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Amelia Opie, Shelley King, John Pierce

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Personal as well as political, *Adeline Mowbray* (1804) is loosely based on the relationship between Amelia Opie's friends, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Written in a period of conservative reaction in Britain, the novel recalls the earlier radical era of the 1790s. Encouraged by her mother to pursue an interest in radical social ideas, Adeline Mowbray innocently puts her theories of idealized love into practice. Her attempt to live with the philosopher Frederic Glenmurray outside marriage is condemned by both her mother and society. Adeline and Glenmurray's relationship becomes the focal point for Opie's satire on society's attitudes to education, women, marriage, masculine and feminine codes of honour, filial loyalty and the struggle to justify individual choice. This Oxford World's Classics volume is currently the only critical edition of *Adeline Mowbray* available.

Adeline Mowbray Details

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Author : *Amelia Opie , Shelley King , John Pierce*

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From Reader Review Adeline Mowbray for online ebook

Emily says

I set out to read Amelia Opie's novel *Adeline Mowbray* more from sociological than literary interest: an 1804 treatment of voluntary cohabitation outside marriage couldn't fail to grab my interest, especially since this is a topic treated surprisingly seldom even by modern authors. Opie was, then, politically ahead of her time, but she surprised me by also writing an engaging book, if one at times infuriating to a contemporary sensibility. Despite some standard-issue melodrama and creaky plot devices of the type often found in eighteenth-century "novels of sensibility," the pages flew by whenever I picked up *Adeline Mowbray*, and the author's sneakily satirical wit kept me guessing to some extent about exactly who she was condemning and for what cause. (I also couldn't avoid a gossipy curiosity about how the novel's models, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, took to their friend Amelia's representations of them.) Of course, my level of engagement was increased by the fact that I was constantly arguing with Opie, which I believe to be exactly the reader response she intended. Even if she was not speaking to the gender politics of twenty-first century America, she was undoubtedly writing to provoke, and it's pretty remarkable that she still manages so well after two hundred years, albeit not exactly in the ways she might have foreseen.

The plot of *Adeline Mowbray* begins with its title character's unorthodox education. Raised by a self-declared genius of a mother who is fond of spouting off about leftist treatises in company, Adeline is encouraged to imbibe "dangerous" tomes of philosophy and political science, with no male oversight for her delicate female brain. The more practical aspects of her upbringing are neglected, and she would hardly have learned housewifery at all had not her grandmother taken her in hand. Unlike her mother, Adeline makes the scandalous mistake of actually wanting to *live* by the ideals she has come to believe in, including the abolition of the marriage institution. Upon meeting and falling in love with Glenmurray, one of the philosophers she so admires, she therefore enthusiastically declares that she will never subject him to that ignominious state, but will live with him outside wedlock in a free and voluntary relationship. Despite his protestations—the man has not the courage of his convictions, having lived in the world more than his lover—she will not budge, and refuses to become his wife. Throw in a sleazy would-be-rapist of a stepfather and the ill-health of her well-meaning philosopher-lover, and things quickly proceed to get very tragic for poor Adeline.

It so happened, also, that something was said by one of the party which led to the subject of marriage, and Adeline was resolved not to let so good an opportunity pass of proving to Glenmurray how sincerely she approved his doctrine on that subject. Immediately, with an unreserve which nothing but her ignorance of the world, and the strange education which she had received, could at all excuse, she began to declaim against marriage, as an institution at once absurd, unjust, and immoral, and to declare that she would never submit to so contemptible a form, or profane the sacred ties of love by so odious and unnecessary a ceremony.

This extraordinary speech, though worded elegantly and delivered gracefully, was not received by any of her hearers, except sir Patrick, with any thing like admiration.

