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Women without Men: Barbara Hofland and the Economics of Widowhood

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Abstract
The appeal that appeared in the World in the spring of 1790 was unusual only in that its presence in a London paper offered the widow a relatively uncommon public advantage in securing funds to help her and her family cope with her widowhood. Widowhood itself was anything but uncommon at the time, and the dire straits hinted at in this single notice were familiar to countless women. Despite the existence of relatively egalitarian inheritance laws, property laws relating to marriage in Romantic-era Britain (c. 1780–1835) had grown less (rather than more) accommodating to the needs of widows and their children than they had been even a century earlier. Indeed, "the romantic proposition that true love required a woman's legal and economic 'annihilation' within marriage," as happened to Mrs Strictland in Clara Reeve's The School for Widows (1791), had become more than merely a cultural truism. Polly Peachum's parents' advice that she snap up Macheath in order to become a wealthy widow may have resonated with the audiences for John Gay's Beggar's Opera (1728), but as Bridget Hill points out, the widow who was left in "comfortable circumstances" was the exception to the rule. Given that even the third of her husband's estate to which the law ostensibly entitled her was generally insufficient to provide economic security, a widow's family's security "depended to a large extent on her efforts." Thus in Clara Reeve's The School for Widows (1791), when Mrs Darnford, the widow of a London tradesman, is left without provision, she must hire herself out as a governess to some young ladies. Still, documentary and anecdotal evidence alike points to the comparatively large number of English families headed by single persons, including widows with—frequently—numerous dependent children; widows may have accounted for as many as 14 per cent of all heads of households. This sort of relatively independent (albeit co-dependent) existence apparently was the norm, for in the eighteenth century some 70 per cent of all widows were the heads of their own households. This same evidence suggests that, their difficult circumstances notwithstanding, significant numbers of widows did not remarry, choosing instead—like Lady Russell in Jane Austen's Persuasion (1818)—to make their own social and economic way within a society in which this option must have been both attractive and workable. The success of such un-remarried and presumably celibate widows, both in society and in fiction, provides an important complement to the image of the lascivious "merry widow" often represented in the era's cautionary tales and whose widowhood is typically marked (in society and in fiction alike) by a looseness of social and sexual behaviour that implicitly challenges the historically entrenched patriarchal order.

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> The widow of a Gentleman of the rank of major, in His Majesty's service, is left with Seven Children without any means of support, unless by the assistance of the public a sum can be raised to enable her to continue an engagement to which she has been introduced, and which affords a reasonable prospect of a provision for her family ... . Subscriptions for the above benevolent purpose will be received at the following Bankers ... .[1]

The appeal that appeared in the *World* in the spring of 1790 was unusual only in that its presence in a London paper offered the widow a relatively uncommon public advantage in securing funds to help her and her family cope with her widowhood. Widowhood itself was anything but uncommon at the time, and the dire straits hinted at in this single notice were familiar to countless women. Despite the existence of relatively egalitarian inheritance laws, property laws relating to marriage in Romantic-era Britain (c. 1780–1835) had grown less (rather than more) accommodating to the needs of widows and their children than they had been even a century earlier. Indeed, "the romantic proposition that true love required a woman's legal and economic 'annihilation' within marriage,"[2] as happened to Mrs

1 *World*, no. 1010 (Tuesday, 30 March 1790), 1.

2 Amy Louise Erickson, "Property and Widowhood in England 1660–1840," in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndon Warner (New York: Pearson Education, 1999), 146.

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3 Bridget Hill, *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 250–51.

4 See especially Peter Laslett, "Mean Household Size in England since the Sixteenth Century," in *Household and Family in Past Time*, ed. Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 146–49; Olwen Hufton, "Women without Men: Widows and Spinsters in Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Family History* 9:4 (1984), 355–76; Hill, chap. 13, "Widows." Hannah Barker claims that women were the heads of some 9 to 14 per cent of eighteenth-century English households. Hannah Barker, "Women, Work and the Industrial Revolution: Female Involvement in the English Printing Trades, c. 1700–1840," in *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities*, ed. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (London: Longman, 1997), 86.

5 James E. Smith, "Widowhood and Ageing in Traditional English Society," in *Ageing and Society* 4:4 (1984), 433.

implicitly challenges the historically entrenched patriarchal order.[6]

Three early novels by Barbara Hofland (1770–1844)—*The History of an Officer's Widow and Her Young Family* (1809), *The History of a Clergyman's Widow and Her Young Family* (1812), and *The Merchant's Widow and Her Young Family* (1814)—reveal how this socially committed Sheffield author used the vehicle of popular fiction to present an alternative to the familiar dilemma of indigent widowhood.[7] These novels are thus important both for their picture of Hofland's socio-economic ideology of the family and for their modelling of an early feminist alternative to familiar patterns of suffering and failure. They also highlight important aspects of the evangelical literary tradition as it existed in early nineteenth-century Britain. This literary culture has historically been neglected, in part because it has so often been mischaracterized as simplistic and doctrinaire and therefore the worst sort of union of dogma and didacticism. However, like the tradition of anti-Jacobin fiction, which has long endured a comparably reductive mischaracterization, the tradition of evangelical fiction in which Hofland's work participates is diverse and often richly nuanced, resisting easy and reductive categorization. Hofland's work reveals surprising deviations from—and even confrontations with—some of the leading principles of the evangelical movement, including its English Methodist strains.[8]

6 Karen R. Bloom has discussed the two conventional types of widows found in eighteenth-century fiction in "My Worldly Goods Do Thee Endow: Economic Conservatism, Widowhood, and the Mid- and Late Eighteenth-Century Novel," *Intertexts* 7:1 (2003), 27–47. Bloom explains how the fictional presentations of the "virtuous widow" and the "wicked widow" embody alternative views of the economic and therefore the social status of women. According to Bloom, the former is typically associated with the country, agrarian societies, and the common good of the community; she is characterized by "selfless, benevolent, community-oriented, asexual, maternal virtue." Conversely, the latter is linked with the city, commercial enterprises, and the advancement of the self; because she embodies "the behaviors and values of emerging capitalism," she is presented as proof positive that "the convergence of femininity and capitalism perverts female identity," which makes her "villainous if not downright monstrous" (38). The celibacy of the former metaphorically reflects her lack of interest in challenging the male-dominated economic paradigms, while the latter's sexual aggressiveness reflects a parallel aggressiveness in participating in the patriarchal socio-economic sphere that is typically off-limits to women.

