics when analyzing *Adeline Mowbray*, the majority of which can be basically divided into two groups: those who understood, like Marc Zunac, that the ending of the novel is a statement which “reflects a tacit admission of the impracticability, if not invalidity of Enlightenment reason as a guide for proper conduct” (2012: 262). Such authors, known as conservative, do not believe in statements of feminine self-assertion, nor permit social renovation, but abet “firm rectitude of principles” (Eberle 1994: 124) and female passivity established by patriarchal societies. On the contrary, the second group was made up of the famous radicals and supporters of the French Revolution, who advocated for a “more egalitarian and human model of marriage [...] based on mutual esteem and common interests” (Diaz 2010: 191). These radicals perceived *Adeline Mowbray* as a positive example of the intellectual women who question the ideas of female sexuality and

freedom of the individual, only to end up suffering the lamentable consequences of a male dominated society. As I previously stated, many discussions with regards to the novel developed around Opie's political position in society due to her previous affiliation in the 1790's with "Jacobin" philosophies and their enthusiastic representatives, like William Godwin, Elizabeth Inchbald, Thomas Holcraft and Mary Wollstonecraft. Some critics attribute her radical change of beliefs to her understanding of "the limits of women's liberation" (Mathew 2007: 382), while others consider that she only tried to protect her reputation but never totally abandoned her radical ideas, just disguised them.

The essential aspect upon which the vast majority of interpreters and scholars have agreed is that *Adeline Mowbray* is a roman à clef "based loosely on the complex and often stormy relationship of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Goldwin" (King and Pierce 1999: viii). In her essay "Adeline Mowbray: Diverting the Libertine Gaze," Roxanne Eberle also confirms that the novel is inspired on Wollstonecraft and Godwin's relationship, but she goes a little further and suggests that more than a replica of the two "Jacobin" philosophers' lives, the novel refutes Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Eberle thinks that, as an early admirer of Mary Wollstonecraft, Opie could not accept the abhorrent position in which the *Memoirs* had placed her, so she wrote a novel that "examines the confusion which ensues when a women's philosophical beliefs conflict with society's notion about female sexuality"(1994: 123), and how that transgressive woman is converted into a sexual object by a conservative society. For Patricia Mathew, more than a critique to Godwin's concepts, the novel exhibits the impracticalities of those theories when applied to women in the late eighteenth century. Her analysis unfolds around the idea that *Adeline Mowbray* "takes its central theme from Wollstonecraft's experiment in marriage with Godwin"(2007: 390) and argues that Opie sets the basis for her fiction by using Wollstonecraft's biography only to prove that going against the rules places women outside the boundaries of social respectability.

Opie plays with the conventional forms of marriage and conceptions of femininity by placing Adeline in an ambivalent position: neither a respectable wife nor an immoral "prostitute". Therefore she has to struggle to prove her decency and moral superiority in the context of a society that overvalues appearances. But Adeline's

entrance into a faulty union is considered by many the result of the detrimental influence offered by her mother's inappropriate early education. As a matter of fact, most frequently critics have looked at how prejudicial her mother's philosophies have been for our character, and attributed to Editha Mowbray the "fall" of her daughter. In her essay "The return of the prodigal daughter" Joanne Tong contemplates how "Mrs. Mowbray pays too little rather than too much attention to her daughter" (2004: 475), the outcome of which is a misunderstanding of her position in society with regards to the strict laws of etiquette and feminine ideology in eighteenth century England. Cecily E. Hill also blames Editha for Adeline and Glenmurray's extramarital affair and their inevitable moral condemnation, and instead of accusing the lovers, she sees Editha as the soul villain of the novel. Contrary to the typical concept of a mother who provides a safe education to Adeline, Editha experiments with dubious theories that ultimately foreground her daughter's tragic death.

