OVERWHELMING ODDS

IN NOVELS like The Gamesters the good characters prove disturbingly powerless against the influences that threaten them, and the forces of darkness correspondingly tend to become absolute. These derive not from one isolated impulse in an individual but from his or her general predisposition to evil, something quite beyond the understanding of the figures that stand for the Christian and humanist beliefs and that are of a trustful, unsuspecting nature. This confidence is an essential attribute of the heroines in another group of novels: girls who suddenly discover that there is no stable balance of good and evil in the world. On the contrary, they feel, it is ruled arbitrarily by the evil-minded, and they are thus surrounded by hostility, which ranges from monstrously outspoken destructiveness to petty and sly scheming.

The most conspicuous qualities of the heroine of Monima; or, The Beggar Girl (1802), by Mrs. Martha Read, are her filial devotion, her willingness to do all the honest work necessary to support herself and her father, and her capacity for gratitude in a world prejudiced against poverty. Just as obviously, Monima is quite unable to guess how far her enemies will go in persecuting her.¹ Even after she has realized that she is being victimized, she fails to acquire prudence in dealing with new acquaintances who are potentially as dangerous to her as Madame Sonnetton² or Pierre de Noix. These two she comes to consider the personification of a jealousy and lust aimed at her exclusively, as it were; on the other hand, Sonnetton's acts of charity seem impersonal to her, the manifestations of Christian love and no more. Sonnetton does indeed for a long time act in such a spirit of benevolence (chaps. 4, 9, 24, 26), thinking himself guided by pity, not love. In the eyes of de Noix this is downright hypocrisy,³ but the
world at large, too, is likely to view suspiciously the interest of a married man in one particular unprotected girl.

The concentration of Madame Sonnetton's and de Noix's hatred and lust on Monima endows their feelings with a virulence for which temperate compassion is no more a match than Monima's meekness and ingenuousness or Fontanbleu's debility. What preserves a Monima from destruction is the steadfastness of her moral convictions. Monima develops a long-suffering resilience in the face of an antagonism which, by contrast, is constantly driven to renew itself. If Madame Sonnetton's jealousy and its kindred ally, the greed of de Noix, do not quite burn themselves out, they sap the restraints of self-discipline and elementary caution that control them. The villains cause their own defeat by overreaching themselves. Thus Madame Sonnetton, in the paroxysm of her fury at her husband and Monima, blurts out the truth about Monima's trials and even the fact that she has been unfaithful to her husband (chap. 29). And de Noix taunts the heroine, anticipating his rape of her, even though she is armed and capable of defending herself; later he overrates the power his bribe holds over the witness he is using against Fontanbleu (chaps. 34-35).

Monima within a few months suffers enough through the agency of her two enemies to last her a long time. In addition to her individual trials she is of course under a continual stress as soon as she becomes aware of the implacability of her persecutors. There is no one to help her or sympathize with her; this is brought home to the reader from the very first by the fact that it is she who supports her father, and not the other way round. She falls in love with Sonnetton, but the unlikelihood that her love may be fulfilled is only another burden for her to bear. She apparently does not abandon all hope in this respect, however: after Madame Sonnetton's death she refuses to marry Greenaway (chap. 34). Eventually Sonnetton turns up in time to save her from a jail sentence, and they marry: Monima is rewarded. This conclusion, which vindicates disinterested love and irrepressible truth, also emphasizes social values, in particular the institution of the family. Sonnetton and Monima in the end belong to a social unit which also includes Monima's
father and her two brothers, lately restored to them. Fontan­­bleu is more than a father-in-law to Sonnetton: it was his support that earlier helped the young man through a period of dejection (chap. 23). Characters like Madame Sonnetton and de Noix, on the contrary, destroy the social fabric, and the family above all. Madame Sonnetton, whose own upbringing was inadequate (p. 213), perverts conjugal love into jealousy and adultery. De Noix's evil nature is a threat to the whole of the social and moral order. He was directly responsible for the deaths of Julia and Ferdinand in France (chaps. 22, 23); the circumstances of his duel with the latter secured a semblance of honor to his charac­­ter, however. In America he must at length again face a tribunal; and this time, though he is not prosecuted any further, the verdict against him is plain. He is unmasked as ruthlessly self­­ish, a relentless plotter against others, and constantly driven by malice and greed.

