

Author



A class discussion turned into a passion for Sandra Woffington. Initially pursuing a spark of interest in female authors, Woffington gradually narrowed her focus to Amelia Opie, and then set about collecting original documents and reading Opie's memoir, letters, and journal entries. Woffington, who enjoys spending her spare time with her husband and three adolescent daughters, is currently enrolled in the M.F.A. program in creative writing and the M.A. program in literature at Chapman University. After finishing these courses of study, she hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in English.

Key Terms

- Autobiography
- Gay Quaker
- Moment of Exchange
- New Historicism
- Plain Quaker
- Poststructuralism

Amelia Opie (1769-1853): The Autobiographical Roles of a "Woman of Letters"

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English

Abstract

Amelia [Alderson] Opie was one of the most prolific and popular female writers of the early nineteenth century, yet her voluminous "tales" and poems, as well as her notoriety, have nearly vanished. Recent studies mostly reexamine Opie's best known novels, *The Father and Daughter* and *Adeline Mowbray*. However, while fictional works can enlighten the present-day researcher as to social expectations and practices during an author's historical era, examining the author as a subjective "self" in that era requires autobiographical study. This research investigates Amelia Opie from her own words, from her autobiographical sketches, letters, and journals. She depicts herself as an actor in her own "romance of real life." In this drama, she uses her strengths of theatricality and curiosity, and her strong sense of individualism, duty, morality, and purpose to negotiate between social pressures and her own desires, as well as between her conflicting desires, such as her desire to write fiction and to socialize with her fashionable and notable friends in the salons of London and Paris, which conflicted with her later chosen Quakerism.

Faculty Mentor



Sandra Woffington's thesis of well over one hundred pages amply deserved the award she won for the best honors thesis in the humanities. It is, however, not the length but the quality that earned her this distinction. In researching the autobiographical writings of Amelia Opie, she went to the Huntington Library and was able to demonstrate, by looking at Opie's original letters, how her previous biographers had shaped their images of her through omission. The thesis as a whole analyzes the three foremost of Opie's previous biographers, provides a kind of counter-biography, and closely reads Opie's autobiography and letters to show the roles she plays and her consciousness of them.

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Go, youth beloved, in distant glades,
 New friends, new hopes, new joys to find!
 Yet sometimes deign, 'midst fairer maids,
 To think on her thou leav'st behind.
 Thy love, thy fate, dear youth, to share,
 Must never be my happy lot;
 But thou may'st grant this humble prayer:
 Forget me not! Forget me not!
 (Menzies-Wilson, 1937)

Introduction

Amelia [Alderson] Opie wrote the above lines as part of a poem titled "To the Flower Called, Forget Me Not" in 1802. While the flower is remembered, the author, largely, is not, yet she was one of the most prolific and popular writers of the Romantic period, a time when the "English popular novel" flourished (Kelly, 1980). In addition to novels, tales, ballads, and poems, Opie wrote abundant letters and kept diaries. Through her autobiographical writings, she presents herself as a "woman of letters" who struggles to negotiate her desires in a society that, despite widespread revolutionary ideas and pressures, limited women's social roles.

While recent studies of Opie largely examine her fiction, this study investigates Opie through her own words in the form of her autobiographical writings. Opie began, but did not complete, an autobiography. Many of her autobiographical sketches, letters, and journal entries have been preserved in *Memorials of the Life of Amelia Opie: Selected and Arranged from her Letters, Diaries, and other Manuscripts*, as well as two extant biographies. Further investigation includes the review of microfilmed letters from the Society of Friends Library in London and original letters from the Huntington Library in San Marino.

The memorial's author, who published in 1854, and the two biographers, who published in the 1930s, present disparate images of Opie. The differentiation results from the agendas of the authors as well as an influence linked to the historical eras in which they wrote. Cecilia Lucy Brightwell, writing in the early Victorian period, depicts Opie as the model of that era: the domestic heroine. Comparing Opie's original documents to the portions printed in the memoir shows the heavy-handed extent to which Brightwell manipulated the text to project an agendized image of the author as "pure," pious and charitable (Brightwell, 1854).