7 Barbara Hofland, *The History of An Officer's Widow and Her Young Family* (1809; reprint, New York: Saxton and Huntington, 1846); Hofland, *The History of a Clergyman's Widow and Her Young Family* (1812; reprint, New York: W.B. Gilley, 1830); Hofland, *The History of a Merchant's Widow and Her Young Family* (London, 1814); 6th ed. reprinted as *The Merchant's Widow and Her Young Family* (London: A.K. Newman, 1826). References are to these editions.

8 See, for example, Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979). For background information on the evangelicals and the Methodists, see David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society, 1750–1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1984); David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); William

Furthermore, the suspicion with which much of modern literary, social, intellectual, and cultural theory (and its discourse and practices) regards religious fundamentalism has frequently led scholarship to shy away from the seemingly formulaic popular writing of prolific and once widely read authors such as Hofland, especially when their works are ostensibly directed towards children. Even while children's literature has, in recent decades, become the subject of increasingly sensitive and sophisticated literary and cultural scholarly study, Hofland's name has remained unfamiliar to all but the most dedicated specialists.[9] In what follows, I shall first trace the larger issues that Hofland addresses in her novels before turning to the plot details that reveal the workings of Hofland's alternative paradigm.

In these three novels, each of which turns on the premature death of a husband who leaves a young wife and a family of some half a dozen, the sudden independence forced upon the young widow by this catastrophe reveals that she is anything but independent. Each widow seems more dependent even than could have been imagined, at least at first. And yet, in each case, by the novel's end the widow has not been ruined by her experience but has actually endured and in fact largely triumphed (with the help of her children and without the presence of a husband) in reversing her misfortune and returning her family to economic stability and social stature. One of the distinguishing characteristics of evangelical Nonconformity in Britain during the period 1790–1830 was the substantial undermining it produced of

R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Hempton, "Evangelicalism in English and Irish Society, 1780–1840," in *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond*, ed. Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 156–76. More recently, the critical attention and respect being paid to evangelicalism in culture is evidenced by collections of essays such as *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective*, ed. David N. Livingstone, D.G. Hart, and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

9 See, for example, F.J. Harvey Darton, *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life*, 3rd ed., rev. Brian Alderson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Mary V. Jackson, *Engines of Instruction, Mischief, and Magic: Children's Literature in England from Its Beginnings to 1839* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Patricia Demers, *Heaven upon Earth: The Form of Moral and Religious Children's Literature, to 1850* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), and Samuel F. Pickering, Jr, *Moral Instruction and Fiction for Children, 1749–1820* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993). Pickering mentions Hofland briefly in connection with stories about orphans and foundlings. Especially important for the cultural and intellectual traditions surrounding children's literature that Hofland inherited is Pickering, *John Locke and Children's Books in Eighteenth-Century England* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981). On nineteenth-century evangelical fiction for children, see especially M. Nancy Cutt, *Mrs Sherwood and Her Books for Children* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

"the traditional systems of dependency that had been at the heart of the old order in church and state."[10] As Hofland's novels reveal, this fracturing of conventional patterns of dependency could occur much closer to home, within the nuclear family itself. And the result could be both economically positive and psychologically (and spiritually) empowering. The pattern of experience traced in these three novels reveals important creative choices that Hofland made as an author and demonstrates how her works join with those of other evangelical writers in foreshadowing the moral, social, and economic themes (like the "Christian work ethic") usually associated with the Victorian period, whose advent was still more than two decades off. Early dates notwithstanding, the novels also anticipate one of the principal developments of nineteenth-century intellectual and aesthetic history: the rise of realism.

Discovering this sort of intellectual and aesthetic significance in the works of a prolific writer whose novels have historically been ignored or categorized as mere formula fiction helps us rethink the work of many of her contemporaries from a period that typically has been remembered for a limited number of names, such as Radcliffe, Austen, Scott, and Mary Shelley, and has been characterized (or mischaracterized) by their works. The sheer numbers of copies of Hofland's works published (and purchased and read) during her lifetime and afterward attest to the fact that she and other evangelical writers were a prominent part of Regency culture and that her writings bore no small influence on the mainstream culture and on canonical writers. As they did when they created the familiar masculinist literary canon by ignoring women's writings, so too in creating the idea of the Regency and its milieu did literary and cultural historians simply leave out what they found repugnant or alien because it failed to conform to their own standards of value and quality. We should especially reconsider, therefore, what women writers of the period tell us both in their fiction and in their private lives regarding issues such as women's dependency on male counterparts. Hofland's novels relate the alternative paradigms represented in the careers of women whose experiences move from initial dependency to eventual assertion and validation. Significantly, in Hofland's three early "widow" novels, when the widow and her family finally achieve economic and social stability and prosperity, the widow does not re-

10 Hempton, "Evangelicalism in English and Irish Society," 160.

marry, nor does she appear to consider the possibility even when her children do make a series of happy matches.