Yet for all his consistency and resourcefulness, he is not in the least a remarkable villain, such as Brockden Brown's Or­­mond or Welbeck. Neither could Monima compete with Brown's Constantia: a very mediocre creation, she has no initiative of her own and is therefore doomed to passiveness or mere reaction against villains and circumstances. The reference to Brown is suggested by more than these comparisons. Monima and Fontanbleu together may well owe some of their features to Con­­stantia and Dudley. One is also tempted to trace the plague background to Ormond rather than to the more realistic scenes of the epidemic in Arthur Mervyn because it serves in the former novel much as in Monima, as one of a number of adverse factors that render the heroine's life more insecure. The parallel must not be pursued too far. For all their attributes of the extraor­­dinary, Brown's novels remain fundamentally realistic. But what passes for realism in Monima is a technique of exaggeration of a sentimentally functional sort. It must emphasize various melo­­dramatic conflicts: between the isolated conscience and integrity of Monima and Sonnetton and the rather callous expediency which is characteristic of their surroundings; between the courageous individual and the inert mass of his or her fellow beings; between the victim of unthinking prejudice and the shallow ad­­
herents to preconceived opinions. Mrs. Read was probably trying to sound lifelike; this might at any rate be concluded from her criticism of current fashions among writers and readers (chap. 26, especially pp. 252-59). She drifted nonetheless into the use of the standard ingredients of contemporary fiction, blending plot elements and introducing characters and states of mind that must have sounded all too familiar to some readers, though many others no doubt welcomed the familiar. This also applies to the characteristic note of pathos sounded in the opening lines: "'This is a bleak morning," said Monima’s father, as he was covering his silver locks with his white cap; 'how excessively the storm rages. Are you entirely out of work Nima?' 'Yes father.' 'And Madame Sontine cannot supply you with any?' 'No!' 'And that,—said he, with a piteous look toward heaven, 'is our last morsel!—what Nima is to become of us?'" (p. 13).

We are spared such insistent emotionalism in the anonymous novel in letters entitled *Margaretta; or, the Intricacies of the Heart* (1807), although its heroine undergoes as many hardships as Monima with as little possibility to radically improve her lot. It cultivates variety more vigorously than *Monima*. This is evident already in the change between three main settings—the United States, San Domingo, and England—and also in the relative importance of plots involving the generation of Margaretta’s parents. Moreover, the novel, in the beginning and again toward the end, moves more lightly than Mrs. Read’s because of its author’s use of the epistolary form, with short letters written by a variety of correspondents. These letter-writers are characterized with a somewhat clearer differentiating intent than Mrs. Read’s figures; and at first the letters do indicate by their manner who is wielding the pen, though on the whole the circumstances in which new characters are introduced tell us more about them than genuine characterization through their action and style.

Margaretta’s first real hour of peril is her meeting with Custon, a selfish, devious schemer then (p. 108) and later. He is moved afterward chiefly by his desire to punish Margaretta for not being swept off her feet at first sight of him. She prefers Will de Burling instead, and Custon wishes to cause trouble for him,
too, since de Burling is obviously disinclined to share the girl with him. Custon is instrumental in informing Arabella of de Burling's breach of faith, and he later makes sure that the wounds to her pride and vanity do not heal. Arabella's weaknesses respond to his treatment (p. 107), and so does the naïveté of Margaretta. She mechanically believes from the very first that de Burling must be a personification of the gentleman wolfishly courting a lower-class girl. Vernon, a conquest of hers, is later to fall as easily for the suggestion that Margaretta is no better than she should be; and de Burling himself is susceptible to rumors of the same sort, spread by Custon, Arabella, or someone like them. Since the victimized characters thus contribute themselves to being kept in a state of wretchedness, there is no need in Margaretta for such spectacular and unmitigated evildoing as in Monima. A varied mixture of features both commendable and unwholesome determines the behavior of Margaretta's supporters. Captain Waller interprets the fact that the girl would not willingly marry him as a decree of Providence; his guilty conscience suggests to him that he must yet atone for his assistance in separating Lady Matilda from Warren, and he vows to become Margaretta's watchful protector. This at the same time makes him the friend and adviser of de Burling. As for the latter, his lapse into distrust—that is, into believing that Margaretta is living in sin with Montanan—must be accompanied by the bitter reflection that he had earlier himself contemplated making the girl his mistress and then rejected the idea for the sake of her love.