Jacobine Menzies-Wilson and Helen Lloyd, writing in the post-suffrage period of 1937, depict Opie as a liberated woman

and a coquettish man-hunter in their work, *Amelia: The Tale of a Plain Friend*. They claim Opie had intrigues with many men, including an "affair" with her own cousin, Tom Alderson. Examination of 11 original letters from Opie to her cousin Tom, dated between 1812 and 1835, reveal nothing but warm-hearted, familial affection, although many lines, if taken out of context or imbued with a biographer's assertion that the author's tone was that of "rage," could be used to show an altered image of Opie as an emotional libertine. Opie uses affectionate language in writing to her male and female correspondents; for instance, she once wrote: "Many days & evenings have also been passed alone with my beloved cousin—to me far the greatest pleasure London can give, as after all, there is no equal to that which one desires from being with those we love" (Gurney MSS, Aug. 10, 1815). This represents familial, not romantic, affection when read in context.

On the other hand, Margaret Eliot Macgregor in *Amelia Alderson Opie: Worldling and Friend*, a heavily referenced academic work, depicts Opie as a complicated woman, desirous of both social privilege and her later chosen Quakerism. This work is the most accurate portrayal, perhaps due to the author's extensive autobiographical research and unemotive presentation. Macgregor quotes large passages from Opie's original manuscripts, letters and journals. These varied depictions of Opie demonstrate that biography is problematic if autobiographical sources are unavailable or if they are utilized in an agendized manner.

Before evaluating Opie's autobiographical texts, and to prevent corruption of the findings as described above, study of current women's autobiographical theory, like that developed by Helen Buss, provides a critical framework for evaluation. Buss finds the combination of New Historicism and Poststructuralism especially useful in evaluating women's archival documents. New Historicism accounts for the construction of an identity within an historical, cultural, social, and gendered place, whereas Poststructuralism focuses on the "competition of discourses, on the ruptures in history, on the freeplay of meaning, and on the subject as decentered" (*New Columbia*, 1975). In essence, instead of viewing Opie's autobiographical texts with a mind to reconstitute a set subject in the historical text, the texts were evaluated for the negotiations taking place in them, or what Buss refers to as the "'moment of exchange,' a term that can designate all kinds of exchanges of assets, of power, not only the economic exchanges of a public economy, but also the more symbolic and personal moments of private economy," such as "talent, power, skills, nurturing, and labor" (Buss, 1998). Since women

of Opie's period existed in the private sphere more than the public sphere, this framework is especially relevant in determining how Opie reconciles her individual desires and her social, historical and gender limitations.

Opie depicts herself as an actor in her own "romance of real life" (Brightwell, 1854). She plays the roles accepted by society: socialite, wife of a prominent artist (John Opie), widow, and Quaker, and roles that fewer women dared to play: unescorted traveler, abolitionist, feminist sympathizer, political dissenter, a "blue-stocking" (a woman with intellectual or literary interests), and a "woman of letters" (*New Columbia*, 1975; Brightwell, 1854). Opie emerges as a woman who aptly negotiates, both overtly and covertly, between the poles of her desire and social acceptability.

Opie's Strengths

The strengths Opie employs to negotiate between the poles of social acceptability and those of her personal desires include curiosity, individualism and theatricality, as well as a strong sense of duty, morality and purpose. Opie's parents fostered some of these traits. In an autobiographical sketch of her childhood, Opie portrays herself as an indulged only child, whose mother forces her to overcome each of her five childhood fears by facing them: to overcome her fear of beetles and frogs, she has to hold them; to overcome her fear of the skeleton hanging in her father's office (her father was a physician), she has to set it in her lap; to overcome her fear of lunatics, she has to press money into the hands of two mad beggar women released from the asylum and who sometimes come to the door; and to overcome her fear of a black servant who lives opposite her, she is forced to shake his hand and learn the sad history of African slavery. Opie (then Alderson) and Aboar, the servant, become friends. For the rest of Opie's life, she joins societies dedicated to abolishing slavery and improving living conditions within asylums.

