Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman

Wettlaufer, Alexandra K.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Wettlaufer, Alexandra K.
Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman: Painting and the Novel in France and Britain, 1800-1860.

The Ohio State University Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24286.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24286
Revolutionary Identities

Painting and Resistance in Owenson’s *The Princess; or The Beguine*

The National Tale and Minor Literature:  
IDENTITY AT THE MARGINS

With *The Wild Irish Girl*, Owenson introduced what would become the genre of the “national tale,” a form developed primarily by women writers over the next several decades in tandem with the “historical novel,” a genre associated with Walter Scott and a more “masculine” tradition. The national tale, Mark Mossman tells us, “embodies the strategy of political allegory” in a narrative of cultural encounter that focuses on place and displacement, often negotiated through the experiences of a hero from the metropolitan/colonial center in the territory of the colonized periphery. Katie Trumpener explains that the genre addresses “questions of cultural distinctiveness, national policy, and political separatism,” while Ina Ferris insists, following Owenson’s own formulation, that the national tale is “founded on national grievances” which foreground the subjectivity of the subjugated Other of the “trampled-down nations.” The intersections between the politics of nation and those of gender are reflected both literally and allegorically in these tales that repeat the basic plot of *The Wild Irish Girl* in increasingly stylized ways. Although this plot initially comprised “the contrast, attraction, and union between disparate cultural worlds” Trumpener tells us (141), the union becomes increasingly problematized and
ultimately impossible in Owenson’s later works. She explains that the national tale’s central political tendency “shifts gradually from a celebratory nationalism, which both recognizes cultural distinctiveness and believes in the possibility of transcultural unions, toward another more separatist position; continuing meditation on a history of cultural oppression makes rapprochement and reconciliation increasingly inconceivable” (146).

The national tale, relegated to a “minor genre” when recognized at all, is nonetheless integral in the development of the dominant form of the historical novel, and their interdependence reflects the dialogic nature of cultural representations of national identity in the early nineteenth century. Indeed Waverley, Scott’s first work of historical fiction, was not published until 1814 and was clearly influenced by the political and national orientation of popular contemporary female novelists like Owenson and Edgeworth. But where the female-authored national tale sought to establish cultural legitimacy and a continuity between past and present, Scott’s historical novels situate nationalism beyond the pages of the narrative “at a further stage of historical development” and only “through dislocation and collective suffering is a new national identity forged” (Trumpener 142). As gendered genres, the historical novel, depicting the nation through conflict and difference, rapidly took on the dominant position within the literary field, while the national tale, locating nation and culture in terms of broader connections and commonalities, was relegated to a secondary position. Writing from the literary as well as the national margins, Owenson used the national tale to give voice to a counter-discourse, exerting a feminist and pluralistic pressure on the political, national, and artistic centers.

In this sense, then, Owenson’s national tales may be considered “minor literature,” following Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of the mode. As they explain, a minor literature does not come from a minor language, but rather it is that which a minority constructs within a major language, and its first characteristic is “the deterritorialization of language.” For Owenson and Irish authors to follow (Joyce, Beckett), English is at once the language of literature, the language in which they must write to be read, and also the language of the oppressor. Writing to give voice to a national consciousness, authors of minor literatures “deterritorialize” language in a variety of ways in order to foreground its extremities or limits, exposing and resisting the functions of power in language. In The Wild Irish Girl, Owenson’s use of Irish or Gaelic (as well as Latin and French) throughout the English text and in the extensive footnotes, often without translation, destabilizes the dominant discourse by introducing a plurality of languages and registers. In The Princess, the narrative is similarly intertwined with passages and conversations in French, effectively interrupting English linguistic hegemony. The remaining characteristics of Deleuze and Guattari’s “minor literatures” are “everything in them is political”
and “everything takes on a collective value” (17). They explain: “It is a literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility” (17). Written by a female Irish author, doubly at the margins, Owenson’s works manifest precisely these forms of political resistance and collectivity as they posit the existence and value of invisible histories, communities, and perspectives.

Challenging contemporary ideologies of nation and of gender, Owenson’s national tales thus present a contestatory narrative of culture, identity, and difference through the disruption of the gendered division of the public and private spheres. Refusing the domestic ideologies that relegated women to the realm of hearth and home, the national tale represented women’s active and participatory role in history, culture, and revolution. In *Mothers of the Nation*, Anne K. Mellor contends that despite—or perhaps because of—the dominance of women’s domestic fiction in the Romantic period, “many women novelists offered an alternative vision of political governance, one grounded on a radical reform of the social construction of gender.” Female authors, including Owenson, Wollstonecraft, and Staël, actively participated in the Habermasian public sphere of civil society as they proposed and embodied alternate visions of society, gender, and the nation, both as politically engaged female writers and through the female characters in their fiction, who equally serve as models for the political role of women in national culture. Looking beyond the parochial and domestic, they offer “other ways of conceptualizing the locality of identity,” Deidre Lynch tells us, in “communities that drew differently and disorientingly on the cultural flows of Empire.” If the national tale is didactic in its aims, it purports to educate the reader not only on the cultures of Ireland, Greece, India, Belgium, and elsewhere, but also on the contributions of women to national cultures of every variety.