De Burling and Margaretta share the responsibility for at least some of the obstacles that rise in the path of their love, but in other respects the girl is to be classed among the unfortunate beings who are at the mercy of circumstances quite dissociated from their disposition and will. The chain of events which have led from the separation of Lady Matilda and Warren to that of Lady Matilda and Margaretta, then to Lady Matilda's second marriage, and on to the meeting and mutual attraction of Warren and the heroine is of course beyond the heroine's control. She is fortune's football, depending entirely on chance to achieve happiness in this world; perhaps the more so as there is definitely
a social as well as a moral clause to the definition of happiness implied in the ending of the book. Montanan is turned into Lord Warren, and his daughter's blood is thus ennobled, at about the same time as her love finds fulfillment: here is a confirmation of the social or cultural prejudice referred to by Miss Stewart in her first letter, where Margarett'a refusal to marry Nelson, a young farmer, is connected with the observation that she is "apparently of superior intelligence to the common peasants of her class" (p. 2). The structure of society and the patterns of behavior attaching to its layers (p. 207) are plainly as little to be influenced by the heroine's struggles as the fortuitous operations of fate. When Margarett'a is left to the enjoyment of both her true lover's restored faith in her and her newly discovered aristocratic parents and personal status, the reader can only feel that she has been providentially rewarded for her constancy, even though it is a constancy rather too passive and appropriately illustrated by the girl's disposition to swoon at critical moments.

Very much an average production, *Margarett*a offers its readers many varieties of stilted diction. It has additional defects, such as the use of a peculiarly mixed imagery and a tendency to sermonize. It is a pity that the author stopped after the first letters to do much in the way of distinctive individual styles; though this might have produced no more original results than stock speeches such as Waller's sailor idiom (p. 87), it would still have been an improvement over the monotony of Margarett'a manner, which is dominant over long stretches of the narrative (letters 38-59). That something might have been made out of the material of the different correspondents is indicated in the first three letters, in which the fellow travelers forced to stop at E—n, each give their impressions of Margarett'a.

Yet there is a relative variety of speakers and writers in the whole of the novel. More importantly perhaps, the preference shown throughout for direct rather than reported speech saves this novel from the tedious uniformity which mars the eleven hundred pages of narrative in *Constantia Neville; or, The West Indian* (1800), by Helena Wells. Its preface states its didactic aim, and later we read that it is intended to expound the merits of "a dutiful, affectionate daughter, a sincere friend, and a pro-
fessor of the religion of her ancestors” (1:172). These qualities are put to the test in circumstances that really owe nothing to the novel of the supernatural scorned by Miss Wells (1:171); but so mediocre was her talent that the reader soon begins to long even for the dubious entertainment and variety provided by the more extravagant features of other contemporary novels. To prove her heroine’s endurance, Miss Wells required three volumes of struggles, but at the end of the second, when there seem to be no valid objections left to a match between Constantia and Marmaduke, their happiness is gratuitously delayed. The plottings of a Madame Sonnetton, or the repercussions (in Margaretta) of a former generation’s errors, are implausible and farfetched enough; but at any rate, once introduced, they do seriously endanger the heroines, whose occasional discouragement is understandable. Now, Constantia Neville is a decidedly independent and plucky girl when compared with many other heroines; it therefore seems difficult to believe that she is really unable to disregard malicious gossip (chap. 25). Rochford alone is more immediately threatening; yet even his menace remains peripheral, as distant as Montagu’s career of dissipation. Such deficiencies are inevitable in fiction that depends almost exclusively on the workings of a plot dissociated from the characters. In addition the dramatic nature of the introductory pages, which tell the story of Constantia’s parents and the Haymans, leads the reader to expect adventures as swift and varied for the heroine; but they are not and have the effect of an anticlimax. There is hardly the material here for situations in which Constantia might be reduced to helplessness by the forces opposing her: she is not really challenged. Yet Miss Wells proceeded to round off her narrative only after having “rewarded” her heroine “for all her sufferings” (3:349). The settling of accounts with the remaining characters, some twenty-five of them, is briskly attended to in the final fifteen pages. There is here and there a touch of satire, the only form of humor in Constantia Neville. Generally, and more especially with respect to her heroine, Miss Wells struck a note of self-righteousness and sententiousness, which drearily combines with the gloomy tints of Constantia’s imagination and apparently affects the very style of the novel.24
Like Margaretta and other heroines, Constantia is never quite without a friend or a possible place where to weather out a storm; this only makes the seemingly invincible hostility which she experiences the more exasperating. In *Moreland Vale; or the Fair Fugitive* (1801), too, the villains’ sway is long unbroken, even though they are suspected of various wrongs. The main plot is laid in the present when their luck begins to turn: a weak spot in their defenses is detected and made use of, another move of theirs quickly countered, and soon the wicked stepmother and her partner in crime run away, only to be promptly caught up with by providential justice: “They had rushed unprepared on their fate—for they had not been at sea but a few days, when they were overtaken by a violent storm—the ship foundered, and every soul on board was lost” (p. 135). All the mischief done the passive heroine, whose single action consists in flight, turns into benefits. The repentant tool of fraud is given a chance to reform; the lover exiled from the country returns a wealthy man and, having already been instrumental in his uncle’s atonement for an earlier error, promotes a match between two discarded lovers before being married to his true love.