There is very definitely a political case at the heart of Opie's novel—an argument against what she saw as the

pie-in-the-sky idealism of William Godwin and others like him who dared to preach against the "accumulated wisdom of ages." Disaster thus falls thick and fast onto Adeline from the moment she announces her anti-marriage stance: otherwise respectable men feel free to molest her; libertines assume she's one of them; even the men who acknowledge her intelligence and virtue refuse to introduce her to their wives and sisters, who, in any case, actively work for her downfall because they see her as a rival and a threat to their own security; she and Glenmurray live in isolation. Then there are the results she anticipates for her children: they will be ostracized as a bastard by their schoolfellows; they will hate and reject their parents because of this; they will grow up lonely because their mother will be shunned. So too, when Glenmurray dies Adeline will be left in poverty because she can't inherit (or at least, she *doesn't* inherit because her husband, despite ostensibly being tortured by the idea of leaving her destitute, doesn't change his will). And later on, even if Adeline manages to find a man who falls in love with her and "makes her an honest woman," her scandalous past will mean he is ashamed to admit to his friends and acquaintances that he is married at all, and even professionals like lawyers and merchants will fail to take her seriously, thinking she is still a kept woman. Meanwhile, female acquaintances she has made along the way may be led into vice by her example, and she will have to live with the guilt of having ruined others as well as herself.

To contrast with all these dire circumstances, Opie refuses to present the original objections that motivate her character Glenmurray (or motivated her friend William Godwin) to write against the marriage institution in the first place 1. I found this a bit frustrating, as if I were listening to one side of a violent telephone conversation. But the reason for Opie's omission is built right into her text: ideas like those of Glenmurray were believed dangerous, irresponsible even to discuss lest some idealistic young woman like Adeline pick up one's novel and be led astray.

I mention "the wisdom of the ages" above, and indeed the idea is a real touchstone for Opie; the phrase is repeated some eight or nine times throughout the novel as different characters, and eventually Adeline herself, bemoan her foolishness in attempting to fly in the face of convention. Which brings up the whole question of progressiveness versus conservatism in different eras. To this modern reader, Opie's reluctance to even *consider the possibility* of challenging the status quo, merely on the argument that many previous generations have accepted it, seems strikingly conservative. Still, as Nymeth pointed out in a recent post on Wilkie Collins, a more nuanced view is necessary: in 1804, the mere act of writing a novel in which a sympathetic heroine decided to live with a lover outside marriage was a radical act. Although Adeline is punished (and punished, and punished some more) for her non-conformity, Opie never makes her the villain, and she more or less respects Adeline's ability to make a rational decision herself, rather than making her the victim of a scheming rake. What's more, although she chides Adeline for giving in to her youthful exuberance rather than respecting the wisdom of her elders, such an attitude is not gender-based; she takes the same line with Glenmurray, who published his offensive tract at the young age of nineteen. In some ways, then, Opie is quite subversive: she presents an intelligent, sympathetic woman who makes a hasty decision for all the right reasons, with a minimum of condemnation.

So too, she points out the ways in which it is possible to stray from virtue even when married: one character uses marriage as a cover to maintain her respectability while still carrying on affairs; another is so jealous of her husband's attentions that she intrigues against any female under the age of eighty. The back-cover material of my copy of *Adeline Mowbray* claims that the novel contrasts "the world as it is" with "the world as it should be," and that's a tempting way to reconcile Opie's seemingly conflicting messages: in an ideal world, she could be saying, there would be less vicious prejudice; but in the world as it is, we need the marriage institution to guard women against its cruelty. I think, on one level, Opie *is* saying that, although it fails to sort her text very neatly. Her own depiction of women who have decided to live outside wedlock for reasons other than virtuous philosophy, for example, is fairly vicious. Adeline, Opie says approvingly, would be the first to shun some acquaintances of Glenmurray's if she knew their true character (their primary faults

are those of promiscuity)—implying that she herself is invested in the shame-based social structure, even if she wishes it would not shame Adeline. Still, Opie's work is a fascinating glimpse at the mindset of a former era's progressive fringe.