Hofland's early fiction, in particular, reveals a sophisticated author engaging in a calculated strategy of social control aimed at reformulating both the social and the economic model of the middle-class family through the vehicle of prose fiction. By "social control," I mean the deliberate effort to materially affect the behaviour of real people (in this case readers) in a "real-world" environment by influencing both their moral and their material principles and consequently the behaviours that proceed from them. Hofland directed her authorial efforts towards an emerging, receptive, but in many ways still unformed public readership that was particularly susceptible to her novelistic approach. That approach combines elements of traditional sentimentalism with an emerging economic pragmatism and scientific realism, all informed by the evangelical activism that asserted "the unique importance of the individual," as opposed to the utilitarian formula that equates the interest of the individual with that of the community.[11] Like much of her work, her early novels are addressed ostensibly to young readers—to children[12]—and so they are calculated at once to model and to reinforce moral and ethical behaviours that have real consequences for the social and especially the economic status of all the characters. As an early reviewer for the *Ladies Monthly Magazine* observed in 1823, the object of Hofland's novels, all of which "have met with a favorable reception," "seems to be to inculcate lessons of morality through the medium of amusing narrative, and thus to instill virtuous principles into the minds of youth."[13] For this reason, we need to observe how the moral and ethical behaviours modelled by the children, in particular, function within the plots of the individual tales, and how those behaviours are shown to arise

11 Jay, 7.

12 *The History of an Officer's Widow and Her Young Family* (1809) contains a preface that specifically suggests the novel is directed towards boys: "I am persuaded that children themselves will not accuse me of lessening their pleasure, by withdrawing them for a few hours from noisy sports and frivolous occupations, to trace with me the various joys and sorrows *of boys like themselves*" (iii, emphasis added). While subsequent contemporary reviews generally imply that Hofland's works are directed at children in general, in 1825 another reviewer suggests that Hofland is writing specifically for girls: "Mrs Hofland is known and esteemed as one of those fair missionaries of literature, who have chosen the amiable task of giving council [*sic*] *to those of her own sex*, who are in a state of preparation for entering society." *Monthly Review*, s.2, v. 108 (September 1825), 87.

13 *Ladies Monthly Magazine*, n.s., v. 17 (1823). The review concerns *Integrity. A Tale* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1823).

either from or in reaction to particular behaviours of the young widows who are their mothers. For the paradigmatic experiences of these children imply a system of values and rewards that are at once moral and economic.

This is not to say that Hofland confined herself and her literary interests to what we now think of as a subgenre, works written for younger readers (by which term, to be entirely fair, we probably should understand both readers of young ages and readers of all ages who may be in the process of acquiring some degree of literacy).[14] Her correspondence with friends like Mary Russell Mitford reveals that she was an active and eclectic reader, and that her own works were read and admired by other authors of note. Mitford's letters to Hofland imply that both women read widely and compared their responses to works as diverse as Moore's *The Fudge Family in Paris* (1818), Sydney Owenson's (Lady Morgan) *Florence Macarthy, An Irish Tale* (1818), William Hazlitt's *A View of the English Stage*, Anna Maria Porter's poetry and prose, and a broad range of authors, whom we would now call both canonical and non-canonical, from Byron, Coleridge, and (interestingly) Peacock, to Amelia Opie, Henry Hart Milman, and Elizabeth Porden.[15] Hofland enjoyed Mitford's earlier works (including her poetry) as well, which undoubtedly added to her gratification at Mitford's positive response to her own work. Two comments are typical: Mitford writes in 1820 that Hofland's works "give too much pleasure *and too much good* to be readily relinquished," and five years later says of Hofland's forthcoming *Moderation* that "it seems likely to be a tale in your very best way; there is undoubtedly no one who can combine *so much instruction with so much heart and feeling*."[16]

Mitford's approbation typifies the contemporary critical reception and reflects the nature of Hofland's public reputation generally. A reviewer for the *Literary Chronicle* summarized that reputation in 1824: "In every work with which Mrs Hofland has favoured the world we discover ... the same attractions,—and these are pathos, sentiment,

14 The author of an extensive review in 1823 made much the same point, observing that, while Hofland had previously written often for children, "the grown-up readers of the circulating library are also deeply indebted to her for some very good Novels" and that in *Integrity: A Tale* (1823) Hofland seemed to have envisioned a reader of an age "somewhere between the man and the boy—or rather between the woman and the girl." *Literary Gazette, and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.* 327 (26 April 1823), 259.

15 For a good indication of Mitford's reading, see the details and comments in her letters to Hofland during the period 1817–37, reprinted in *Letters of Mary Russell Mitford*, 2 vols., ed. Henry Chorley (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1872), 1:27–148.

16 *Letters of Mary Russell Mitford*, 1:83, 130 (emphasis added).

ably delineated character, pointed and nervous dialogue, and sound moral truth."[17] Consequently, we need to consider the role that Hofland's immensely popular—and therefore widely influential—novels may have played in the formation of later Romantic and early Victorian culture, especially in terms of gender.[18] Hofland's boys and girls—and their mothers—live altered lives within their unexpectedly altered circumstances, to be sure, but it would be a mistake to oversimplify either the novels or Hofland's creative intelligence (and her moral outlook) by observing simply that the boys get careers outside the home—usually in a profession—and succeed at them, while the girls become stay-at-home models of sweet, subservient domesticity. In reality, the matter is considerably more complicated.

Each of the novels examined here comprises a tale of perseverance and adaptability in the face of misfortune, but in each successive tale Hofland presents the widow as less abject and paralysed than in the previous novel, while at the same time she documents the development of the several children with greater psychological and experiential sophistication.[19] These adjustments to the form and the substance of the successive novels reflect Hofland's increasingly realistic approach to psychology and art alike. One immediate consequence is that the element of contrivance—which figures in each novel in the form of a series of barely credible fortunate coincidences—is rendered ever less intrusive. At the same time, the twists and turns in the fortunes of all the characters suggest a natural and overarching domestic and economic design that ensures that, unlike what Darwin would later postulate about their fate, the weak not only survive but in fact prosper. Hofland's tales work out in fictional form the principle that is central to Darwin's later work: if the environment is changed, the responses and behaviours of those who need to function within that environment must necessarily change too, if they are to survive. Her novels may reasonably be viewed, therefore, as fictional case studies of how reorganizing an environment tests what human subjects do in response; as such they anticipate many aspects

17 *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* 246 (31 January 1824), 71.

18 Her nearly seventy literary works for children and adults are reported to have sold nearly three hundred thousand copies in Great Britain alone; sales in America and elsewhere probably increased that figure by at least 50 per cent. See Thomas Ramsay, *The Life and Literary Remains of Barbara Hofland* (London: W.J. Cleaver, 1849), viii.