Central to Owenson’s vision of the national tale was the destabilization of accepted norms of identity and positionality, and through techniques of dislocation and displacement, she forces her readers to share the discomfort of her protagonists. Ferris finds in Owenson’s national heroines an “ethic of estrangement through which the Irish novelist repositions the Staëlian heroine to expose the ambiguities of agency in colonial spaces” (78). Troubling the very assumptions of representation and subjectivity, Owenson crossed borders of gender, genre, and nation to body forth an alternative conception of a mobile and performative identity. Following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, travel between Britain and France was once again possible and indeed was soon in vogue for the burgeoning middle class, many of whom had made their fortunes
During the prolonged hostilities between the two nations. The Grand Tour, once the prerogative of the gentry, was now embraced (in modified forms) by a wide swath of English society; a cross-channel steam ship began service in 1816, and hotels were soon opened across the Continent to accommodate the swarms of British tourists. Travel accounts and guidebooks for the British tourist proliferated, and Owenson’s interventions in the field share much with her national tales. Beginning with *France* (1817), followed by *Italy* (1821), and another volume entitled *France in 1829–1830*, the author of *The Wild Irish Girl* turned her gaze to European culture, geography, and politics. Unlike Staël’s highly intellectual *De l’Allemagne*, Owenson’s *France* and *Italy* focused on daily life and custom abroad, narrated through a liberal republican filter in what Raphael Ingelbien dubs the “travel-book-cum-radical-pamphlet.”

Thanks to the paradoxical *anglomanie* in France after Waterloo and to her literary acclaim with French readers, Owenson was welcomed into French society upon her arrival in 1816. In 1812, Owenson had married Sir Charles Morgan, and the former governess from Dublin acquired the title Lady Morgan. The English doctor’s knighthood had only been bestowed shortly before the marriage, and the couple was regarded as arrivistes by London society, while the conservative British press endlessly mocked the pretensions of “Miladi.” In France, however, the provenance of her title was of little interest, and Lady Morgan enjoyed great popularity for her wit and energy at the salons, soirées, and balls of Ultras and liberals alike. She befriended titled aristocrats and renowned intellectuals, leaders of the past and present from Mme de Genlis and Lafayette to Vivant Denon and Benjamin Constant, becoming such a “succès de société” that she was included in a chapter entitled “Certaines personnes de distinction” in Henri Bouchot’s study *Le Luxe français: La Restauration* (1893). Bouchot notes, “One woman was especially in vogue in the early days of the Restoration: that was Lady Morgan,” and goes so far as to include her portrait within the illustrated history of French society.

Owenson’s *France* is a highly subjective examination of contemporary culture that gives equal weight to conversations with peasants, laundresses, and “Parisian society.” Like all of her narratives, it is marked by heteroglossia, with lengthy sections in French and conversations transcribed “verbatim.” Much like Lescot’s paintings of the Italian peasants and their customs, *France* presents a series of vivid genre scenes that offer the reader a view of daily life through the lens of politics. The author announces her sympathies from the outset, beginning in Book I with “The Peasantry,” and addressing topics such as “The Peasantry before the Revolution,” “Conditions of the Peasantry arising out of the Revolution,” “Rural Economy,” “Peasant Dwellings,” “Religious Processions,” and “Costume.” Here and throughout *France*, Owenson engages in social and political commentary, referring frequently to the Revo-
lution, praising Napoleon’s reign, criticizing the current Bourbon monarchy, and unabashedly addressing women’s sexual and social freedoms. Her critique of the Restoration régime is direct and unapologetic, while her frequent comparisons between the French and Irish peasants focus on commonalities rather than the superiority of one or the other. In subsequent chapters, the author moves into “Society,” turning her gaze to “Royalists,” “Constitutionalists and Bonapartists,” “Woman—Her former Influence and actual Position in French Society,” and “Street Population of Paris,” as well as to “Dinners,” “Soirées,” “Modern Artists,” and “The French Theatre.” Owenson establishes her social position as a mobile observer of the various ranks and venues of French life, equally at home in each, while locating her fixed political position as a republican and a feminist. As a female traveler in 1816, her engagement with contemporary politics was unusual and even audacious. The success of France with the British and liberal French public only increased the negative responses of her critics: Croker published a twenty-five page diatribe against the volumes in the Quarterly Review, and the French government issued an order forbidding her return to France. Proving the dictum there is no such thing as bad publicity, France went into four editions in Britain, four in the United States, and two in France.