1Out of curiosity, I looked up the portion of Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* that concerns the abolition of marriage. His position is one of extreme individualism, and he objects to anything that irrevocably binds one human to another and prevents him from pursuing his own individual development. That, combined with the very small degree to which the typical 18th-century couple were allowed to know each other before marriage, persuaded him against the institution. Whereas my own reservations about state-sponsored marriage are explicitly feminist—its long history as a means of legally reducing women to the status of property, including revoking their own property rights and failing to penalize rape within marriage; its equally long history of being used as a tool to deny civil rights to groups of people who diverge from the status quo, such as same-sex, mixed-race, mixed-religion, or slave couples; its attempts to codify in secular law a vision of morality with which I disagree, i.e., that any child could lack "legitimacy" or that sexuality not sanctioned by a priest/rabbi/shaman/justice of the peace is debased or destructive—Godwin's, as presented in *Enquiry*, were not. He was more concerned that every person got enough autonomy, enough time away from the crowd and from pressing familial obligations, to develop and pursue their own thoughts. Which is neither here nor there; I was just curious about the half of the conversation that Opie left out.

Ellie Kidger says

This is the most unconventional 18th century/romantic novel I've read yet. Adeline doesn't want to be a wife, she wants to be both in love and free. Her relationship with the philosopher Glenmurray is shocking to society, but she sticks to her guns, which I admire. It feels super modern and honest about life as a woman in early 19th century Britain, though the ending feels very generic and more like a conduct novel than the radical text it is for the most part.

Michellelester says

Perhaps lacking the subtlety we'd want now, with some clunky narrative just to motor through necessary events at times, but it's a book that stays with you somehow, and one I think I will revisit...so something in it!

Meredith Miller says

Too much sentimental moralising for me. Everyone who ever makes a mistake dies. Of its time, you might think, but there are plenty of riskier and more interesting things coming out in this moment. Obviously, it was bold to depict a heroine who has a free sexual relationship out of choice and principal, but the novel spends two thirds of its time undoing that in the worst possible way.

One thing though, Opie has an incredible ear for speech. Mary's (minor character and sex worker) dialogue is pitch perfect in a way someone like Dickens could only dream of. I don't think anyone else gets a voice like that right for another century at least. Lots of horrid stereotypes - sexually predatory Irishmen and tragic,

naïve women of colour.

I'm glad I read it but I wouldn't do it again.

Margaret says

Adeline Mowbray has been brought up by her intellectual mother to pursue radical thought, but when she puts that thought into practice by living with the philosopher Frederic Glenmurray while not married to him, Adeline is condemned by all, including her mother. Opie was a friend of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, and *Adeline Mowbray*, which deals with the effects of a cohabitational relationship outside of marriage, is partly based on their relationship.

Opie explores the contrast between the real world in which Adeline must live and "the world as it ought to be" in which she wants to live. Her conclusions are unsettling to modern readers, though reasonable for her times, and I rather wished for a slightly less downbeat ending, but it's a very thoughtful book, with some excellent and deep characterization, particularly of Adeline and her mother.

Michael says

This is the third time I've read Opie's novel (it's one of my thesis books). It gets better each time. When I first read it, I found its melodramatic elements difficult to take. I also misinterpreted the plot. Really this is a raw and thought-provoking book. It is melodramatic because it deals with tough social questions which are hard to weave into the sinuous narrative of a *Bildungsroman*. Today, a novelist tackling with such large-scale, controversial issues might also use melodrama to make their point, but they would wrap it up in ironic magic-realist conventions to make it more palatable to the reader. Authors like Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Marquez and Arundhati Roy depict fragmented societies on the verge of massive social change, as Opie does, but she tries to make the coincidences and reversals of her plot seem realistic, where Rushdie, Marquez and Roy are happy for such plot elements to seem artificial. This makes it easier to misinterpret Opie. She has a sincere narrative voice, which encourages the unwary reader to take things at face value. The wry postmodern melodrama always encourages suspicion.