This complex case of rights redressed is, to generalize, the reflected picture of the villains’ power over their victims. Whereas the latter depend on, and wait for, the assistance of Providence, the former are favored by an active singleness of purpose, gaining strength from the reserve energy of their comprehensive wickedness. They easily outwit their trusting, liberal-minded, improvising opponents. Furthermore, the virtuous characters are by no means perfect; they are weakened by entirely normal human faults. Until the villains overreach themselves and the slow machinery of rehabilitation and retribution is set in motion, the reader must therefore witness a near-frustrating process of unlawful triumphs over helpless innocence.

1. In *The Sentimental Novel*, Herbert Ross Brown offered a summary of *Momma* because “it affords a fair sample of the soul-wringing sufferings to which uncomplaining virtue was often subjected” (p. 172).

2. The name is here uniformly spelled in its Americanized form, Sonnetton, and not in its original French form, Sontine.

3. “...He was bent on revenge against Sonnetton, whom he considered as a fawning hypocrite, in his asseverations of friendship and pity to the beggar.
He judged of others by himself, and hence he concluded, that she was an object of illicit love to him...” (p. 324). For de Noix’s technique of insinuation and his “fiend-like purposes,” see also p. 266. All references are to the second edition of Monima (New York, 1803), which appears to have been a reissue of the first.

4. The more spectacular among her vicissitudes are a stay in a workhouse (chap. 3), weeks of confinement in a lonely country house, ending in near-starvation (chaps. 5-9), some days in a lunatic asylum (chap. 27), and of course her various clashes with de Noix (especially chaps. 32 and 34). A heroine who undergoes a persecution equally unreasonable is Louise Pascem­tier, an orphan girl who eventually marries her protector, too (“The New Pygmalion,” A Collection of Moral and Entertaining Stories, pp. 35-62).

5. Her husband has a poor opinion of her (p. 42); she is shown in her tantrums: “Raving and frantic with the excess of jealousy, Madame Sontine roved, and roared about the kitchen like a lion” (p. 43).

6. It means the end of his self-assurance and criminal career: “...When his eye caught Sonnetton’s, a cannon-ball to his heart, could not have carried more horror with it” (p. 456).

7. There are also instances of stylistic affinity which would seem to point to Brown as a model for Mrs. Read, e.g.: “...It was obvious that some unhappy victims were groaning under the pressure of her direful revenge. In how far they might have made themselves guilty of faults or crimes that could have merited it, was to be decided by personal enquiry” (p. 67).

8. Considering the general character and tone of Monima, another possible influence suggests itself, that of Mrs. Sarah Wood. The American Review and Literary Journal (2, no. 2 [1802]: 164-66), criticized the implausibility of the plot and the unconvincing characterization, as well as the affected style of Monima, but offered guarded praise in calling the author “a lady of delicacy and sensibility” whose “sentimental observations do no discredit to her heart or understanding” (p. 166).

9. See, e.g., the picture of Monima waiting for an interview with Mme Sonnetton (p. 29); a portrait of Sonnetton, the “youthful sentimentalist” (p. 209); the happy family ending (p. 456); or the following evocation: “...The moon arose from her watery horizon.—To a soul of sensibility, it is ever an interesting sight, and seldom fails of creating sublime sensations; but on the wide-extended prospect of the ocean, nothing can be imagined more magnifi­cent” (p. 209).

10. There is a similar beginning to Mrs. Rowson’s The Fille de Chambre. For other pathetic passages and expressions, see pp. 14 (Monima wandering through the streets), 80 and 414 (the girl and her father making their escape), 420-21 (the heroine’s illness).