In 1818 Owenson’s publisher, Henry Colburn, commissioned a similar volume on Italy which appeared simultaneously in Britain and France in 1821. If anything, Owenson’s Italy was even more polemical than France, for Italy’s fragmented, feudal state under the occupation of the Austrian Empire resonated with her vision of Ireland, as did the Romantic and picturesque landscape. Praised by Byron (“Her work is fearless and excellent on the subject of Italy”), proscribed by the Pope, the Emperor of Austria, and the King of Sardinia (whom she called “the king of anchovies”), Owenson took her place alongside Staël, Byron, Keats, the Brownings, and countless other nineteenth-century defenders of the colonized Italian states. Shortly after the successful publication of Italy she began a study of Salvator Rosa. A fictionalized biography of the seventeenth-century painter, Owenson’s first substantial foray into art criticism reflected her Staëlian belief in the interdependence of art and social structures, as well as a highly Romantic sensibility. Rosa’s sublime landscapes and his status as “Painter, Poet, Musician, Philosopher” appealed to Lady Morgan, but above all she admired his oppositional political engagement as “an Italian patriot, who, stepping boldly in advance of a degraded age, stood in the foreground of his times” (Rosa iii). Independent, rebellious, melancholy, and passionate, Rosa was an outsider in an era dominated by the more classicized canvases of Claude and Poussin. In The Life and Times of Salvator Rosa, Owenson makes unmistakable parallels between the political situation in Rosa’s time and her own, while emphasizing the intersections between the Baroque genius’s art and his politics.
In a new preface to an 1855 edition of the study she wrote, “Did Salvator live now, one might fancy him joining the ranks of the gallant defenders of national independence and civilization” (Rosa iv).

The Princess; or The Beguine:
REVOLUTIONARY IDENTITIES

Owenson’s formulation of artistic identity, whether for painter or novelist, male and female alike, entailed “a spirit of independence” (Rosa iii) in both art and the politics of the nation. In The Princess; or the Beguine (1835), Owenson sets her final national tale in Belgium against the backdrop of the Belgian Revolution of 1830. Although most critics have insisted on Owenson’s move away from Irish themes and subjects in the 1830s, Ingelbien demonstrates, conversely, that “Morgan’s foreign subject matter was never at odds with the agenda of her Irish fiction; her defense of Ireland and her championing of continental radicalism complemented each other” (108). Indeed, the similarities between the rebellion of the Catholic Walloons against the domination of the Calvinist Dutch and the situation in Ireland are unmistakable, and Ingelbien notes that for Owenson, “Belgium’s experience revealed potential lessons for Irish politics in the 1830s” (110) as she was able “to explore the paradoxes of a revolution that presented intriguing parallels with O’Connell’s campaign for Repeal” (113). But of even greater interest for this particular study are the ways in which, in this late narrative of national and artistic identity, the mysterious heroine, who appears in the guise of a princess, a nun, a painter, and a patriot, demonstrates the ambiguities of gender and its performances in the revolutionary context. Perhaps Owenson’s least read novel, The Princess offers her most developed consideration of the complexities of women’s artistic and national identities in nineteenth-century Europe.

The title presents the first of many border crossings and ambiguities with its oscillation between two registers of female identity at opposing ends of the social spectrum. Princess, with its links to royalty and privilege, is uncomfortably paired with Beguine, a foreign word from the French and Dutch, denoting a member of a lay sisterhood of women devoting themselves to prayer and good works (though not under vows). If a Beguine is a nun of sorts who eschews worldly goods for celibacy and philanthropy, a Princess embodies the aristocracy, society, and frequently luxury. Much like Corinne, ou l’Italie, which serves as a model for this tale, The Princess; or The Beguine leaves the reader uncertain whether the two terms are synonymous (Corinne is Italy; the Princess is the Beguine) or mutually exclusive (one must choose either Corinne or Italy; the Princess or the Beguine). Though the answer is clear by the end of Owenson’s
Part II: Cosmopolitan Visions

novel, the initial blurring of terms and identities is central to the plot and meaning of the story. The epigraph at the beginning of chapter 1, taken from the letters of Madame de Sévigné, further establishes a cross-cultural context. Cited in French, the quotation from one of the most famous mothers of the seventeenth century (her letters were addressed to her beloved daughter), implies a female artistic lineage across the boundaries of time and nation.

The novel begins with a group of foolish British aristocrats at the opera, foregrounding from the very outset the ideas of performance and spectatorship. As they discuss the impending arrival of the Princess of Schaffenhausen, “so rich, and so odd . . . and then so very clever,—she speaks five languages and paints like a professional,”13 the British express their ambivalence about the German visitor, while Owenson’s own ambivalence about the wealthy fops is equally evident. In her absence, the Princess is invoked as somewhat “louche” (PB 1: 30), for not only is she “a woman of genius,” but she is also sympathetic to the revolutionaries and “la canaille” (PB 1: 31). Her identity constructed through gossip, innuendo, and rumor, the Princess is a cipher: “more dazzling than appreciated, more imagined than understood. What she appeared was known even to the editors of the newspapers, and to the reporters for second-rate fashionable journals; what she really might be, had hardly yet been questioned by her most intimate associates” (PB 1: 60). The titular character is thus at once mysterious and suspicious, a princess paradoxically associated both with art and with revolution, but even before we “see” her in the text we are led to understand the disjunction between appearance and reality. Those who observe the Princess do not necessarily “know” or understand her. Throughout the novel she will be a shadowy and elusive figure, pursued by the British gentry and disappearing from sight almost as soon as she is glimpsed.