When Opie is fifteen, her mother dies, after which father and daughter bond even closer than before. They remain close throughout their lives. An only parent, Dr. Alderson indulges his daughter; he introduces her into the society of his individualistic and revolutionary friends where she meets clergymen such as Dr. Sayers; political dissenters such as William Taylor; writers such as Mrs. Barbauld; dramatists such as Thomas Holcroft and Mrs. Inchbald; the actor Mrs. Siddons; and supporters of the French Revolution such as Mrs. William Taylor (Madame Roland to her friends). Miss Alderson also knew Mary Wollstonecraft, an advocate of women's rights, and William Godwin, the philosopher. (In fact, Godwin was

romantically interested in the vivacious, auburn-haired Miss Alderson prior to his association with and later marriage to Mary Wollstonecraft). Thus, intellectual curiosity was fostered at an early age.

Opie repeatedly uses the words "curious" or "curiosity" in her autobiographical writings. Curiosity and theatricality help her negotiate her desires. For instance, Opie became curious as to what takes place inside the summer courts of Norwich. She writes in an autobiographical sketch, "as soon as I found that ladies were allowed to attend trials, or causes, I was not satisfied till I had obtained leave to enjoy this indulgence" (Brightwell, 1854). She uses theatrical vocabulary to demonstrate the power the courts held for her:

A court of justice may be likened to a stage...A Nisi Prius cause is a new drama...the emotions we behold are real, not acted, and springing from the exigencies of the moment...the eloquent energy of the pleaders, the replies of the witnesses...are not only like the representations of great actors, 'faithful to nature in the mimic [of] scenes,' but are nature itself!...It is also my conviction that whatever brings us acquainted with, and interested in the affairs and well being of our fellow creatures, in their varied stations and positions in society, may have a beneficial influence on our hearts, minds, and characters. (Brightwell, 1854)

Opie regularly attended the London theater, and in her youth wrote a play, *Adelaide*, which she performed twice—taking the principal role—for friends at a private theater. In her autobiographical writings, Opie often shows acute awareness of drama and role-playing. Upon hearing of an opportunity to meet a cross-dressed woman who poses as a sailor to follow her lover to sea, Opie states: "What a romantic incident! The romance of real life too! How I wanted to see the heroine" (Brightwell, 1854). Another time, she writes of having known Charles Lamoth: "I knew him to be one of the actors in the first revolution; and as soon as my silence yielded to my curiosity, I began questioning him concerning some of the patriotic leaders" (Brightwell, 1854). In addition to her poems, novels, and moral tales, Opie wrote songs; she was said to have performed the ballads at various social gatherings, throwing herself into the part of "the bereaved or the deserted lover" (Menzies-Wilson, 1937). As will be seen later, her sense of theatricality and attention to role-playing is an asset that she uses to negotiate her desire to interact with society after she adopts Quakerism.

Opie’s autobiographical writings also utilize dialogue and a vocabulary of sensibility similar to her fictional works; they are replete with superlatives and great mention of “feelings.” Yet she also demonstrates an acute and conscious awareness of the difference between illusion and reality. In a sketch of her childhood, Opie states, “I have since had to awake often from illusions that were dear to my heart” (Brightwell, 1854). Thus, she recognizes the difference between illusion and reality; however, she sometimes states that she prefers the romantic illusions to reality. While each of the strengths described above help Opie to negotiate between simple desires, they become even more apparent as she negotiates between her most conflicted desires, her need for society and her need to write, both of which opposed her chosen religion, Quakerism.

Conflicting Desires

Perhaps the most difficult negotiation Opie faces in her lifetime arises when her desire for religious commitment to the Society of Friends requires that she not only forego writing fiction but also relinquish the company of her distinguished social circle of London and Paris friends. Nine years after Opie marries and moves to London, her husband dies and she returns to her father’s house in Norwich. She then becomes close to a family of Quakers, the Gurneys, who live nearby. In 1814, after seven years of affiliation, the Gurneys, particularly Joseph John and Priscilla, entice Opie to leave the Unitarian church and attend Quaker meetings. But curious Opie is far from converted; in a passage that demonstrates the opposing poles of Opie’s desire, she writes the following to William Haley, a poet and friend:

Strange, inconsistent being that I am! one day I am at a Countess’s assembly, the other at a quaker’s meeting, & a quaker’s yearly feast—now hearing sermons from public friends, now seeing plays—now walking along the Streets on the arm of a plain quaker, now leaning on that of a volatile Viscount—and what a strange thing it is, & did it ever happen I wonder to any one before to have my company as much relished by the one description of person as the other? I sometimes think it calls my sincerity in question—& as if like St. Paul I was all things to all “men” but not for such good purposes. (Macgregor, 1932-33)

In this passage, Opie shows more than opposing poles. She shows comfort and amusement in the drama of her own contradictions. In addition, she shows pleasure in her own role-playing abilities by implying that she is all things to all

men. However, rather than stating her own pleasure, which comes across in the language, the words indicate she takes pleasure because others “relish” her company. Thus, she finds satisfaction in her popularity.