19 The novels were frequently reprinted in England and America, also appearing together in an American edition under the title of *Mrs Hofland's Domestic Tales* (New York: Francis, 1850) and in a subsequent edition with the same title (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, 1859).

of nineteenth-century behaviouralist scientific concern with the influence of environment upon human development.

But here things become complicated. First, it seems clear that Hofland regards the widowed families she portrays not as inherently weak but as only apparently so, judged by the conventional standards of misfortune visited upon "leaderless" families in fiction—and in reality—in a Napoleonic-era England where the male breadwinners (and, subsequently, the families) regularly fell as casualties of war. In fact, the circumstances of these families' distress often call to mind those of the biblical Job; if they can sustain their family unity and their "family values" (to use the currently unfashionable phrase) and live with focused industry, they are rewarded beyond their expectations—but not beyond their faith. For the "overarching domestic and economic design" that safeguards and preserves them is a moral, ethical, and spiritual one, grounded in the principles of Christian faith, goodness, charity, and love—but also in perseverance and hard work. This is the sort of agenda that led one reviewer to acclaim Hofland the "oracle of the virtues."[20] But as we are now beginning to recognize, many "oracles of virtue" were at work in the Regency world, as were many degenerate and dissolute souls (one need only recall the many caricatures of the Prince Regent). The true measure of the Regency lies in its many and complicated cultural cross- and counter-currents, some of which may be traced in its infinitely varied literary products, which embrace at the same moment writers as seemingly dissimilar as Hofland and Byron, James Hogg and Elizabeth Hamilton.

Let us consider demographics for a moment. To begin, we know that these novels reached a wide readership. *The Clergyman's Widow* (1812) and *The Merchant's Widow* (1814) were published by A.K. Newman at the Minerva Press, and each ran through many editions and printings, both in England and in America. *The Clergyman's Widow* (which eventually sold seventeen thousand copies)[21] was already into its fifth British edition with Newman in 1822, while *The Merchant's Widow* had reached its sixth in 1826, also with Newman. *The Officer's Widow* (1809) was an early instalment in the long series of works that

20 The phrase occurs in a review in the *Literary Chronicle and Weekly Review* 369 (3 September 1825), 570.

21 *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, ed. Virginia Blain, Isobel Grundy, and Patricia Clements (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 530. Given the large numbers of copies Hofland typically sold, we can only infer how much greater still her influence must have been when we factor in the numerous circulating libraries, whose presence ensured that individual copies reached very considerable numbers of readers *and auditors*.

Hofland published with J. Harris, who succeeded E. Newberry as an active publisher of literature for children. *The Officer's Widow* was also frequently reprinted.[22] Assuming that circulating libraries exponentially multiplied the novels' actual circulation, and assuming too a primarily juvenile audience for these works during the Regency, it is easy to see why the lessons they taught would have borne visible fruit as that generation of young readers and listeners grew up and became the Victorians.

Central to the moral agenda of each of these novels is the remarkable adaptability that all the children demonstrate. In every case, the disrupted family's success in coping with—indeed overcoming—adversity stems directly from the willingness of the children to subjugate their individual agendas to the more immediate and pressing needs of the family as a whole. Typically, the widowed mother's obvious suffering—and the children's desire to reduce or obviate it—provides the catalyst for a transformation: a selfish, even prideful, focus on what the child most wants to do for his or her own gratification is replaced by something much less desirable—even distasteful—but which is nevertheless in the best interests of the family (as opposed to the benefit of external units such as the State or the Church). The history of these ultimately self-sacrificing choices—none of the children is compelled to accede—underscores the recurrent message that making the most of fortuitous opportunities is far better than pursuing idealistic and perhaps unattainable dreams or fantasies. This is, of course, a lesson thoroughly grounded in the program of social and spiritual pragmatism associated with predecessors such as Hannah More and Elizabeth Hamilton, and with what Beth Fowkes Tobin has called "the economy of self-regulation."[23] One contemporary reviewer saw clear connections between Hofland's novels and the works of her contemporaries, crediting her with approaching "nearer the genius of Mrs [Elizabeth] Inchbald, and one or two of Mrs [Amelia Alderson] Opie's works, than any other living novelist we know." This is no inconsiderable praise, even if it is immediately dampened by the reviewer's subsequent comment that

22 Subsequent editions of *The Officer's Widow* tended to be called simply "New ed." The title page of the 1815 New York edition, however, already indicated that the copy was that of "the third London edition." Hofland, *The History of an Officer's Widow and Her Young Family* (New York: W.B. Gilley, 1815). Harris published volumes called "new editions" as late as 1834.

23 Beth Fowkes Tobin, *Superintending the Poor: Charitable Ladies and Paternal Landlords in British Fiction, 1770–1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). See especially chap. 4: "*Mansfield Park*, Hannah More, and the Evangelical Redefinition of Virtue."

while her novels display "less sentiment, and more good sense and cleverness" than do some of the other authors' works, they fail to display "the powers of a Mrs [Mary Balfour] Brunton, or Hannah More, or the knowledge of character possessed by Mrs Opie or Miss [Maria] Edgeworth."[24]

Given this company, it is easy to see why Hofland has sometimes been ranked among the evangelical authors and sometimes among the rationalists. And yet, as several scholars have noted, she falls easily into neither category but shares elements of both while still participating—as her literary correspondence suggests—in the more sophisticated forms of literature generally associated with the full-blown "modern" novel for adults.[25] Hofland's tales bring together in a productive combination the familiar Romantic theme of individual initiative and prerogative and the recognizable proto-Victorian impulse to value what is profitable, in both the short and the long term. Especially interesting is how Hofland diverts that Romantic focus on the self and on personal achievement, which typically tends to lead individuals away from community service and interaction, and directs it instead towards that very integration with and devotion to community: in this case the most personal of all community units, the nuclear family. In Hofland's novels, the very destabilization of that family, which has been brought about by the sudden death of the male provider, becomes the enabling condition for the acts of generous self-sacrifice undertaken by the children, acts that are validated in the novels by that most Victorian of indicators of moral and social success: financial profit. Moreover, although the officer's widow in the early novel is portrayed as virtually helpless (especially at first) in dealing with her situation, the clergyman's widow copes much better, while the merchant's widow proves to be the most resilient of all, so much so that the novel bearing her name is as much about her own triumph over adversity as it is about her children's unselfish devotion to serving the best interests of the family.