In a nutshell, the book is about a woman who tries to live unmarried with her lover, is stigmatised, and suffers terribly. Two hundred years later, attitudes about cohabitation have changed, but there is still residual prejudice against libidinous women and single mothers, and many other kinds of stigma besides. The book is still relevant. Adeline winds up regretting her actions, which has led many readers (including this one) to think that the novel puts forward the oppressive idea that women should always conform. But it is actually more complex than that.

Opie's great strength as a novelist is her liberalism. Every character puts their point of view. Every character is complex, riven by divided loyalties, the victim of unconscious prejudices, their power of action limited by society, their opinions inevitably undermined by incomplete evidence. It is wrong to think that any character—including the remorseful Adeline—represents the the truth. Her sufferings have many causes, and at different times many characters suggest many different solutions to them, none of which is perfect.

Opie had the power to make her original readers burst into tears. But as I say, her melodramatic technique has less power over 21st-century sensibilities. Her great contemporary, Mary Shelley, has more success with

modern readers. Her own great study of stigma, *Frankenstein*, draws on gothic and science-fiction conventions which still have a grip on the imagination. That said, I can think of one melodramatist who retains power to move and shock: Rainer Werner Fassbinder, whose brilliant films, such as *Ali: Angst Essen Seele Auf, Lola, Händler der Vier Jahreszeiten* and *Faustrecht der Freiheit*, tread much the same ground as Opie's great forgotten novel, and sometimes in much the same manner.

Trilllian says

Adeline Mowbray est au final, un roman qui se lit vite, le style est fluide et facile. En lisant le résumé, je ne m'attendais pas à un roman aussi moralisateur, et à des rebondissements aussi étranges, et le roman ne manque pas de moments un peu trop rocambolesques! on sent qu'il a du servir d'inspirations à d'autre mais il ne me laissera pas un souvenir impérissable!

Anisa says

2.5 stars

Jess Swann says

Alors, le résumé m'avait alléchée et effectivement, j'ai beaucoup apprécié ce roman même si j'ai plusieurs fois pesté contre l'entêtement d'Adeline ! Dans cette histoire, on comprend effectivement le piège de professer trop jeune ses opinions. C'est ce qui arrive au grand amour d'Adeline... Elle tombe amoureuse de lui à cause de ses idées et il l'aime à la folie. Lui, comprend ce que ces préceptes ont de négatifs. Mais s'il se renie, Adeline ne l'aimera plus... J'ai aimé leur histoire, un peu moins la suite où Adeline épouse un homme pour assurer à son enfant une vie exempte de disgrâce, elle en sera bien punie !

La relation entre Adeline et sa mère est également poussée à l'extrême et on comprend que c'est la mère qui cause la ruine de sa fille. D'abord en se concentrant sur ses idées d'éducation au lieu d'éduquer puis, en cédant au désir qu'elle éprouve pour un libertin. La malédiction lancée par la mère est l'un des moments les plus forts du roman. J'avoue avoir frémi ce moment.

Au final, le tout est bien écrit et donne à réfléchir sur l'utilité des règles et surtout sur la nécessité de s'y conformer

Ce que j'aime : le personnage d'Adeline, tout d'abord fidèle à ses convictions puis vaincue par la société

Ce que j'aime moins : j'aurais apprécié de connaitre le devenir de l'enfant d'Adeline

En bref : Un excellent roman qui donne à réfléchir

Ma note

7/10

Julia says

Genius mother (EVERYBODY said she was a genius) raises her daughter to believe in extremely liberal ideals, then disowns her daughter when she actually lives them out.

Johanna Lilas says

Adeline Mowbray est élevée par une mère cultivée qui s'inspire des principes des Lumières. La jeune femme découvre lors de son apprentissage un traité sur l'abolition du mariage écrit par Frédéric Glenmurray. A l'occasion d'un séjour à Bath, elle rencontre l'auteur dont elle admire et approuve les théories.