Needless to say, these theories have been countered by other authors, who defend Editha Mowbray and prefer to see her as redeemed mother rather than as an agent of corruption. In *Empowering the Feminine*, Eleanor Ty studies the novel from the Editha - Adeline perspective, "for the mother/daughter relationship not only begins and ends the work, but it is an integral part of the plot" (1998: 148). Ty analyzes how the book reflects (as the title *Adeline Mowbray; or The Mother and Daughter* suggests) the love between the heroine and her mother more than the love story between Adeline and Glenmurray.

In pointing to "the inadequacy and folly of conventional moral judgment" (Ty, 1993: 29) the novel thus provides an idea of what people believed to be "a proper lady" (in Mary Poovey's term) in a patriarchal society, and what are the repercussions of violating such established codes. As Opie asserts in the novel, "the opinion of the world is everything to a woman" (1999: 82), and that opinion situates Adeline outside the boundaries of social respectability because of her disbelief and rejection of the institution of marriage. By being cast away from all social interaction with the honorable and decent female community, Adeline has to succumb to the world of the vicious and libertine. This is why our heroine accepts the world's view and comes to terms with her condition of "a fallen woman". As Cecily Hill perfectly phrased it, Adeline "must bend to the world's virtues or be perceived to have none"(2015: 735).

Thus, she either accepts marriage as the only available alternative for a woman or she immediately becomes an immoral “whore”. But is this the only possible solution available for women? Should Adeline be seen as a vicious libertine because she rebuts marriage, and wants a “union cemented by no ties but those of love and honor”? (Opie, 1999: 15).

The majority of studies related to Opie’s novel most commonly analyze Adeline’s “bitter acceptance of woman’s fate” without emphasizing nor scrutinizing how, chaste in her relationship, Adeline is guilty only of adopting philosophies far more advanced than her time. So, my essay tries to understand how our heroine advocates for women’s freedom to enter egalitarian relationships which do not subdue them to the compliance and docility that marriage imposes. She is not a defender of libertinism nor of lax and immoral principles, and her unwed union with Glenmurray is a perfect portrayal of mutual respect, decency and faithfulness to each other. Taking aside Adeline’s rejection of the institution of marriage, she can be seen as an ideal sentimental heroine, who does not “act in defiance of the world’s opinion, from any depraved feelings, or vicious inclinations”(Opie, 1999: 239), but on account of her philosophical need for individuality, as well as her innate right to be treated as a free human being.

Contextual situation in eighteenth-century England

“If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves?” (Mary Astell)

Historically the foundation of society has been established firmly upon the superior position of men with regard to women. The habitual practice of the world has placed them in a state of “ingenious subjection”(Thompson, 2005: 6), and in a time in which birthright only privileged men, women were kept silent as well as repressed by gender differences. While some writers, philosophers and other political thinkers attempted to make evident the unproductiveness of an idea such as gender equality and advocated for feminine subjection and conjugal dominance, progressive proto-feminist intellectuals aimed at “subverting the conventional depiction of women” (Backscheider, 2000: xi). These authors decided to address the separation between private issues and public discourses, for which conduct books so firmly advocated, and to grant female intellect equal status to men’s.

This goal agreed with the French motto “liberty, equality, fraternity” pursued in England by the famous “Jacobin” philosophers, who saw the ineffective social stability of a society rooted in a repressive patriarchal system. They sought to expose the foolishness of a preconceived society by representing women “whose mind and body are unencumbered by the rules of sexed propriety” (Thompson, 2005: 202), instead of women who were lacking power and individuality. The battleground for these intellectuals was the ongoing debates about the position of women in society, questions affecting marriage and family issues and the merging of the public and the private spheres. Thus, the union of both spheres foregrounded the entrance of women into the fictional world, while their hard work brought them respectability as writers.