In fact, these three novels trace the development in Hofland's fiction of one of the patterns that Gary Kelly has associated generally with "fiction for the young" in the Romantic period: the "covert assertion of the potential power of women in a culture that celebrates the domestic sphere as the origin and first shaper of the individual

24 *Monthly Magazine* 53 (1822), 550–51.

25 On this point see, for example, Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period, 1789–1830* (London: Longman, 1989) and Jackson.

self, and the continuing domain of authentic meaning throughout life."[26] "Authentic meaning" is a slippery term, of course, but it would seem—especially in the work of writers such as Hofland, Hamilton, and to some extent More—to designate a moral and spiritual orientation that directly informs both the general behaviour and the economic industry of the characters. In Hofland's novels, for example, this "authentic meaning" lies in the moral economy of the children, and increasingly of their widowed mothers, which is cultivated in service to a capitalist ideology. As Kelly puts it, in the sort of fictional universes in which Hofland typically situates her tales of moral and economic revival, plot and character are part of a closed system circumscribed by an economy that is "moral, financial, and cosmic."[27] In this particularly Darwinian situation, there is no formal social or political "safety net" for families whose male breadwinner is suddenly removed from the scene, and the very survival of the remaining family depends upon its members' moral, spiritual, *and economic* fitness. Thus these tales stress the economic rewards of family solidarity, subjection of personal desire, hard work, and trust in the abiding benevolence of God, rewards that trope in temporal economic terms the presumed eternal spiritual rewards that Hofland expects her readers to regard as the outcome of the Jobean trials with which her characters must wrestle. Furthermore, these implied spiritual rewards are traced in the temporal world by the public admiration of the families' friends and acquaintances, whose approbation forms yet another element of the chorus of praise that generally marks the denouement of one novel after another.

The key to success in each case lies in the tradition of plain hard work—or "industry"—whose roots lie in the working-class values that emerged in the eighteenth century concurrent with the rise of the novel and that plays such an important part in the thought, writing, and social agenda of nineteenth-century England. The structure of this tradition was dramatically and effectively apparent in William Hogarth's famous series of prints *Industry and Idleness* (1747), a visual primer on the pitfalls of one's failure to choose the former over the latter that constitutes one of the few instances in which Hogarth presented in a series or "progress" a wholly positive example, albeit one that is accompanied by a contrasting disastrous one. The representatives of Industry and Idleness, Francis Goodchild and Thomas

26 Kelly, 100.
27 Kelly, 103.

Idle respectively, suggest how Hogarth's upwardly mobile and class-conscious audience regarded the emerging English middle—or professional—class (that is, themselves) and the lower classes. The visual record of the former's moral (and therefore economic) success provides the positive theme, in this sequence of paired engravings, to which Idle's decline supplies the negative counterpoint. Idle's refusal to learn the moral lesson leads inexorably to his execution at Tyburn in his final appearance in the series, while in the sequence's final engraving Francis Goodchild completes his journey from apprentice to Lord Mayor of London. This familiar moral history, recognizable in its original and in numerous variants, informs the sort of fiction being written in the Romantic period by writers such as More, Hamilton, and of course Hofland.

Hofland's *Poems* of 1805 (written before her second marriage) contains a poem entitled "To Industry."[28] The absolute centrality to human experience of industry, which she calls the "Parent of Independence" (line 1), is clear from the statement that, as in Hogarth's series,

> Bereft of thee the brightest talents fade,
> And Genius, heaven-born Genius, wrapt in gloom,
> Sighs out his pæans in oblivion's shade,
> Sad sharer of an undistinguish'd tomb. (lines 9–12)

Following the familiar moral tradition, the poet regards poverty, "whose name appals the mind" (line17), as a fortunate reversal, in at least one respect, because it provides fertile ground for the seed that industry plants when it comes "in humble garb, *by heaven design'd*, / To soothe the howlings of her [Poverty's] ruthless storm" (lines 19–20; emphasis added). The significant point here lies in the explicit linking of industry to a clear heavenly design, a design that, moreover, transforms "the Demon" poverty, lending "her" "a fairer semblance, and a soften'd mien" so that "clean were her hands, and white the rags she wore" (lines 21–23). In other words, industry purifies those suffering individuals who embrace it in the midst of their poverty and misfortune, while transforming poverty itself into something else entirely but which nevertheless would not have come into being without the prior condition of the reversal that produced that initial poverty.

28 Barbara Hoole, *Poems* (Sheffield: J. Montgomery, 1805), 189–91. References are to this edition.

When we remember that, at the time she composed the poems that she finally published in 1805, Hofland had herself recently lost both her fourteen-month-old daughter and then her first husband (Sheffield businessman Thomas Hoole died of consumption in spring 1799), and she was facing impoverishment with her surviving infant son (born in 1798), we see the clear autobiographical significance of "To Industry."[29] In this light we can better appreciate the poem's final stanza:

> Then INDUSTRY! Be thou my bosom's choice,
> Thy animation, arduous Power! bestow,
> And though I haply tremble at thy voice,
> Accept, confirm, the will which binds my vow. (lines 33–36)

This is precisely the lesson that has to be internalized and then acted upon in the novels considered here, not only by the children but also by their widowed mothers. Interestingly, as I observed earlier, none of the widows in these novels remarry, unlike Hofland herself, who did take a second husband. The refusals of those fictional widows to remarry (and thus their decision to lead celibate lives) lend added weight to the almost sacramental quality of the "vow" with which the poem ends and remind us of the extraordinary privileging of virginity in nineteenth-century culture. In fact, the moral design of the novels will not permit any such resolution as the widow's remarriage, which would truncate, by rendering it superfluous, the paradigm of moral and economic development traced in them. In this paradigm, in which "harassed wives or widows reveal strength and ability at a time of crisis," the strength they discover proves to be "practical as well as moral."[30] This pointed rejection of the expected "happy ending" (marriage and money) underscores just how strikingly different is the paradigm that Hofland traces in these novels when it comes to women's ability to discover genuine independence, to overcome apparent disaster, and to cultivate capacities whose presence might otherwise have gone entirely unknown and unrealized. In rejecting the option of remarriage for all three widows, Hofland makes a decidedly feminist statement, refusing to permit the conditions of her

29 This autobiographical element informs many of the poems, including "The Widow to Her Infant, in the Cradle" and "To Frederick," as well as numerous occasional poems upon persons, places, and events in Hofland's circle of experience.