The male protagonist, Sir Frederick Mottram, is a variation on the Romantic Oswaldian type, from an overtly feminist perspective. Nervous, sensitive, shy, and impassioned, he is also a hypocrite whose insecurities shape his every move. Born the plebian son of a self-made man, Sir Frederick married a woman of a higher social class in a “mariage de convenance, the barter of rank for wealth” (PB 1: 63); now an inveterate snob, he is also aware of his inferiority. Sir Frederick’s wife, Lady Frances, has become intimate with the Princess and in a reflection of Mottram’s deeply rooted prejudices, “Even before he had seen her, he had learned to hate, with all the energy of wounded and implacable self-love, this fashionable and diplomatic sibyl” (PB 1: 62). While the final phrase recalls Corinne in pointed terms, Sir Frederick’s hatred of this woman he has yet to meet takes Staël’s paradigm to new levels of ferocity. Mixing national and gender politics in equal measure, the conservative Tory MP mistrusts this German woman of genius as much for her liberal views as for her foreign ways and unfeminine comportment; Lady Frances’s friendship with the Princess (along
with her infidelities) is one of Mottram’s many reasons for desiring a separation from his wife.

When we are finally introduced to the Princess, the talented painter performs as well as creates works of art: “It was the peculiar character of the Princess of Schaffenhausen’s countenance and person, to make a picture in whatever light or position she placed herself” (PB 1: 122). Always in costume, she evokes masterpieces of the past and on this particular evening, her “ensemble gave her the air of a picture by Hals or Velazquez” (PB 1: 123). As she confers with Lady Mottram about her unhappy marriage to Lord Frederick, the German artist sketches an image of the Englishwoman with a parakeet who has escaped its cage. The Princess, “seizing a pencil, with the aid of a little rouge borrowed from the adjoining toilette, produced a beautiful croquis of the beautiful subject. The resemblance, though flattering, was perfect. The bird was in the act of flying off; and a motto was written beneath, ‘Qui me néglige, me perd’ (PB 1: 125). Thus, the Princess of Schaffenhausen is doubly associated with art, but if her performance of paintings serves to obscure her identity from others, her execution of her own original creations reveals truths, for the image exposes her inner thoughts and prefigures the end of the Mottram marriage. Art, in Owenson’s formulation here, must be interpreted in order to signify, and appearance is by definition both mobile and deceiving.

_The Princess_ centers on mobility of every sort—physical as well as social—and thus the greater part of the narrative follows the travels of three groups—Lady Frances and her aristocratic London friends; Sir Frederick Mottram and his Irish valet, Lawrence Fegan; and the comic Irish family of Sir Ignatius Dougherty—from Britain to the Continent. Although Sir Frederick’s journey is the primary focus, the journeys of the other groups serve as important counterpoints and commentaries on class, race, and nation as they confront difference abroad. Sir Frederick, like Staël’s Oswald, has lost his passion for life and is dying of ennui: “I am inert, listless, dissatisfied” he complains (PB 1: 154), and it is once again through the experience of foreign cultures that the Romantic hero may be intellectually and spiritually revived. Through a series of mix-ups, Mottram arrives in Ostend without his carriage, luggage, or even money and begins his Belgian education from an entirely different position—foreign, penniless, powerless—than the one he normally occupies as a wealthy and well connected Member of Parliament in London. In certain ways, _The Princess_ is a Bildungsroman in the tradition of Goethe’s _Wilhelm Meister_, but in an important inversion, the invisible hand secretly guiding the protagonist’s adventures is not the Tower Society of enlightened male aristocrats, but a single woman in multiple personae, including Marguerite, the Beguine, and the Princess. The conservative politician, initially supportive of the Dutch opposition to Belgian freedom, begins to move toward the Belgian cause as he encounters the people.
and their culture directly; his first-hand experiences on the street without the buffer of wealth and status provide a new perspective that leads to empathy with the oppressed. Every bit as didactic as Corinne, Owenson’s novel includes lengthy sections of travelogue devoted to the history, architecture, geography, and politics of Belgium, with the similar goal of educating the reader along with the protagonist.

At the same time, she destabilizes absolute knowledge as her narrator intones, “Among the many metaphysical refinements for which philosophy stands indebted to the Germans, there is none more luminous, and at the same time more sound, than their distinction between subjective and objective reality. The aspect of external nature borrows so much of its character, not only from the temperament and disposition, but from the caprices of feeling and passion of the beholder, that the evidence of the senses scarcely suffices to convince us of the identity of certain objects, when revisited under a change of fortunes or of moods” (PB 1: 262). This Romantic formulation, acknowledging the shaping force of emotion and experience on our perception of the world, signals the relativity of individual understanding. But Owenson takes the concept further through the device of the disguised heroine whose identity is impenetrable to Sir Frederick. Unable to perceive that the Princess is also the Beguine and Marguerite, he is also blind to the fact that she is the woman he had loved and abandoned in his youth. While critics complained that Sir Frederick’s inability to recognize these women pushes the limits of verisimilitude, one could argue that is precisely the point. Like Balzac, Owenson disturbs the equivalence between voir/savoir/pouvoir (sight/knowledge/power) by denying Lord Mottram visual access to knowledge. He sees but he does not see what is before him, and metaphors of blindness and illumination are key to the tale. Lord Mottram, affiliated with the conservative and misogynistic forces of government and hegemony, is rendered impotent and ignorant, unable to read the world. It is only the Princess, as a visual artist who has also mastered invisibility, who controls access to representation, knowledge, and understanding. For indeed, in her performances of multiple identities and nationalities (German, Belgian, Irish), the Princess consciously embodies the constructed and subjective nature of identity, nationality, and ultimately even gender.