Even more striking, Opie aligns herself with a sainted male figure, Paul, known to have traveled widely in his cause of spreading the Christian faith. In another instance, Opie aligns herself with Jesus Christ. In a letter to Joseph John Gurney, she defends her socializing:

Our blessed Saviour associated with publicans, & sinners—& though he *alone* was capable of being amongst filth without being defiled, yet, while conscious that the sins of those we associate with are not such as to invite us to participate in them, but rather serve as *warnings* to ourselves, I do not feel it a *duty*, however it may become my *inclination*, to separate from them. (Gurney MSS, Aug. 9, 1815)

Again, Opie emphatically states her own mind. This demonstrates her early attempts to incorporate religion into her desire to socialize—an attempt to imbibe the one without feeling guilt for the other. More than that, however, Opie equates herself with two male Christian figures. She not only deems herself just as capable as St. Paul or Christ himself in remaining unspotted by the world, but also alludes to an equal ability to minister.

In 1820, Opie’s father becomes ill, which serves as a catalyst for religious conversion. Still, she does not convert until her father becomes deathly ill four years later. Brightwell quotes (but heavily edits) a letter to demonstrate Opie’s struggle with conversion in 1824 and her “earnest desire to be guided aright in this matter” (1854). Opie writes the letter in response to one written by Elizabeth Fry, formerly Elizabeth Gurney, a well-known Quaker prison reformer and a friend of Opie’s. The material included in the Brightwell biography, which is also utilized in the Macgregor biography, shows Opie leaning toward conversion. However, the original letter, uncovered at the Huntington Library in San Marino, reflects Opie’s firmly stated conviction not to commit before she is ready to do so:

For I feel no progress...I have repeatedly and daily spread my case before Him who can alone help me, humbly praying for direction, [*editor scored out sentence*] join another sect of worshippers with whom many of my relations on the mother’s side have been united for generations past viz. the Wesleyan Methodists and so impressed have I been with this idea that [*editor*

scored out sentence].

Yesterday, however at meeting *before I received thy* message, I had settled my mind on that point in a different manner—I wanted to believe that the reason that I was not allowed to obey entirely and use the plain language in defiance of every obstacle, and all fear of man was, that I am as *yet* too sinful, too disobedient in many ways, and not sufficiently purified from...worldly stains. Tho' free entirely. I fear I can never be allowed to join the Society, as a convinced person. (Huntington MSS, OP 48, Jan. 19, 1824)

Following the above, Brightwell uses a segment of the letter in which Opie relates how she feels comforted by religion—"as when I feel humbled, and experience a deep sense of my own sinfulness; when I rise from my knees, or leave meeting with an arrow striking in my heart, as it were, I feel a sort of pleasure, which I now would not exchange for aught the world can give"—but Brightwell omits an important statement that follows the section she quotes (Brightwell, 1854). Opie writes: "I think I need not add that with all this going on in my mind, I am not likely to ask for membership" (Huntington MSS, OP 48, Jan. 19, 1824). Brightwell also changes Opie's words. The biographer quotes:

To say the truth, much as I should like to belong to a religious society, and much as I see, or think I see, the hand of my gracious Lord in leading *me*, to whom have been given so many ties to a worldly life, in the various gifts bestowed on me, (I mean *accomplishments*, as they are called,) to communion with the sect which requires the sacrifice of them almost *in toto*, thereby trying my faith to the uttermost, still I feel no necessity for haste in doing so. (Brightwell, 1854)

The actual last words written by Opie are, "still I feel little do so" (Huntington MSS, OP 48, Jan. 19, 1824). Her meaning could be "few" do so. Opie knew that the Gurney family had undergone its own transformation. Some of the family members, including the patriarchal head of the household, John Gurney, were "gay" Quakers—those who did not adopt the "plain" language of thee, thy and thou and who did not adopt the "plain" dress. Others, like Joseph, Rachel, Priscilla and Elizabeth had become "plain" Quakers (Macgregor, 1932-33). Opie would also have understood that according to the ideology of the Society of Friends, a set doctrine of behaviors did not exist as such; rather, Quakers accept that the path to God differs for each individual.