The rise of women novelists was a key phase for women’s involvement in written culture and society. As Elizabeth Thomas so perfectly noted to her fellow pen sisters: “show your Sex's Aptitude and Worth [...] Redeem the coming Age! and set us free! /From the false Brand of Incapacity” (1722: 219, ll 24-8). Paradoxically, “the scope and scale of women’s involvement in the literature market”(Turner, 1992: 2), which initially

was believed to pursue the writing of conduct books for the patriarchal model of a proper feminine character, eventually evolve into women's achievement of civil liberty. Nevertheless, from the "Anti-Jacobin" perspective female writings were expected to educate the community, especially women, on the subject of social and moral issues, while denouncing any transgression of conduct that could be deemed immoral and licentious. So vehement was their campaign against such modern political ideas that conservative writings associated revolutionary women that indulged their sexual desires or philosophical aspirations with prostitutes: "Shudder at the new unpictur'd scene/Where unsex'd woman vaunts the imperious mien" (Polwhele, 1798: II 15-6). For them the revision of old patriarchal values drew attention to the inadequacy of such an education and the horrors to which young ladies would be exposed. Conservative publications fought viciously and carried out pervasive attacks against revolutionary voices and their ideological campaign over the construction of femininity.

Be that as it may, "Jacobin" philosophy built its foundation precisely upon the political modernity of the non-subjection of women to patriarchal constraints. Such ideologies, advanced by Mary Astell's repudiation of women's submissiveness, attempted to eradicate feminine compliance in the eighteenth-century and to assert "egalitarian or unsexed physiology" (Thompson, 2005: 15). The differences between society's "proper" ladies and so-called "fallen women" resided in the fact that, while the latter refused the captivity that the marriage contract imposed on them, the former were incapable of transgressing on or rejecting matrimonial arrangements. The latter authors' avant-garde work attempted to change society's frivolous mentality with regards to the position of women as subordinate beings, having no sex-rights but those granted by marriage, to a politically freer ideology which allowed women to indulge their thoughts and inclinations. Hence, the work of the pioneer feminist Mary Astell foregrounded the theory upon which "Jacobin" philosophers stood by in the eighteenth century. Famous writers like Thomas Holcroft, Elizabeth Inchbald, Mary Hays, William Godwin, the "infamous" Mary Wollstonecraft and to a certain extent Amelia Opie advocated for women's civil liberty, as well as a cultivated understanding of women's right to freely endeavor their desires without being understood as having immoral aspirations. Their battle against values that "confined [women] to a

single virtue – chastity” (Wollstonecraft, 1997: 272), and also against the blind obedience of female characters to their tyrant husbands were regarded as the political innovations that eighteenth-century English society needed.

After Astell’s scholarly refusal to assert men as “the more excellent sex” (Hobbes, 1996: 139), Mary Wollstonecraft’s writing became the core of the political feminist movement that these radical thinkers tried to promote. Her prominent book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* called for the equality between sexes and the rights of women to practice active virtue by refusing to comply with the status of wife. Her question was simple: “Do passive indolent women make the best wives?” (Wollstonecraft, 1997: 145). Evidently the answer is far more complicated than a simple yes or no, and if for conservative thinkers morality committed women to be the slaves of men so as to preserve appearances and create a “Utopian society,” for progressive philosophers such as Wollstonecraft these mistaken conceptions only silenced the female sex and annihilated their rights to equality.

But by the end of the eighteenth century the enthusiasm for progressive ideologies brought forth by the French Revolution declined, and this gave rise to the reactionary “Anti-Jacobins”’ merciless attacks against statements of women’s self-assertion. Thus the Revolution’s aftermath came at a high price for “Jacobin” liberals, who became increasingly unpopular, all the while the English society was “invited to ostracize and fear the outspoken women who had emerged in the radical 1790s” (Eberle, 1994: 123). As if that was not enough, a “negative” addition to the philosophical war of ideas was facilitated by William Godwin’s publication of the *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. His revelations about the unconventional lifestyle that Wollstonecraft had pursued only reinforced the *status quo* of a repressive patriarchal system, and supported once more the idea of the “proper lady” for which conduct books so firmly advocated. Thus, for women writers any affiliation with Mary Wollstonecraft’s feminism jeopardized their image as “pure women”, and catalogued them as prostitutes.