Early in his travels, Sir Frederick meets a young Flemish woman in a hooded cape who introduces him to some of the nation’s most beautiful paintings. Importantly, clothes will serve as the Princess’s primary modes of disguise. She depends on hoods, capes, and veils as costumes in her various performances, revealing in part the ways in which identities and perceptions are shaped by a sartorial vocabulary. If “clothes make the man,” for woman in this novel these external trappings serve to obscure what lies beneath. Mottram is immediately intrigued by the hooded woman’s intelligence and gentle manner, and as she
teaches him about the art and history of Flanders’s oppression, “Sir Frederick Mottram was slowly yielding himself to a cause for which he had hitherto felt no interest, through the medium of his imagination. The arts were mixing themselves with his political opinions . . . He was beginning to feel for Belgium; and feeling is a powerful step to conviction” (PB 1: 312). For Owenson, art (literary as well as visual) is a means to move and persuade, inciting political as well as aesthetic feeling.

One of the most pronounced aims of The Princess is a plea for the freedom of Belgium, and by extension Ireland, Italy, and the other colonized nations of the world. As Owenson clearly argues, women will play a central part in this political progress, and much of the novel is dedicated to examples of women's active engagement in culture, history, and national identity in the past and present day Belgium. Toward the end of the first of the three volumes of this triple-decker the narrator contends:

The great movement of the age, the mighty struggle for conquest between past and present institutions, had produced in England, as elsewhere, an undercurrent of female agency, in which religion and politics, the church and the state, sought alike to sustain their power and advance their interests. In a moment of such crisis, no instrument was so humble, no means so indirect, as to be considered unsusceptible of advantageous employment: and it is the peculiar advantage of women’s interference, that its sphere of action is all-pervading, and that its applicability commences there where all other agencies have no prise or lever to act upon. (PB 1: 323)

Owenson indicates that church and state, in their all-encompassing quest for domination, enlisted female agency to achieve their ends, and she defines the purview of women’s influence as precisely where all other such powers end. In the course of the remaining two volumes, however, Owenson will demonstrate the ways in which women use this political and moral agency to advance an agenda in direct opposition to the “struggle for conquest,” promoting instead a resistance to the very structures of power that seek to exploit them.

When in Bruges, Sir Frederick again sees a figure approaching in a mantle and hood “which might serve alike the purposes of devotion and concealment . . . She carried a large clasped volume which might either be the portfolio of the artist or the breviary of the devotee” (PB 1: 327–28). Like the oscillation between Princess and Beguine, this uncertain identity—is she an artist or a nun?—presents yet another aporia in the third incarnation of the title character as Madame Marguerite, a Belgian artist. In pairing these two vocations, Owenson invokes contemporary artistic brotherhoods such as the Nazarenes, who lived in monasteries and pursued “their ideal of a communal
life that fused art and religion . . . replacing the model of the academic painter with the role of the monk-artist.”

But where these male confraternities were devoted to a self-reflexive purity removed from the quotidian world, Owenson’s artist, Marguerite, will be engaged in charity (like the Beguine) as well as art, working actively for the cause of freedom. Differences aside, the idea of a female sisterhood of artists is also posited by the evocation of religion and nuns, while aligning Marguerite (and the Beguine) with a higher power than Sir Frederick’s self-interested politics. Importantly, however, Marguerite rarely speaks of God, Catholicism, or traditional spirituality; instead, she voices an anti-royalist stance, criticizing “absolute power” which she insists “like the sublime, borders on the ridiculous” (PB 1: 329). She explains to Mottram that a shift has occurred since the coronation of Charles X at Reims: “kings will no more be permitted to snatch their crowns from heaven, but must in future be contented to receive them from the people, as ours has done. You will however find, sir, in Belgium, images of another power, in our public edifices (quite as well worthy of attention as that of any royalty), the power of the nation” (PB 1:330). Intrigued by the Belgian artist, Sir Frederick is initially “displeased by the strong political colour of her opinions; and by a certain pedantry even in her own professional observations, which smacked of provincial notability.” Before seeing her work, he dismisses her talent out of hand, deciding “This was doubtless the Angelica Kauffman or the Rosalba of some Flemish town” (PB 1:340), in an echo of Henry Mortimer’s dismissal of Glorvina’s talents based on prejudice rather than experience.