In the above quote, Opie demonstrates her acute awareness of "self." At this point in time, she attends Quaker meetings, but she also visits London annually and mixes with nobility, philosophers, literary men and women, politicians, and others. In the autobiographical sketch of her childhood, Opie calls herself "a girl fond of excitement," a fact evidenced by her actions (Brightwell, 1854). Opie shows self-awareness by clearly stating to Elizabeth Fry her doubts of being able to relinquish the social aspect of her life. Furthermore, Opie goes on to say that if she survives her father, she has a favorable mind to travelling, as she has always wanted to visit foreign countries and that "it might be far better for me to travel, unfettered by any ties" (1854). The word "unfettered" demonstrates how Opie perceives that a commitment to Quakerism would stultify her freedom and independence. In 1812, five years after the death of her husband, Opie writes to her cousin Tom Alderson, "I have been a great wanderer this year—being a free and independent woman I chose to go to Maloun...with companions who suited me, & whom I suited" (Huntington MSS, OP 72, Sept. 18, 1812). This sentiment echoes one written by Mary Wollstonecraft in a letter to Opie: "My conduct in life must be directed by my own judgment and moral principles...I still mean to be independent" (Brightwell, 1854).

In 1824, however, Opie formally applies for admission to the Society of Friends. Her writings evidence anxiety, not over her own uncommitted religious state, but over her father's lack of religious conviction. In a prayer written by Opie in 1821, she asks God for the ability to lead her father aright: "deign Lord to let the prayers of a child, for a beloved parent, come up before thee...enable me, O Lord! to be the humble means of leading him to Thee" (Brightwell, 1854). Joseph John Gurney and Opie minister to Dr. Alderson as he lies dying. Dr. Alderson is said to have accepted those ministrations and to have found conviction prior to his death. The Society of Friends accepts Amelia Opie's application for membership on August 11, 1825, just two months prior to her father's death. Per his request, Dr. Alderson is buried in the Friends' burial ground.

Opie was a very committed woman. She once stated, in regard to receiving a second invitation after having confirmed the first, that she had made a "sacred vow, never to break an engagement" (Brightwell, 1854). In keeping with this affirmation, Opie adopts the Quaker "plain" dress and "plain" language of thees, thys and thous. Her closest aristocratic friends accept her conversion. Lady Cork beseeches her to visit: "*Si vous êtes heureuse, je ne suis pas malheureuse.*" "If you are happy," she writes, "I am not unhappy." She adds, "So come

to me and be my love, in a dove-coloured garb, and a simple headdress. Teach us your morals...good people, mixing with the world, are of infinitely more use than when they confine themselves to one set" (Brightwell, 1854). Similarly, Lady Charville writes to her: "*Vienne nous voir—j'en serai trop enchantée; ton coeur n'est point changé, et je suis sûre que ta costume ne te rendra pas moins intéressante pour tes amis*" (Brightwell, 1854), meaning, "Come see us—I will be so enchanted with it; your heart is not changed at all, and I am sure that your costume will not render you less interesting to your friends."

Mostly, Opie secludes herself from the social world, both in mourning and in a sincere attempt to follow Quaker edicts. At this point, a brief explanation of Quaker tenets is helpful in understanding both the ideology that drew her toward the religion and the restrictions placed upon her. In *The Literary Life of Early Friends*, Luella M. Wright states that early antagonism against the Quakers stemmed from their publication of tracts that attacked Calvinist views. The Quakers "upheld certain principles that were novel in their day and thoroughly disapproved of by their critics—principles of democracy, of philanthropy, of inwardness in religion" (Wright, 1932). Quakers argued against giving tithes, believing instead that each person had charitable obligations that necessitated personal interaction with those that needed assistance. They also "refused to acknowledge any degree of inferiority and superiority, and therefore were unwilling to remove their hats as a token of deference, or to address any individual, citizen, justice, or king with a title of any description" (Wright, 1932). In addition, by interpreting the command, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel" as referring "not only to a consecrated order of priests but to Christians generally, the sects encouraged lay preaching" (Wright, 1932). While some other sects practiced lesser degrees of lay preaching, "the Friends carried [this position] to unprecedented limits by asserting that every person belonging to the Quaker constituency was a potential minister" (Wright, 1932). At meetings, any member could speak to the group about his or her personal experience in reaching the "Light of God" (the group first designated themselves Children of the Light) (Wright, 1932). They believed that rather than establishing doctrines of belief and mandated behaviors that God reached each individual in a different way and that by sharing each others' experiences they helped one another to find their own way. By 1700, the Quakers "became not only the largest sectarian group in England, but...actually equaled in number the four next largest organizations dissenting from the Church of England" (Wright, 1932).