30 Dennis Butts, *Mistress of Our Tears: A Literary and Bibliographical Study of Barbara Hofland* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992), 33.

characters' environment—the woman's in particular—to change yet again.[31] Even so, and not surprisingly, the alternative vision through which Hofland challenges gender hierarchies cannot entirely break free of the prevailing class power dynamics, for even in the paradigmatic case of the merchant's widow Mrs Davantree, the widow still depends upon at least some semblance of male patronage, however indirect.

As will be apparent from the following details of the plots of the three novels, in each case no story proceeds without the removal of the father from the scene—and from the plot. It is his presence that seemingly holds in place the pyramidal patriarchal status quo and

31 Late in her career, Hofland again took up the subject of widowhood in *A Widow and a Will*, a novella published in 1834 with *The Captives in India. The Captives in India, a Tale; and A Widow and A Will*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1834). In this tale, Mrs Ellen Crosbie, the wife of a principal solicitor of a Gloucestershire town, is unexpectedly left with two adolescent daughters and a third of about seven, her husband leaving three thousand pounds to each girl and the remainder of his property to his widow. To the consternation of her older brother, the childless London businessman and widower Mr Joshua Waterford, Mrs Crosbie is seduced by the life of high fashion, to which she increasingly commits her funds and her daughters' lives. She subsequently propels her eldest daughters, Ellen and Maria, into ill-conceived marriages with opportunistic men. These matches end disastrously with Ellen's husband's suicide (after he abandons her) and Maria's husband's impoverishment, and with the financial ruin of Mrs Crosbie herself, who has speculated unwisely with her own money and that of her daughters in the two husbands' unsound schemes. Meanwhile, Hofland has introduced the young, orphaned Arthur Conroy; early on, Arthur was Mrs Crosbie's charge, but, when she ostracized him as insufficiently fashionable for her daughters' company, the benevolent Mr Waterford befriended him and silently provided him with a good education. With the Crosbie family ruined economically, and with the elder daughters having floated the idea of establishing a boarding school to support themselves, Mr Waterford steps in after an absence of several years and, through the good agency of young Conroy, arranges for the distribution among the women of the interest on twenty-four thousand pounds "so as to preserve each party from her own probable weakness" (3:323). In consequence, Mrs Crosbie and Maria live together, caring for the children, while Maria's husband mends his financial ways and establishes a profitable factory in Manchester. At age twenty, Amy happily marries Arthur Conroy(whose name inexplicably has changed to Alfred!), and Mr Waterford ends his days as a contented invalid in the daily company of Amy, "Alfred," and their two young children. In the novella's final sentence, Mr Waterford is dispatched to eternity after spending these twilight years "thankful that he had lived to witness connubial felicity according to his own ideas, and that he had been the means of healing sorrow and restoring content, and of teaching those who were similarly situated how to provide for a 'Widow' and to make 'a Will'" (3:338). Much less interesting than the early "widow" novels, this novella's contrivance and melodrama are matched by a sense of careless haste, most apparent in Hofland's failure to notice that she has altered the young Conroy's Christian name. From any feminist perspective, the tale is even less satisfactory, since (unlike the early novels) it panders to and reinforces the most unfortunate gendered cultural assumptions about women's unsuitability for life in the "real world" and the consequent need for benevolent but nevertheless patronizing male overseers to whose superior intellectual and economic prowess all the characters are left much beholden.

that, as a result, confines everyone else—wife and children alike—in one way or another to the status of the abject. When Hofland eliminates him in each instance, she provides the enabling circumstance for the alternative paradigm of moral-domestic-financial behaviours that are then performed for the reader and that are rewarded financially and lauded verbally, both by individual characters and by Hofland herself in the voice of her authoritative third-person narrator. These novels constitute a clear alternative to what Karen R. Bloom sees in the treatment of widows in most late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novels, which is a discourse intended "to contain the economic potential embodied by such women, in an effort to restrict the perceived chaos triggered by economic changes in English society and sensibility."[32] Quite the reverse: the outcome in Hofland's novels is not chaos but order, and that order is both moral and economic.

Nancy Armstrong has observed of early nineteenth-century fiction that "the novel was identified with fiction that authorized a particular form of domestic relations."[33] She reads the history of fiction in this period in relation to gendered thinking of the time and to the therefore stereotypical views of the "feminine" (and hence "womanly") delineated at the end of the eighteenth century by conduct books of the sort that Erasmus Darwin and others addressed to women. Views of this sort were reinscribed at the middle of the nineteenth century by authors such as Frederic Rowton, who was heavily invested in perpetuating an image of woman as a delicate and recessive repository of sweet sentiment. Hofland's novels implicitly reject this recessive model of woman by presenting an entirely different model, a model of increasingly self-assured development of individual and familial potential that has measurable social and economic consequences for women and for their children. Interestingly, Hofland's widows succeed in significant measure by bringing into active play many of the normally recessive characteristics that the conduct books had sought to force upon them, redeploying them in active, assertive behaviours of themselves and their children.