Sir Frederick’s education is not limited to Belgian politics and art; through his relationship with the hapless Fegan, an Irish valet who joins Mottram’s service on the eve of his departure, the British lord comes to reconsider his views on class as well. Far from London and his zone of comfort, Sir Frederick must rely on Fegan not only for his labor but also for his companionship, and for the first time in his life, the haughty master of many servants was led to acknowledge their possible individuality. Accustomed to regard his domestics as machines mounted upon certain principles for his service, he had overlooked their moral characters as men; nor ever reflected that the inconveniences incidental to their administration, their follies, vices, and infidelities were in part the consequences of that total absence of sympathy and communion with which English masters treat their domestics. (PB 2: 2–3)

In an idealistic vein, Owenson thus proposes that class prejudice, like national prejudice, is based entirely in ignorance, and one need only to get to know the Other in order to love him. Attributing the serving class’s “vices” to their treatment by their masters rather than an inherent inferiority, the author once
again argues for equality and pluralism. In questions of nation and class, progress is achieved for Owenson when the oppressors can recognize the value and humanity of the oppressed, a message that implicitly applies to gender as well.

In a series of scenes in Book II, Owenson presents portraits of Marguerite at work, creating images of the image-maker or representations of the representer. With Sir Frederick as the focalizing observer, she is described in terms that elicit a work of art (“The bend of the long columned neck was in itself a study for a painter. The rounding of her statue-like shoulders was defined by a Vandyke of white cambric . . .” \(PB\ 2: 73\)), and render Marguerite the object of his constitutive gaze. But no sooner is the image proposed than it is refused by the author and her female artist who interrupts the fantasy. Sir Frederick stares at her, unseen, as she sits working on a drawing and framed by the window behind her: “There was a moment of perfect illusion, which a breath might have dissipated. Sir Frederick Mottram did not breathe, but the artist did; and there was a heaving of bosom-drapery, which transferred the admiration of the beholder from what appeared at first a living picture, to the most picturesque of living forms” \(PB\ 2: 74\). By insisting on her breath and her consciousness, as she returns his gaze, Owenson reminds the hero and the reader that the artist is a real woman, and the male viewer’s fetishizing fantasy is destroyed. Indeed, Sir Frederick will continue to mistake art and representation—in the multiple performances of the Princess—-for reality, unable to recognize the real woman behind the charades.

In a subsequent scene in her atelier, depicted in terms that evoke the myriad studios of contemporary painting and literature, Marguerite’s paintings bring to mind an orphan taken in by Mottram’s mother while he was away at Oxford. Returning from university, he had fallen in love with and then abandoned the foreign-born girl, sacrificing passion for ambition: “his after-life had been the expiation of the imprudent impulse, as it had been the penalty of his heartless desertion of its object. Distrust of woman, the habit of considering her through her position in life, as a means, and never as an object, had clung to him” \(PB\ 2: 197\). Redolent of the terms used to describe (and implicitly condemn) Mottram’s treatment of the lower classes, the passage goes on to establish a parallel between the politics of gender and the politics of nation, both based in profound hypocrisy:

The orthodox moralist, the pure and loyal church-and-state man, was a latitudinarian where the passions, or vanity, which so often passes for passion, were concerned. He had written one of his best papers in the Quarterly Review, on the superior morals of England while notoriously engaged in a liaison with the wife of his own friend, the Marquis of Montressor . . . Foreign demoralization was a frequent theme in his conversation, and his literary productions, when
he dabbled, like other party notabilities, in reviews and newspapers. But the
domestic gallantry of England, the libertinism of some of her highest aristo-
cratic coteries (comparable only to the society which flourished under Louis
XV, and hurried on a revolution as inevitable as it was morally necessary), had
never yet come under the ban of his opinion. (PB 2: 198–99)

The construction of difference and of England’s moral superiority to other
nations is here based entirely on false distinctions, and the man who wants to
divorce his wife for her dalliances has himself strayed repeatedly. Owenson’s dig
at the Quarterly Review, one of her sharpest critics, is a pointed critique of its
partisan leanings and its moral corruption.

Thus the “moralist” who despises the Princess for her turpitude considers
taking the woman he admires, Madame Marguerite, along with him on his
travels as a paid “compagne de voyage” (PB 2: 200), clearly seeing her as an object
for sale for his pleasure or amusement. Yet having seen her in her atelier, hav-
ing recognized her as a laboring subject rather than an idle object, his opinion
begins to change. Sir Frederick’s confrontation with “the desolate work-room”
and the female artist’s “struggling genius, with all its sublime but melancholy
imagery, the eight years spent there in profitless labor . . . had cast over the
character and position of this singular woman a halo of respect, and awakened
a reverential admiration for her qualities, and a pity for her dreary position,
which altered the whole nature of the sentiment she had hitherto inspired”
(PB 2: 201–2). If she gains his respect, it is notably for her suffering, while his
admiration is mixed with pity; had she been successful she would have been
intolerable to the egotistical lord. Nonetheless, it is the evidence of her labor
that makes her in some way real and thus human to Mottram. The description
of Mme Marguerite constructs her as the Romantic artist par excellence—a
misunderstood genius, struggling in an impoverished garret—and the follow-
ing passage, recounted by an elderly gentleman to Sir Frederick, also reflects on
Owenson’s own career. He explains that the Belgian woman is “Not a fine artist,
monsieur, but a fine genius. She has worked for bread more than for fame, and
therefore wants finish; besides, she has indulged her taste more than consulted
her interest. She has, too, a knack of painting a fool like a fool, and rogue—not
to be mistaken” (PB 2: 253). Like Owenson herself, who began writing novels
to escape her life as a governess and continue to support her father and sister,
Marguerite paints to earn her living, and it is a means of female independence
as well as expression. Owenson, like the fictional painter here, was frequently
criticized for her shoddy style, poor spelling, and lack of finish, and clearly
identifies with the attribution of these faults to “genius.” The author and her
artistic mirror portray subjects that criticize, rather than flatter, society. Like
Owenson’s overtly political novels, Madame Marguerite’s “pictures have all a
moral object . . . and our noblesse has never patronized her” (PB 2: 253). Outside of the mainstream, neither appreciated nor patronized by the powers that be, Madame Marguerite and Lady Morgan are artists who, like Salvator Rosa, embody Owenson’s version of Romantic genius and freedom, following their own inspiration rather than social dicta. For each, artistic creation is an act of politically engaged labor.