11. Their elements include the separation of lovers by force, a case of mistaken identities after a secret exchange of babies, a number of aliases, an instance of bigamy unknowingly committed, and one case of near-incest. References are to the first edition of Margareta.

12. Custon himself intends to lodge Margaretta in a brothel and proposes to his friend Rutter to introduce her to him: “...Should she chance to please your fancy, you may rely on the ready services, of your devoted, Archibald Custon” (p. 70).

13. A lengthy discussion of passions and reason (p. 418) traces the source of all anguish to Arabella’s failure to study “the intricacies of her heart” and place her passions under the control of reason.
14. De Burling’s change of heart (letters 15, 24, 31, 95, 104) in its first stages resembles that of Harrington, in The Power of Sympathy. Still fluctuating in these early statements, his willingness to sacrifice his happiness is later firm: “…From my still dear Margaretta, I had a proof, an exquisite testimony of a remaining tenderness; and yet, I had resolution enough, because my poverty came in competition with my love, to evince by firm intention of quitting England, and leaving Lord Orman in possession of a prize I so long and so vainly sought” (p. 395).

15. It is mutual with a difference, though, as Margaretta’s comment shows: “I was in the protection of a stranger, who with all the honor so nobly conspicuous in his character, might, by the influence of passion, become my greatest persecuter” (p. 210).

16. Cf. Margaretta’s remark: “I begin to think that I was not destined by nature for an humble cottage” (p. 80). Yet she still feels that she must be doubly watchful because her suitor is a gentleman, socially above her and therefore privileged (pp. 29-30, 66).

17. There is a rather incongruous retreat from the aristocratic position when Margaretta praises her father’s decision to emigrate to America (p. 398), though there have been earlier statements favorable to America, e.g., in connection with the abolition of slavery (p. 235). A parallel emigration to America occurs in Mrs. Rowson’s Reuben and Rachel.

18. See, e.g., the picturesque description on p. 1, Margaretta’s portrait (pp. 8-9), the passages of sentiment (pp. 179-80, 305, 349-50), the expressions of rage and revulsion (pp. 182-83, 231).

19. “His eye was caught by the beauty of Margaretta; and bold, as a lion, he seized his prey, and would have at once hurled destruction over her, had I not, by the most fortunate chance, found her, when her danger was at its very crisis, and released her from his ravenous claws!” (de Burling about his rescue of Margaretta from Custon, p. 77).

20. See the reflections on “the purest philosophy” (p. 270), breach of promise (p. 401), reason and passions (p. 418).

21. It is presumably deliberate that Miss Stewart and de Burling use a similar terminology to set forth their very different plans for Margaretta (pp. 8-9, 15).

22. References are to the second edition. For a discussion of Miss Wells’s first novel, The Step-Mother, see above, Chapter 6.

23. “Such were the sentiments of a modern philosophist, who prided himself on being an illuminé, and a propagator of those doctrines which were to enlighten Europe, and to free all mankind from the shackles of superstition under which they had for so many ages groaned” (2:242).

24. Here is a passage typical of the accumulation and breathlessness of large portions of the narrative: “The promptitude with which Caroline had yielded to an imperious necessity, had scarcely allowed her time to consider what kind of reception she should meet with from her aunt, or whether the short notice she had given of her coming might not indicate that her motions were as little regulated by propriety, and a sense of justice, as her brother’s had been. Left to meditate on the future, the suggestions of hope gave place to a train of gloomy reflections, awakened by recollecting, that, though on the road to a sister of her mother’s, that sister had not, in her recollection, proved herself such in affection, the partiality to Montagu being the only instance that her conduct had afforded of her being possessed of any tenderness for objects beyond the pale of her own family circle” (3:119-20).
25. The novel was published in New York. *The Fortunate Discovery*, by the same anonymous lady, is discussed above in Chapter 7.

26. Quibble's confusion when the matter of the will is brought up, and Lovemore's attempted abduction of Eliza, respectively.

27. A parallel to the main plot is set forth in the interpolated story of Julius and Juliana, with its definitely pastoral note anticipating that of the ending of *Moreland Vale* (pp. 143-64).

28. *The American Review* (1, no. 4[1801]:491) spoke with severity of *Moreland Vale* in order to discourage any housewife tempted "to devote that time to increase the number of useless books on the shelves of our circulating libraries, which might better be employed in household affairs"; its verdict was plain: "*Moreland Vale* is a story framed with little art, destitute of incident, and tending to no purpose."