Le remariage de sa mère avec un libertin provoque son évasion avec Glenmurray. Elle choisit de vivre sous son toit sans l'avoir épousé. Or, le mariage est une institution et une norme dans la société du XIXème siècle. Adeline est rapidement confrontée à la réalité de son temps qui interdit les relations hors mariage. Elle se voit ainsi considérée comme une "femme entretenue". Elle est aussitôt bannie de la bonne société.

La jeune femme se bat constamment contre les préjugés de ses contemporains. Néanmoins, son point de vue évolue au moment où elle a un enfant car ce n'est plus seulement sa réputation qui est en jeu.

On apprend dans la préface que le roman est inspiré de la vie de Mary Wollstonecraft, féministe et mère de Mary Shelley (Frankenstein).

Ce roman d'Amélie Opie a été publié en 1804. Vu la date de la publication, il semble être peu conventionnel même s'il est un sous certains aspects moralisateur et emprunt de quelques sentiments religieux. J'ai apprécié, le style désuet et les moyens utilisés par l'auteur pour faire rebondir des situations délicates. Il est en fait difficile de lâcher le roman quand on est pris dans l'histoire.

El says

Out of all of the relationships we encounter in our lives, I am not certain there is a more complicated relationship than that with our mothers. Bonus points in complicating matters if the relationship is between a mother and her daughter. I have no science to back that statement up, but I'm sure it's documented somewhere.

I picked this book up once upon a time because I had never heard of it and the publisher, Pandora, specializes in "Mothers of the Novel", which I thought was neat because there are all these books written long ago that no one has ever heard of, primarily because they were written by women. Not cool.

This particular book was written by Amelie Opie, a woman who was friends with Mary Wollstonecraft - the mother of Mary Shelley. This book is loosely based on Wollstonecraft's life which is definitely fascinating,

and since I'm on this whole Wollstonecraft-Shelley-and-team kick, I thought it was perfect that this was on my shelf right now.

Adeline Mowbray is the Mary Wollstonecraft of this novel. Raised by her mother to have rather radical beliefs (particularly for the late 18th century), Adeline ultimately has relations with Frederic Glenmurray, a man she has no intention of marrying. Gasp! Scandal! (Glenmurray, for those of you in the know, is the Gilbert Imlay of in Wollstonecraft's life.) Her mother, of all people, condemns her and (view spoiler) and Adeline finds herself out in the world without even her mother's support. She encounters a lot of judgmental people who give her a lot of sass for her decision not to marry Glenmurray, and there's a terribly long chapter in which there is a lot of Adeline's thoughts on marriage and society. It was interesting, don't get me wrong, but it was tediously moralizing.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: I don't always care for a lot of historical fiction based on the lives of real people because it always seems to be awfully one-sided and heavily biased and oh, everyone is so perfect. Maybe this one felt a little less so because I pretty much agreed with Adeline's views on marriage and most everything else, except for all the fainting and swooning because I can't tell you the last time I fainted and/or swooned. But also I feel Opie probably did know what she was talking about, and I would love to have heard that conversation between her and Wollstonecraft: "Hey, I want to write a story about you. You're going to faint a lot. Cool?" High fives all around the table.

The relationship between Adeline and her mother is so awful and heartbreakingly, with lots of sighing and clasping at the breast, and wailing. I'm pretty sure there was wailing.

It's always easy to read these books from a modern perspective, like who cares that people live together unmarried and even have a kid together? But in 1804 when this book was published, and in the late 1700s when this story took place, that was not common and it was frowned upon in most circles. Women were not to be educated, and here Adeline and her mother were both relatively well-educated. There was also a relationship involving mixed relations. Way ahead of its time.

Except that it pretty much fell off the literary map, didn't it, so thanks to Pandora for bringing back and giving it some life again. Women wrote books too, world. Good ones, even.

Billie says

This is one of those books that I should have read in grad school but didn't have time. I'm kind of glad I waited, though, to read it at leisure instead of for "work."