In the final volume of *The Princess; or the Beguine*, Sir Frederick and Madame Marguerite engage in a lengthy debate that echoes those between Corinne and Oswald, but where Mme de Staël’s characters discuss religion and literature, Owenson’s engage directly with the contemporary politics of empire and nation. She aligns the characters’ leanings with gender, class, and life experience: Sir Frederick’s conservatism and Marguerite’s liberalism are inextricable from their positions in society. Once again, Mottram’s inability to perceive the other is highlighted. He proposes to the painter that “you non-conservatives” are not as far from his own position as one would imagine: “it is on the question of practicability that we most widely differ.” He continues, “Our views of human nature . . .” but is interrupted by Marguerite who adds “Are formed upon the narrow experience of your exclusive circles, and they are forever misleading you” (PB 3: 25). The liberal viewpoint, linked to republicanism and political independence for the lower classes and oppressed nations, is ultimately tied to artistic identity as well by Owenson. When Sir Frederick offers the painter his arm she refuses his support: “I have gone through life without an arm to lean on; and I will not now risk my independence by taking the arm of a minister of state, even though he be le plus aimable de tous les ministres possibles” (PB 3: 26). In a prefiguration of the ending of the novel, politics is privileged even over love, and the heroine seeks not domesticity but social justice.

The conversation continues as they visit the library of the Dukes of Burgundy. Sir Frederick objects to women “meddling” in public affairs, while Marguerite maintains that they have always been singularly capable of managing both domestic and public functions, like Mme de Maintenon, able to “direct the affairs of Europe while they trace patterns for footstools.” The Belgian painter explains, “The influence of women was, is, and ever will be exercised, directly or indirectly, in good or in evil! It is a part of the scheme of nature. Give her the lights she is capable of receiving; educate her (whatever her station) for taking her part in society. Her ignorance has often made her interference fatal: her knowledge, never” (PB 3: 39). Very much in keeping with contemporary feminist thought, Owenson argues for woman’s education at every social level, insisting that her ignorance is more dangerous than any knowledge could be. Whether through direct intervention or in conversation with husbands, fathers, sons, and friends, women can and do participate in the public and political
spheres. She goes on to offer her conservative interlocutor examples of the influence of Belgian women on culture and history, including Marguerite of Burgundy “who was to the Low Countries what Francis the First was to France” (PB 3: 39).

The Princess is Mme Marguerite’s “patroness,” commissioning from her copies of paintings, manuscript illuminations, and other Belgian masterpieces. Moreover, she tells Sir Frederick, they are collaborating on a book dedicated to “one of our great stateswomen, the Duchess Marguerite,” who was “author, politician, sovereign, but femme avant tout” (PB 3: 46). The Princess of Schaffhausen will write the text while Madame Marguerite will illustrate it, a fact that shocks Sir Frederick as it combines the talents of the woman he is growing to love with those of the woman he thinks he detests, though it will soon be revealed they are one and the same. This “joint” female production has a precedent in a book begun in the sixteenth century by Marie de Behercke, their guide to the library explains, and completed in the seventeenth by Wilhelmina De Vaël. In art as well as politics, Owenson continues to demonstrate the role of women in the nation.