If, as Armstrong argues, domestic fiction rooted subjectivity "in sexual desire and in one's ability to channel such desire toward socialized goals," then the situation created in Hofland's "widow" novels examines the paradoxical means by which this channelling is brought

32 Bloom, 45.

33 Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 50.

about by the removal of the husband and thus the removal of at least the sanctioned presence of sexual desire. What Freud would identify as libidinous energy is redirected into personal and interpersonal family behaviours whose most visible consequences are economic. This implies that any specifically sexual gratification that might be associated with the widows' remarriage is replaced by an economic gratification that makes the former no longer necessary. This point supports Armstrong's further observation that domestic fiction makes the welfare of the social group as a whole depend upon the regulation of the individual's (sexual) desire, so that nineteenth-century domestic fiction gradually "transformed this fantasy of self-production into the procedures designed to produce men *and women* fit to occupy the institutions of an industrialized society."[34]

In these three novels, however, it is less the adult woman who regulates her desire than it is her several children, perhaps because Hofland addresses the novels primarily to children, whose behaviour she wishes especially to shape and direct. Moreover, the children's "desire" is not necessarily sexual but rather more an aspect of the roles or identities they have created for themselves in idealistic fantasies that were initially permitted by the relative safety of the status quo, which has now been shattered by the deaths of their fathers. Desire is, in fact, transferred into economic terms as a part of the emerging ideology of the professional and artisanal classes in which sexual desire is troped or even supplanted by economic desire, as happens famously in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Thus while several of the daughters put off or conceal their romantic interest in male suitors (their desire for "careers" as wives and mothers), their behaviour is actually comparable to that of their brothers, who curb their own career aspirations in order to contribute more effectively to the struggling family unit.

Furthermore, the more capable and self-reliant widow, Mrs Daventree in *The Merchant's Widow*, is a woman whose eventual success may be directly attributed to the skill (and perseverance) with which she applies the sort of qualities that conduct book authors like Darwin had itemized:

> if to softness of manners, complacency of countenance, gentle unhurried motion, with a voice clear and yet tender, the charms which enchant all hearts can be superadded internal strength and activity of mind, capable to transact the

34 Armstrong, 164 (emphasis added).

> business or combat the evils of life, with a due sense of moral and religious obligation, all is attained which education can supply; the female character becomes compleat, excites our love and commands our admiration.[35]

Women like Mrs Daventree pose no threat to the emerging domestic economy because their essential behaviour is rooted in those social graces that were historically attributed to women, even as their success in rallying their families proceeds from the "internal strength and activity of mind" and the "due sense of moral and religious obligation" that Darwin describes. As Hofland becomes more sophisticated in her treatment of narrative and psychology alike, she begins to distinguish among the attractive and the unattractive features in otherwise "successful" female behaviour, giving us in *The Clergyman's Widow*, for instance, the figure of Lady Barbara Blount, whose aggressive, boisterous behaviour bears out the broad hint in her name and prevents our fully embracing her as an "attractive" female figure, even after we discover the clearly benevolent nature that she conceals behind her bluff facade.

In *The Officer's Widow* (the earliest novel, published anonymously),[36] Charles Belfield, who has been living with the West Yorkshire family of Reverend Atkinson during his father's absence, is gathered up at the age of fifteen by the soldier father he has not seen for eight years, who has served in the West Indies, and who has now procured a military commission for him. Charles is dispatched to the East Indies, returning six years later as a First Lieutenant to marry his childhood sweetheart Maria Atkinson, who bears five children over the next ten years, at which point Belfield is thirty-one years old and Maria twenty-nine. Called to fight three times in these years (1783–93) and promoted to Captain after the third tour, each time he escapes serious injury, but then his regiment is ordered to join "the ill-fated expedition to Holland" (25), which we may understand to be the Duke of York's incompetent campaign in Flanders in April 1793.[37] During that campaign, he is wounded; the strain of his transit home

35 Erasmus Darwin, *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* (London: J. Johnson, 1797), 4.

36 The only contemporary reviewer of the novel assumes that the author is masculine, agreeing "with the author in his preface." *Critical Review; or, Annals of Literature*, s.3, v. 17 (August 1809), 444.

37 Pursued into Bremen by the French general Pichegru after he had defeated the Allies at Fleurus, the Duke's army of volunteers and mercenaries was decimated by the unsanitary conditions on the fields and in the field hospitals during the brutal winter of 1793–94, a fact that provoked both horror and indignation among the British populace.

is more than his weakened body can bear, and all that remains for him is "to see his wife and die" (28).

His destitute wife and children leave Yorkshire for Lincolnshire, where they may live more cheaply. The eldest son, Charles, aged eleven, has long been destined for the ministry. In addition to a natural elegance, he has, Hofland writes, "a disposition and manners so mild and conciliating, that he appeared *by nature* calculated for the pious employment for which his good grandfather had always designed him" (32; emphasis added). Henry, apparently aged nine at this point, is "of a very different description: generous, open, and courageous, but violent, impetuous, and headstrong" (32–33). Henry, whose great plan is to become a soldier, one day rescues a small girl from drowning but is nearly drowned himself and is pulled out by two passing men, one of whom congratulates him warmly on his courage.

Charles, meanwhile, who is constantly solicitous of his weak and easily distressed mother's welfare, continues to prepare for the ministry and is first astonished and then horrified four years later when a letter comes from a friend of his father's who has procured for him a military commission in his own regiment. Nothing could be more distasteful to young Charles, now fifteen, or more contrary to his intentions. Confounded by a situation so alien to his natural inclinations, and painfully conscious of the depressing effect of his distaste on his mother's mood and health, he turns to God for direction. After long consideration, Charles concludes that "it was his duty not only to accept with gratitude a means of honourable subsistence, but to accede to the measure with such a degree of cheerfulness as might free his mother's aching heart from the despondency which he saw had already seized upon it" (48).

Having reported the details of Charles' self-sacrifice, Hofland next turns to his younger brother Henry, whose envy knows no bounds when he realizes that now Charles is destined for the military career, a career for which Charles has no enthusiasm but only a sense of moral duty. When Charles departs, Henry, conscious of the suffering his conduct has inflicted on their ever-frail mother, repents heartily, and mother and son embrace and weep. At this point, Mrs Belfield, who "would not let this opportunity slip of improving his heart, and directing his views," reminds Henry of "the value of that sacrifice his brother had made, in thus entering, for her sake and that of his family, into a line of life discordant with his feelings" (54). She goes on to observe that Charles might have refused the commission,

followed his own preferred course, and "staid at home, impressed as he must be with the idea, that he was leading a useless life, and preying on the parent whom he would rather have supported" (55).[38] Her conclusion is peppered with exclamation points: "But ... how different has been his conduct! How noble his exertions! Charles is indeed a hero; for he has achieved a victory already, greater than many of the proudest names in the list of glory could ever boast—he has conquered his own desires" (55). Point made; lesson learned.