This was the socio-political sphere into which Amelia Opie brought to life her novel *Adeline Mowbray, or, The Mother and Daughter*, a book which although seeming to endorse the conservative message of the counterrevolutionary period in which it was written, at the same time illustrates “a realistic picture of the brutality and pain of

domestic life”(Diaz, 2010: 192). The author’s previous engagement with radical ideologies and past but close affiliation with “Jacobin” representatives made Opie adopt an ambivalent position in her writings: while properly denouncing liberal conventions, she explicitly touched upon essential aspects such as female sexuality, freedom of speech, or sexual transgression.

Née Amelia Anderson and known as “an ardent admirer of the revolutionary principles” (Eberle, 1994: 121), she deflected from her commitment with the radical politics of the “Jacobin” circle in 1798 after marrying the painter John Opie and becoming an “honorable” and “proper” wife. This was the same year that Godwin published his *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, which unleashed a controversial debate between virtue and vice, and about society’s shortcomings as regards political modernity. So by the time Amelia Opie started writing *Adeline Mowbray*, in the early 1800s, the adverse reactions against Wollstonecraft and her followers “ranged from mild shock to disgust”(Ty, 1998: 4). The imposed need of separating herself from revolutionary philosophies did not mean that Opie completely disapproved discourses on sexuality and desire. In *Adeline Mowbray* the author challenges the limitations that society imposed on women by “empowering the role of the feminine” from a different perspective: on the one side she engages debates between the private and public life, while at the same time questions “how moral judgments are made”(Ty, 1998: 10).

As noted above, aspects related with femininity and equality have been extensively debated by Mary Astell in *Some reflections upon Marriage* and later by Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, eventually materializing in Opie’s character Adeline, who, driven by intellectual independence, has to endure society’s prejudice regarding her sexual transgression. As a result *Adeline Mowbray* “is positioned within the ideological war of ideas that shaped fiction in the 1790s” (Myers, 2000, 105), and our heroine’s attempt to live with Frederic Glenmurray outside marriage is condemned by a society unprepared or unwilling to challenge gender inequalities.

The politics of marriage

The standard eighteenth-century view on sexual differences emphasized from a patriarchal perspective the dangers to which women would be subjected if they advocated against the sacred institution of marriage and decided to enter what James Boswell termed a “promiscuous concubinage” (1991: 77). Their refusal to comply with the established norms could only convert them into licentious women, therefore sexual objects. This is why Adeline and Glenmurray's relationship becomes the focal point for Opie's satire on society's attitudes towards female self-assertion, erotic desire, marriage, and women's struggles to justify individual choice. Aida Diaz notes how “it cannot be denied that Opie offers us [...] a dark image of the powerlessness and vulnerability of married women”(2010: 192). If at first Adeline refuses to marry out of those philosophical principles which she openly professes, her later acceptance precisely of that status of wife can be understood as a marriage of convenience which she accepts so as to elude “the stigma of prostitution” (Eberle, 1994: 139) that she has been branded with.

As stated above, by the end of the 1790s many of those who had welcomed the libertine ideas which the French Revolution popularized became disenchanted with their exuberance. Campaigns to stop the expansion of extremist ideas were put in motion, and many revolutionary voices were silenced so as to stop the spread of radicalism. In addition, authors started to express more firmly the position of the female sex in society as being weak, submissive, and not a free individual. For these thinkers, the power of the domestic government resided within the man, while women were to be seen as their obedient subjects. One famous representative of this group was Jean Jacques Rousseau, who advocated for equality amongst men, but situated women in a subservient position arguing that because they were weaker and less rational beings they needed to be subjected to man's exercise of rational judgment.