When he finally declares his love for Madame Marguerite, she rejects him out of hand, for as a married man he offers her nothing more than a life of “Infamy!” When Sir Frederick protests “What jargon,” she coolly replies “You would call it so, if offered to your wife” (PB 3: 101), returning again to the hypocrisy of his double standard of class and gender. Perennially misreading the signs, Mottram refuses to believe she is not in love with him: “You cannot suppose that I am such a dolt as to believe that you have done this, all this, in a spirit of fanatical liberalism, to work a political conversion, and bring over a proselyte to a cause in which you have no interest beyond that of abstract opinion!” Marguerite responds, “Why not?” (PB 3: 102). She explains that “Belgium has been misrepresented to England” and Mottram is “among those who influence opinion” (PB 3:103). Sir Frederick is a man whom people listen to, his thoughts are read in the newspapers, and his voice is heard in the Parliament, so in persuading him, Marguerite argues, she can change the fate of Belgium’s cause in Britain. By a similar token, Owenson’s novel seeks to serve the same purpose and effectuate the same change. Owenson’s female painter privileges politics over love and public over private concerns, thus taking on the very agency described earlier in the novel. Marguerite goes on to explain that she is also the Beguine who, in disguise, has haunted Sir Frederick in Bruges, Ghent, on the Kantur, and in the church of St. Beghè. By implication then, he has been doubly blind to her intentions and to her dual identity, as both the artist, Marguerite, and the Beguine, Soeur Greite. But even more strikingly, she recounts her life story and reveals that she is also Sir Frederick’s cousin, the girl he abandoned so long ago, and indeed the Princess of Schaffhausen as
well. Marguerite’s complicated history posits a portrait of hybrid and mobile identity: the daughter of an Irish father and a Polish mother, she was born in Belgium in a Béguinage (convent) and immediately orphaned. Raised by the Beguines, she is sent to a British family at fifteen to be a companion to their daughter. She is treated as a pet by the mother who discovers that she is her niece, and when the son—Sir Frederick—proposes marriage upon his return from Oxford to the foreign girl, she is turned out into the street. Unable to survive on her own in England, for they are mistrustful of a female artist and a foreigner, she returns to Europe where she ultimately becomes the Princess of Schaffhausen. Her social mobility, from orphan to princess, rejected by a family who is now far lower than she in the ranks of the gentry, is mirrored both by her national hybridity as Irish/Polish/Belgian and by her many identities that reveal facets of her life and experience. In a similar fashion, Sir Frederick’s own unstable identity is also revealed: his mother was an Irish actress and the much ridiculed Dogherty family not only are his Irish cousins, but also have inherited an ancient baronetage, thus rising from the bottom to the top of the social scale. His servant, Larry Fegan, is revealed to be the bastard son of Ignatius Dogherty and thus Sir Frederick’s own cousin and a descendent of the Irish kings. The defining characteristics of national and social identities that in turn determine hierarchies of power and prestige are thus destabilized, rendering any pretensions of social or national superiority absurd.

When the Princess reveals herself to the rest of the protagonists, this final encounter is staged like a tableau, with the artist composing and performing the scene one last time for her audience. Significantly, each person sees something different: “Lady Frances saw before her the concealed mistress of her husband, a person who had doubly made her a dupe. Lord Allington regarded her as a political intrigante, endowed with great beauty and as much ability as he had ever ‘coped withal.’ Lord Aubrey thought she made Lady Frances look fade; and Mrs. St. Leger saw the heroine of a German romance, painted by a member of the romantic school” (PB 3: 330). Perception, as much as identity, is disrupted, for each person has seen what he or she wanted to see all along. The Princess explains that she has never been the person they took her for and hoped to exploit for their own ends. Having read them in ways they failed to reciprocate, she tells the group: “I have only played your own game. When you English oligarchs received me into the sanctum of your mysteries political and social, you had hoped to make use of me for your purposes: I availed myself of the hint, and worked for my own, which were those of my country” (PB 3: 379). Having converted Lord Mottram to her cause, her work is done, and so the Princess declares she will end as she began, as a Beguine. Rejecting marriage (for Sir Frederick proposes after Lady Frances runs off with a lover) and domesticity, she returns to the Belgian sisterhood, whose mission remains to
minister to and improve society, “to repair its mischiefs, and to pour oil and wine into the festering wounds of outraged humanity” (*PB* 2:107).

Throughout the novel, the Princess has controlled her own representation through a series of performances that signal her understanding of and resistance to the dominant orders of signification. Identified as a painter in all of her incarnations, her vocation seems central to her mastery of the scopic regimes of meaning and interpretation. Indeed art is the one constant in these multiple personae, and serves as a means to independence and self-fashioning.  

For the Princess, painting is an accomplishment she can turn into a profession “should the rapid changes of the times, and the loss of her Belgian estates, ever drive her upon living by the exertion of her own high endowments” (*PB* 1: 58), while it is precisely how she supported herself when evicted by the Mottrams as a young girl, and later as Madame Marguerite. It is also, of course, a direct link to the author, another female artist seeking to effectuate social and political change through her representations. Owenson and her character derive their authority from their ability as artists to recognize and move within the multiple registers of power and meaning, manipulating the representation of identity to reflect the constructed nature of gender, class, and nation in Belgium and Britain alike.

Critics from its publication to the present have complained that *The Princess* fails as a novel, for its heroine’s multiple identities serve no purpose beyond confusing the reader. In 1835 Christian Isobel Johnstone reproduced almost thirty pages of the novel in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* only to conclude that the main character is “a kind of second-hand Corinne, and very inferior sort of Mrs. Macgillycuddy, without adequate motive of object for her endless shifts, subterfuges, and manoeuvres,” while in 1990 James Newcomer contended that Owenson “does obfuscate to no particular end” and that “*The Princess* has been rightfully forgotten.” If we consider, however, the dialectic identity of the nameless heroine as the site of meaning, rather than meaninglessness, then *The Princess* may be read as Owenson’s reflection on women’s active intervention in national history and their resistance to the limiting narratives of gender and identity.