Diverting the Libertine Gaze: Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray*

Although *Father and Daughter* obliquely touches upon the concerns of “Jacobin” sympathizers in England, Opie’s use of the sentimental tale tends to preclude overt socio-political commentary. In 1805, four years after the publication of *Father and Daughter* and at a moment when Mary Wollstonecraft’s reputation would seem to be fully compromised, Opie explicitly addresses republican concerns such as free love, free speech, and abolition in *Adeline Mowbray; or, The Mother and Daughter*. Indeed, the novel was considered a *roman à clef* about Wollstonecraft and William Godwin throughout the nineteenth century. While there are important differences between Wollstonecraft and Opie’s eponymous heroine and between Godwin and the novel’s hero, Frederic Glenmurray, the text does examine the confusion that ensues when a woman’s philosophical beliefs conflict with society’s notions about female sexuality. *Adeline Mowbray* is about naming a woman a “whore” because she is both sexually and intellectually transgressive. As Wollstonecraft and Hays had already demonstrated, telling the story of the “sexual” woman provides an ideal opportunity to critique unjust systems of social and legal regulation. Opie’s text, however, considers the consequences of deliberately choosing sexual transgression based upon deeply held philosophical principle. The text draws upon elements of the philosophical novel, particularly Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, as well as the conventions of the domestic tale, without idealizing either form, thus Opie’s text moves beyond the parameters of the “seduction novel” to focus upon the political and philosophical conflicts of the early nineteenth century. By situating the debate between “radicals” and “conservatives” directly over the heroine’s desirable – and commodifiable – female form, Opie exposes the self-interest implicit...
in both radical and conservative prescriptions about female education and citizenship.

Questions about Opie’s own political position have been at issue from the time of *Adeline Mowbray’s* publication. In the nineteenth century it was widely read as a critique of English Jacobin politics, particularly the life and work of Godwin, Holcroft, and Wollstonecraft. The same ideological backlash that leads to Wollstonecraft’s condemnation protects Opie; her reputation as a “respectable” woman ensures a largely positive reception of her work. Contemporary journals herald *Adeline Mowbray* as a worthy novel by a “lady whose uncommon talents do honour to her sex and country” (*The Critical Review* 219), while *The Monthly Review* reads the novel as an uncompromising condemnation of Wollstonecraft and Godwin: “It is the intention of this work to portray the lamentable consequences which would result from an adoption of some lax principles relative to a rejection of matrimonial forms which have been inculcated by certain modern writers” (320–1). Forty-eight years later, *Adeline Mowbray* was still being read as a repudiation of “Jacobin” morality. Although Cecilia Brightwell acknowledges Opie’s suspect political beliefs, she carefully disassociates the author from any connection with the radicals themselves, particularly that “philosophising serpent”, Mary Wollstonecraft. Brightwell fervently insists that “there was too much of the pure womanly character in [Opie], to suffer her ever to sympathize with the assertors of ‘woman’s rights,’ (so called)” (42).

On the rare occasions when Opie’s work was examined during the 1970s and 1980s, biographers and critics continued to judge her based – not on her own “female speech” – but on her reputation as a “flirt” and the romantic triangle that she seems to have formed with Wollstonecraft and Godwin. It is often suggested that Godwin wooed Amelia Alderson even as he embarked on a relationship with Wollstonecraft. Leaping to her subject’s defense in her biographical study of Wollstonecraft, Claire Tomalin strongly condemns Opie’s motivation in writing *Adeline Mowbray*. She reads the novel as part of a “steady campaign of denigration” waged against Wollstonecraft throughout the nineteenth century: “it is hard to forgive Amelia Opie for the cool way in which she thus made use of the woman who had certainly done her no harm and who had left daughters, legitimate and illegitimate, who could have done with some kindness from their mother’s friends” (294). Both Brightwell and Tomalin fall into the trap of judging Opie based on their own “feminine ideologies”. Whereas Brightwell frames Opie as an ideal Victorian “angel”, the twentieth-