Opie supports female preaching. In a letter dated June 29, 1827, she writes of having met a female preacher, although it is unclear if the woman is Quaker. Opie writes, "It is certainly an extraordinary power, and many of the clergy who disapprove of women's ministry, have been brought round to approve" (Brightwell, 1854). Such statements demonstrate Opie's awareness of gender issues within her society and perhaps reflect aspects of Quakerism that may have influenced her decision to join a group that supported her own beliefs in gender equality and individual spiritual experience.

Nevertheless, from 1825 to 1830, Opie mostly restricts herself to Quaker friends and her energies to several charitable organizations: the Sick Poor Committee, the Infant School Committee, the committee of the new Magdalen, the Bible Society, the British and Foreign School Society, and the Anti-Slavery Society. In addition, she visits women in jail and attends Quaker meetings, including the London Yearly Meeting in May. She turns to reading religious poetry and sets aside other forms of reading that lack spiritual content. Previously, she had kept occasional diaries, particularly when she traveled, but from 1827 on, she regularly kept diaries. Between 1827 and late 1829, her journal is fraught with self-reproaches, such as: "More self-blame to undergo," "Oh! My pride of heart! Not subdued yet," "I grow worse, I fear, rather than better," "Rather depressed that I have done nothing to-day to improve myself, except reading the Bible—I begin to feel that my time must be made profitable, or I cannot be happy," "An idle, I fear, and, so far, a sinful day," and "Lost a great deal of time to-day reading an old favorite—displeased and shocked even, at my waste of time, and my life so far spent" (Brightwell, 1854).

When Opie writes poetry or fiction, however, she seems satisfied with herself and at peace, perhaps showing that writing provides her with a sense of purpose, and with that comes self-satisfaction. For instance, she states: "Made myself finish another fable for my work, and liked it...On the whole more satisfied with this day than the preceding one," "Staid at home all the morning, and wrote some of my book," "Tranquil at rising, and wrote all the morning, till I went to E. [Earlham, the Gurney estate]," and "Evening, wrote, and to bed at eleven most thankful and peaceful" (Brightwell, 1854).

While Opie also notes days of peace and accomplishment, overall she languishes in her self-imposed seclusion. After five years of charitable committees and restriction to a social circle of Quaker friends, Opie could stand it no longer; she returns to the world. In 1828, after the publication of *Detraction Displayed*, she travels to Cromer and Northrepps to

visit friends and family. Her writings improve in tone: “grateful for the enjoyment I have had; but, as far as christian duty goes, I fear it has been a day of selfish enjoyment only,—a day for time, but what for eternity?” (Brightwell, 1854). Upon returning home on January 24, 1830, she writes, “Returned in safety to my lonely home. What a contrast to the scene I left! but I am deeply thankful for three weeks and two days so happily spent, and for the real and many comforts to which I return” (Brightwell, 1854). The short trip acts as a catalyst. Then 60, Opie reenters fashionable society in London and Paris. In Paris, she reenters the salons of Madame de Staël, Baron Cuvier, and General Lafayette.