In *Adeline Mowbray*, Opie evidences the mentality of such a society by placing Adeline in that subservient position and enduring the pains of domestic life. First it occurs when her mother remarries and she becomes Sir Patrick's stepdaughter. His promiscuity and sexual appetite place Adeline in genuine danger under his roof. His

profligate attempt “on the honor of the daughter of his wife”(Opie, 1999: 60) illustrates how the head of the household is a libertine and an oppressor. Though he is presented as a respectful man, Sir Patrick does not hesitate to marry and remarry so that his economic purposes and sexual desires are better suited, and even to become a bigamist as long as he obtains what he desires. Therefore he embodies all the patriarchal traits that conservative societies encouraged, and which I have previously listed with regard to the differences between men and women. As Opie makes clear:

In his dealing with men, Sir Patrick was a man of honor; in his dealing with women, completely the reverse: he considered them a race of subordinate beings, formed for the service and amusement of men; and that if, like horses, they were well lodged, fed, and kept clean, they had no right to complain. (1999: 27)

Thus, as a result of the marriage contract, which empowered the husband with all the rights of property over his wife, Mrs. Mowbray and consequently Adeline were at Sir Patrick’s disposal, having no choice and no power. Such actions can be interpreted as a critique against conventional marriage and the legal vulnerability in which it places women.

The second occasion in which Adeline is placed in a dramatic situation is when, compelled by circumstances, she marries Berrendale. Here Opie depicts Adeline’s married life as that of a servant who has to obey and please her “master” constantly. But while Adeline fulfills her duties as a wife to perfection, being cheerfully submissive and accepting his decisions, all in the interest of domestic stability, Berrendale solely proves that he is well aware of the authority with which society has empowered him, making use of it to its fullest. His appalling behavior and despotism embitter Adeline’s existence, while his language and affirmations are aimed exclusively at producing hurtful reproaches: “I think that I gave a sufficient proof of [my affection] when, disregarding the opinion of the world, I married you, though you had been the mistress of another”(Opie, 1999: 189). Thus, the egalitarian type of marriage is clearly not a possibility in Opie’s narrative, and all the while conduct books and society condemn female sexual transgression, men’s infidelities are left aside as simple errors of judgment that can be easily forgotten. As Carol Howard notes, Berrendale’s sexual transgression “cannot be separated from his other acts of vulgar intemperance” (1998:

363). Still, his errors can be effortlessly dismissed on account of men's superiority with regards to women. These circumstances show us how *Adeline Mowbray* is constructed upon society's limited judgment, and how the world has the power to shape a woman's life and posit her as licentious if she fails to accept her role within its hierarchy and to follow the established path. Amelia Opie shows us that although she obtains that much desired by society status of wife, Adeline is in no way free from harm but that "the marriage contract that [she] has signed in order to avoid the prostitution contract only exposes her to further insult" (Eberle, 1994: 140). Our heroine escapes society's persecution only to end up living the grim life that all married women had to endure.

Yet, despite that rigid mentality which subdued eighteenth-century English society, there were people willing to fight against that repressive system and against the institution of marriage that converted women into slaves. Authors such as Wollstonecraft and Godwin became the perfect embodiment of contemporary thinkers, whose unwed and bold relationship trespassed against the limits established by society by defending the position of women in society as rational human beings. As William Godwin noted in his book *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* marriage only monopolizes both men and women into a life-long contract which inevitable produced unhappiness:

The institution of marriage is a system of fraud [...] Marriage is law, and the worst of all laws [...] Marriage is an affair of property, and the worst of all properties. So long as two human beings are forbidden by positive institution to follow the dictates of their own mind, prejudice is alive and vigorous. (Godwin, 2001: 137)

Up to a certain point, but nonetheless under some concealment, Opie endorses these radical ideas of freedom of the individual and women's self-assertion, and in *Adeline Mowbray* her fictional character Glenmurray adopts Godwin's philosophy about "the evil of marriage" (Godwin, 2001: 137) and the disillusion that such a contract brings to both men and women. Like Godwin, Frederick Glenmurray rejects the conservative concept of a proper wedding in favor of a heterosexual relationship outside of wedlock, that is, "cemented by no ties but those of love and honor"(Opie,

1999: 15). Thus, while radicals found marriage lacking political modernity and reciprocal dependence for both sexes, conservative thinkers saw it as the stable pillar of society that kept women safe from libertine conceptions that made them fall into disgrace and become prostitutes. In his famous poem "The Unsex'd Female," Richard Polwhele spoke about those "enlightened" women who only brought shame to their kind, and how "once the female Muse" they disgraced themselves and "loose the chaste cincture"(1798: ll. 49, 25) which made them pure. As previously stated, Opie adapts her novel to the limitations that early nineteenth-century society dictated by inserting characters that disapprove of Adeline's philosophical ideas, like Rachel Pemberton:

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 age, and the dictates of experience, set up their own opinion against the hallowed institution of men and the will of the Most High. (Opie, 1999: 122)

These characters that Opie imbeds in her novel portray the rigid mentality that society had with respect to women's sexual transgression, and what their arguments were so as to disapprove of such conducts.

Hence, the concepts that Opie touches upon in *Adeline Mowbray* about women's display of immoderation and sexual indulgence are vigorously censured by the patriarchal community; that is why the author has to go to some lengths to prove Adeline and Glenmurray's unwed connection can be seen as as respectable as well as moral relationship. The female question of love and marriage is a constant all throughout the book, and as we can see Amelia Opie maintains a safe, but fairly close, distance from the intellectual relationship which Adeline and Glenmurray profess. She neither openly endorses nor firmly rejects it, but leads us on a middle path so as to comprehend the difficulties with which women were faced and the possibilities available for them at that moment.

Adeline's unorthodox life

I became the mistress of Mr. Glenmurray from the dictates of my reason, not my weakness or his persuasion. (Opie, 1999: 88)

As mentioned previously, according to moral books and feminine ideology women's virtue was associated with the preservation of their sexual chastity. If that would fail and they would forfeit their most prized quality then a breach of duty towards society would occur. This appears to have been Adeline's case when, "out of regard to [her] own principles"(Opie, 1999: 41), she desired to live a free and chaste love with the man of her heart. Clearly the innovative ideology that she tried to propagate was unwelcomed by society's standards and because of that, Adeline was categorized as licentious and lacking all moral values. So, her out-of-wedlock relationship with philosopher Frederick Glenmurray was understood as incompatible with the dictates of England's patriarchal society. From their point of view, heterosexual relationships outside of marriage represented lax principles that could only be interpreted as both treasonous and immoral, and women who engaged in such activities were defying authority by promoting promiscuous behavior. Hence, England's conservative society opened no opportunity for independently minded women.

Interestingly enough, Amelia Opie produces a character that, although entrapped in the cultural restraints of late eighteenth century society, refuses to submit to the rules of property that marriage implied. Thus, Adeline represents the personification of a heroine who, enthralled with philosophical ideas of individuality and feminine self-assertion, fights back by refusing to comply with the norms of a repressive community. Her embodiment of the mistress figure, in a society which values appearances more than intellectuality, places her "outside the confines of social respectability"(King and Price, 1999: ix), demonstrating in this way the folly of a community rooted in conventional moral judgment in which "marriage is a social necessity" for the female sex (Ty, 1993:30).

In the novel *Amelia* Opie does not portray Adeline as an instiller of immoral behavior but as a defender of the union between a man and a woman based on respect, love and freedom, all the while the institution of marriage forfeits women to a title that assigns them to male subjection:

I should long ago have been his wife; but, from the conviction of the folly of marriage, I have preferred living with him without the performance of a ceremony which, in the eyes of reason, can confer neither honor nor happiness. (Opie, 1999: 122)

Even when her situation changes for the worse and she is denied any acquaintance with society's "respectable" women, Adeline demonstrates constancy to her rigorous system of thought and action. Her behavior may be considered erroneous by the rest of society but nonetheless she does what she truly believes to be right, as we can see from her conversation with Glenmurray: "If you still are convinced your theory is good, why let your practice be bad? It is incumbent on you to act up to the principles that you profess, in order to give them their proper weight in society" (Opie, 1999: 66).