Opie experiences trepidation at appearing in the salons of Paris in Quaker dress. For instance, her journal records the anxiety she experiences when visiting General Lafayette’s soiree:

Though, at one period of my life, I was accustomed to follow my name into rooms filled with lords and ladies, and perhaps princes,—the confidence, which custom gives, was so annihilated in me by long disuse, that, as I ascended the wide staircase of the splendid hôtel of the État Major, I desired that my name might not be announced; and I was the more satisfied that it was not...I sighed, as I looked at my simple Quaker dress, and considered whether I had any business there; and shrunk into a corner,—for the first time in my life wishing the apartment I was in less brilliantly lighted. (Brightwell, 1854)

Before long, however, Lafayette and the ladies of his family appear, and all welcome Opie. She later writes of the same evening, “the evening was only too short and pleasing. I felt elated, but at the same time overwhelmed with the kind attentions and flatteries, which, as a woman of letters, I received” (Brightwell, 1854). She again questions whether she ought to be there, but negotiates her desire to stay by maintaining that she has “a duty to fulfill” (Brightwell, 1854). She waits until midnight, seeks an audience with Lafayette, then presses a note into his hand and discusses the abolition of slavery with him.

Opie’s reentry into society dressed as a Quaker met with mixed responses: Mary Russell Mitford suggests that Opie never lost “the hankering she had after her old artistic and literary world”; Crabb Robinson states that “her becoming a quaker gave her a sort of éclat”; Robert Southey views the change as both “a natural and a happy one,” though he would have been ‘better pleased’ if she ‘had not consented to corrupt the

King’s English”; Harriet Martineau sees “a spice of dandyism in the demure simplicity of her dress”; Miss Sedgwick asserts that “the fashionable little train to her pretty satin gown indicated how much easier’ it was ‘to adopt a theory than to change one’s habits”; and Mark Wilks suggests, “You are a sort of Janus. You have two faces to present, and when you allure by the first you turn the other, and I would not have it otherwise. It gives you opportunities you would not otherwise have” (Macgregor, 1932-33; Menzies-Wilson, 1937). While some view her change as sincere, others see it as a theatrical device to draw attention. Those who knew her best, however, seem to accept her oppositions—her need for society and her need for Quakerism—as equally sincere. In any case, her theatrical nature and strong sense of individualism help her negotiate and accept her self-constructed singularity. She never again retreats from the world.

Opie’s theatricality and attention to role-playing help her negotiate between her conflicting desires: to remain committed to “plain” dress and present in fashionable society. After an evening at Lafayette’s in October of 1829, Opie writes to J. J. Gurney:

We dined every day 33 in company...The 1st evening I had to give an exposition of Friends’ principles...Ségur who was in America with La F[ayette]—says he is *three quarters a Friend himself*—& in his parting gift to me [a] copy of his songs [&] poesies, he has written, ‘*L’ami Ségur to l’amie Amelia Opie*. (Macgregor 1932-33)

Later, at the age of 66, Opie records in her diary how she had met the Princess of Saxony while aboard a boat carrying her home from her final trip to the Continent in November of 1835:

On the deck, I had a flattering *recontre* with the Princess, who, attracted by my singular dress, opened a conversation with me. At last she asked my name; and when I said Amelia Opie, “Madame Opie,” she exclaimed, “*quoi! auteur célèbre!*” and then she was kinder still, had one of her own stools brought for me, and made me sit beside her. (Brightwell, 1854)

The above excerpts demonstrate how Opie uses her theatrical talents and awareness of role-playing to negotiate her desire for social interaction with fashionable society while in Quaker dress. As can be seen, Opie now successfully negotiates between her previously conflicting desires. She even takes great pleasure in her singular position.

After she reenters the world an intriguing correlation arises. Her journal fills with descriptions of landscape, less abundant self-recriminations, and many mentions of her thankfulness. Opie’s writings of nature become romantic. She personifies nature:

The sea is closed round this magnificent mountain, with its masses of rock frowning midway down its verdant sides, during greater part of the day, and such a sea as it is in winter! They are shipless waters, for no vessel could live in them; and I did enjoy to see the waves of the Atlantic rolling proudly on, on one side of the castle, telling of greater and more fearful power beyond, where my eye could not penetrate. The first night I was there, the weather was so rough, that I went to bed supposing the moon would not shine; but when the tide *unclosed*, as the saying is, the moon shone, and I, on waking past midnight, saw her light, but could not see her; so the next night I sat up till she rose, and, leaning on the balcony, witnessed her fight with the wind and rain, and her ultimate victory. (Brightwell, 1854)

In another instance, she notes the “sublime appearance of the clouds, which resembled glaciers,” and refers to the sea as “a succession of foaming billows, and the white horses galloping towards us...Oh! The ever-varying beauty of the ocean” (Brightwell, 1854). Having left the world for a time, Opie seems to embrace it upon her return.