Many critics have rushed to state that *Adeline Mowbray* exhibits the somber outcome of feminine sexual transgression and lack of morality, and that Amelia Opie wrote the book as an intransigent condemnation of the "rejection of matrimonial forms" (Eberle, 1994: 124). Yet I have to disagree with these statements because we see how Adeline's reputation as a "fallen" woman is not the result of a shameful behavior but of her refusal to conform to the norms and moral codes of the period. She is taking a stand for femininity and independence, as well as contesting the notion of the docile woman that conduct books so vehemently affirmed. Because of that, Adeline has to endure the pain caused by society's rejection, and to use Gary Kelly's words "she is taken to be anything from naughty to vicious by other good characters"(1980: 200). Thus, we are compelled to see Adeline's virtuous personality as being irrelevant as long as she endorses radical philosophies that guide women towards vice and immorality. One may wonder whether her behavior can be seen as depraved and licentious, and as a consequence guides others on "the path of sin"(Opie, 1999: 240); or the issue at hand has to do more with the fact that, in a

patriarchal society, Adeline acts on her desires and dares to live with her lover outside the confines of marriage.

Thus, Adeline's intellectual autonomy allows her to believe that she can form a chaste and honorable union of rationally minded individuals without the necessity of wedlock. However, this is the error that ultimately leads to her downfall: believing that society is prepared for such progressive ideas. The fact that she establishes "theories about cohabitation as superior and more natural than marriage" (Mathew, 2007: 389) gives society the opportunity to demonstrate the foolishness of independent philosophical women and the necessity of their husbands' guidance. As Mary Wollstonecraft so ironically denounces in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*:

Women, in general [...] have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit. [...] All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering, not the wavering produced by deliberation or progressive views, but by contradictory emotions.[...] Undoubtedly, a mixture of madness and folly. (1997: 177)

Into this error falls Adeline's unprepared society and as soon as she decides to be "a kept miss" (Opie, 1999: 116) people conclude that she is no longer virtuous. She can no longer belong to the society of the "righteous" women, as it can be understood from the conversation that Adeline and her servant Mary have one day:

Everybody say that you are a kept lady, and I made no bones of saying so; [...] "But what do you mean by the term a kept lady?" "Why a lady who lives with a man without being married to him, I take it; and that I take to be your case, an't it, I pray?" "But mistresses, or kept ladies in general, are women of bad character, and would live with any man; but I never loved, nor should love, any man but Mr. Glenmurray. I took on myself as his wife in the sight of god. (1999: 117)

It is appropriate to observe that Amelia Opie goes to great lengths to show that Adeline's ideas make her in no way immoral nor vicious, and that women like her, who decide to live outside the artificial constraints imposed by patriarchal prerogatives, are as honorable and faithful as married women. Her mistake is not that she begins a

relation outside marriage, but that she advocates for women's right to choose their partners and the possibility of a relationship based on equality and free love. Society's response to such scandalous demands is to transform her into a prostitute, but as Roxanne Eberle so perfectly phrased it in her essay, "it is Adeline's rejection of society's attempts to treat her as a 'whore' which makes the novel interesting" (1994: 133), while her unwillingness to compromise her beliefs shows not that she is unworthy, but that society is not prepared to change its social mores: "Alas! Cried Adeline, 'when can we hope to see society enlightened and improved'" (Opie, 1999: 127).

The author is "at pains to demonstrate Adeline's moral superiority to many other [pure] women" that appear in the novel (Hill, 2015: 735), and despite her appearance of vice, the "immoral mistress" stays faithful to her lover until the very end of his life, afterwards respecting her despotic and bigamist husband Berrendale. But while Adeline "appears as spotless as ever" (Opie, 1999: 75), the same thing cannot be said of other supposedly virtuous women. Maynard's sisters, of whom Opie reveals their real character as being nothing but vicious, are nonetheless considered respectable women in society: one of them, although married, maintained an affair with a "gallant" under her husband's protection, and the other "coquetted with many men, but intrigued with only one at a time"(1999: 127). Hence, society sentences Adeline to be seen as a "woman of vicious inclinations"(1999: 116) even though, as Opie clearly demonstrates, she is morally superior to many other women in the novel.

Another example of indecent behavior that the author illustrates so as to contrast with Adeline's character is that of her former maid Mary Warner, later presented as Mrs. Montgomery. Although society chooses to see Adeline as the villain due to her "libertinism", in reality Opie redeems her by comparing these two women so as to show how "true immorality" is illustrated. While, for Adeline, to live with Glenmurray without being married meant engaging in a pure union and living a life of honour with only one man, for Mary it implied that she could offer herself to anyone that she considered fit to take care of her. So, whereas Mary may be guilty of vulgarity and can even be called a prostitute in that sociohistorical context, Opie distances Adeline from such improper actions and creates a female character that "is determined to act the

part of an honest woman”(Hill, 2015: 738), simultaneously fighting for her right to civil and political liberty as well as free love.

Hence, it comes as no surprise that Adeline’s behavior is understood as either rebellious or unbefitting, and that in the interest of shielding her from greater threats imposed by society Amelia Opie may depict her “to be more ill-judging than vicious” (Opie, 1999: 79). Without any doubt Adeline’s propensities regarding women’s rights collide with society’s notion of femininity. In my opinion, these contradictions between the “qualities” which society attribute to Adeline and what she actually stands for represents the subject matter around which the novel’s theme evolves and that the patriarchal society so fiercely tries to discredit. Opie demonstrates how Adeline’s position as a woman places her at the mercy of men’s insensible disposition, but also that her unorthodoxy is a stand against female passivity, not a quest for women’s acceptance of lax principles. Despite the fact that she continually “asserts her right of self-ownership and demands respect upon her intrinsic worth”(Eberle, 1994: 134), this appears to be the reason why Adeline is not accepted in the world as it is designed. Her unorthodox relationship, as Amelia Opie has constructed it in the novel, does not depict an immoral and libertine heroine but a woman with modern philosophical ideologies about love, freedom and the position of women in her society.

As a result, Amelia Opie’s prose fiction, or as she termed it, her “simple moral tales”, engaged with many of the political discourses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, notably touching upon those “concerned with women’s education and rights in marriage” (Hill, 2015: 748). In *Adeline Mowbray* the core of the novel is constructed precisely upon the contrasting ideology of the “pure” and the “fallen” woman. The author, on account of political as well as social reasons, neither completely upheld nor openly attacked such theories. Nevertheless, her covert attachment to revolutionary ideas that favored social renovation as well as free love materialized in *Adeline Mowbray* becoming thus a way of making it public without seeming to do so.

The real state of the case was that Adeline, “morally strong yet publicly disabled” (Kelly, 1980: 200), had to endure society’s rejection and moral condemnation not because her conduct was licentious, but as a result of the conservative ideologies that governed English society. In addition, it is important to underline that the novel’s

outcome is not meant in any way to discourage the fight against patriarchy, but merely illustrates that such revolutionary ideas about women's self-assertion and their right to sexual freedom, concepts which Adeline adopted and tried to live by, were inapplicable in a society such as England at the end of the eighteenth century.

To the reading public it is evident that our heroine was entirely convinced of the propriety of her conduct and that "her determination gave her a sort of desperate serenity" (Godwin, 2001: 96) in the face of the relentless force of social mores. Adeline, fascinated by abstract ideas and philosophy, fought for what she believed to be morally correct, and entered into an unwed union on account of her "conviction of the folly of marriage"(Opie, 1999: 122). Yet, from society's point of view Adeline's conception of heterosexual relationships outside of marriage was seen as sexually transgressive and "in defiance of the world's opinion" (Opie, 1999: 239). This is the reason why Amelia Opie's novel shows how there can be no room for political modernity unless a radical change occurs within the laws and social rules of the fashionable English society. As Eleonor Ty notes in *Empowering the Feminine*: "Opie explores the complexities of the desiring female subject in her society"(1998: 149) by placing Adeline in the position of the "mistress figure" that does not comply to the rules of property. Adeline Mowbray is about an intellectual young woman whose ideology is far ahead of the century she was born in and for which she has to pay the ultimate price. Her belief that women can love purely and live honorably outside the confines of matrimony demands a change in the *status quo* regarding the condition of women and the politics of marriage in the eighteenth century.

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