Another conflict arises in 1844, however, when a publisher decides to reprint a 12-volume set of Opie’s complete works. The author uses her strong sense of duty to negotiate her desire to publish. After J. J. Gurney admonishes Opie for reprinting fiction, she defends her actions in a letter dated Feb. 23, 1844; Opie was 74 years old:

My tales were out of print (my works is the proper word) and heartily glad was I when I found there was a desire for a reprint as it would give me an opportunity of correcting whatever I deemed amiss in the said publications...

I never thought, nor do I *now* think that in doing this I have *at all* violated my engagement as a Friend—I promised never to write things of the same sort again, nor have I done so—but though I freely admit that *novel-reading* as it is contemptuously called, (& with some justice) has a tendency to make young persons disinclined to serious, & more instructive reading, &

is therefore pernicious, I never said, because I never thought that works of fiction were never to be read—on the contrary, I believe simple moral tales the very best mode of instructing the young & *the poor—else why* do the pious of all sects & beliefs, spread *tracts* in stories over the world—and why did the blessed Saviour teach in parables?—These books, however full of errors, will survive me and in many languages—(some of them at least—and when a few weeks (now months) ago I thought my days were numbered I remembered with comfort that I had nearly executed the task I had undertaken—& felt no *remorse of conscience* for having assisted the printer—Nor did I think myself *responsible*, to any *human* being for having undertaken the task I considered myself responsible to my God and my conscience. (Macgregor, 1932-33)

Opie’s sense of morality and duty help her negotiate her desire to remain an author in print. Because she cares deeply for her acclaim as an author, and to justify her needs, she claims the humanitarian importance of her work. Ironically, after Opie negotiates and defends her desires and actions, she states emphatically that she is responsible to no human being. Initially, she attempts to placate and defend herself, but then asserts that she will proceed according to her own conscience, not the conscience of any other human being. This sentiment coincides with one of Opie’s maxims: “that a strong inclination always makes opportunities to do whatever it wishes” (Gurney MSS, June 15, 1816).

Conclusion

Occasionally, Opie’s works return to print. In 1995, *The Father and Daughter, A Tale in Prose*, was republished, and in December of 1999, *Adeline Mowbray* reappeared. However, while Opie was one of the most popular writers of her day, she is lesser known than some of her contemporaries, such as Jane Austen or Mary Shelley. Scott Simpkins, in his introduction to *The Romantic Novel*, points out that the canon of Romantic novelists continues to expand, adding women, as their works are representative of the Romantic period. For Simpkins, this is “another means of refiguring the period in terms of what was influential, as opposed to what critics from the Romantic period to the present have determined *should* be viewed as influential” (1994). As one of the most popular writers of her day, Opie influenced the readership of her time. To ignore her writings, fictional, didactic and autobiographical, is to omit pieces that constitute the Romantic period.

In understanding this period and its authors—not just the works, but the social implications from which the works arise, a study of extant autobiographical texts reveals the individual strengths, power structures, and ideologies through which these writers produced their works. Research of the autobiographical writings of Opie uncovers the power and skills she employs to promote changes in her revolutionary and ideologically volatile world. She uses her talents for writing and theatricality, her natural curiosity, and her strong sense of duty, morality and purpose to help negotiate between the opposing poles of her desire to commit to religion without foregoing the “romance of real life” and without foregoing her desire to live her life as an intellectual “blue-stocking” and a “woman of letters.” She maintains her interest in ideology and politics. She participates in her chosen causes—abolition and charity—and she finally seems to accept Lady Cork’s suggestion that she could do more good in society than in seclusion from it.

Opie was not a two-faced Janus. She was a complicated woman, living in a revolutionary and ideologically-complicated time. Often criticized, she uses her skills to negotiate between her social affiliation to aristocracy and her religious affiliation to the Society of Friends. Finally, Opie emerges as a woman who successfully negotiates her own “romance of real life,” living each day to the fullest, or, as she once wrote, “I live *quite to my mind*” (Brightwell, 266). She was not a Worldling and a Friend. She meshed these two ardent desires to become a Worldly Friend.

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