Henry soon gets to test the extent to which he has internalized this moral exemplum. For in the fall of the following year, when Henry would be about fifteen himself, the Belfields are visited by a Mr Corbett, one of the men who had observed Henry's rescue of the little girl. Mr Corbett is a linen-draper in need of an apprentice, and he is interested in a boy of such obvious strength of character. Like his brother nearly two years earlier, Henry now has his turn at horror and revulsion: "I feel that I can never be a tradesman. I would rather be a common soldier, a great deal, than stand behind a counter all day folding muslins and ribbons. My father and my grandfather were in the army, and I am certain that if I am not, I shall never be good for anything" (61). In Mr Corbett's presence, Mrs Belfield brings out the moral lash of guilt, chastising Henry's ingratitude and observing sorrowfully that she "has to lament, that only *one* of her sons is capable of the heroism of self-denial" (62).

In the days that follow, Maria Belfield languishes and becomes positively ill, while Henry agonizes over his decision. Finally, unable any longer to bear the unhappiness his recalcitrance has produced in the household, he agrees to go to Mr Corbett. This decision, which is of course met with lavish praise, produces unexpected opportunities for Henry's sisters, to whom he soon sends "several little elegant toys, such as fancy pin-cushions, needle-cases, thread-boxes ... [and] an assortment of fancy, gilt and drawing paper" (70–71); these are patterns, it turns out. If his sisters make such articles, he can sell them to improve the family's cash-flow. He sends patterns for shirts as well, to be prepared for sale, so young Anne and Maria pursue this project with application and, soon, with success.

When war is declared, after the collapse of the Peace of Amiens, Mr Corbett's eldest son and several other local young men enlist in the

38 Hofland says nothing about Mrs Belfield's curiously selfish and self-serving implication that Charles's further preparations for the ministry would have resulted in "a useless life" that would amount to predation.

army, but not Henry, who explains to Mr Corbett that "When I wished to be a soldier ... it was not for the sake of a red coat. I fancied myself capable of great enterprises, and wonderful achievements. I have, in a great measure, curbed my enthusiasm, as inconsistent with my duties; but if I were to enter into anything like a military life at all, I know it would quite unfit me for anything else, and, therefore, I wish to drop it entirely" (77–78).

Soon Henry again proves himself a hero, saving from a raging house fire a Mrs Lloyd, who we discover is Mrs Corbett's mother. In the process, he is assisted by a stranger, a Quaker linen-draper named Mr Pendleton, who subsequently hires Henry in his own business, but not before Henry has contributed his own financial resources (including a handsome reward from Mrs Lloyd) to help his brother Charles purchase a lieutenancy. Eventually Henry moves into Mr Pendleton's home above the shop, where one night he intervenes in a burglary downstairs just in time to save Mr Pendleton from certain death at the hands of the burglars, struggling with them until help arrives. The grateful Mr Pendleton soon makes Henry his full partner and retires, leaving his house and furniture to him.

Finally, Hofland stages a grand finale, during which Mr Pendleton unites the Belfield family to present a letter announcing that Charles Belfield, who has distinguished himself as a military commander, has also proven a fast friend and counsellor to a wayward young acquaintance, the son of Sir John Domville. Domville is so impressed with young Belfield that he drafts a bequest of a thousand pounds to Mrs Belfield. Charles himself now appears on the scene, to complete the happy reunion. In the warm afterglow of these events, we learn that Henry will soon marry Mr Corbett's daughter, and, on the same day, his elder sister Maria will marry his friend Frederick Crosby, while the younger sister, Anne, is engaged as Henry's housekeeper. The youngest son, Edmund, about whose welfare everyone has been concerned throughout the story, but whose activities have received scant attention, comes to the fore in the closing pages. There it is reported that all four elder children will now commit themselves to his benefit. When Henry inquires what profession Edmund wishes to enter, he responds that he has not concluded a plan, but observes that "I wish to go to college, and be a very learned man" (151). Hofland gives Mrs Belfield the final word, having her observe to her family that "in every situation in life, a man may find occasions to display those virtues he

does possess, and acquire those in which he is deficient; and in the very act of obedience and tenderness to his parents, he has every reason to believe he will be blessed by his Heavenly Father" (152).

I have sketched this plot in some detail because it prefigures those of the two subsequent novels. In *The Clergyman's Widow*, the Reverend Mr Gardiner dies in spring 1793 of consumption, in Lisbon, where he has been sent (paradoxically) for his health. In his last days, he is befriended by a young man who forms the link with the family whose history the novel details and who himself dies of consumption three years later. Mr Gardiner leaves behind his pregnant wife of fifteen years, Maria, and five children, not counting two sons who died in childhood. The surviving children include three daughters and two sons, joined soon by the infant Henry. Unlike Maria Belfield, who is largely paralysed by her misfortune and who has to be superintended in virtually every move, Maria Gardiner takes the initiative in her situation, selling her possessions to her good, concerned neighbours and leaving the parsonage. Her eldest son, George, is taken in hand by the young curate, who serves also as schoolmaster, while the second son, William, is taken in by a kindly farmer, Mr Gooch; the third, the infant Henry, is kept largely offstage until he figures in the plot.

The three Gardiner daughters present predictably diverse characters. The eldest, Maria, is a handsome, animated young woman who combines "a lively sensibility" with "a sweetness of temper, patience of disposition, and firmness of mind, not often united with acute feeling." This lends her a maturity that makes her appear "likely to be not only ... a second mother to the younger branches of her family, but in some measure to supply to their surviving parent the friend she had lost" (40). Sarah, the next daughter, is a beautiful, gentle, meek, but neverthless enthuiastic soul who, despite her innate timidity, "was blessed with an excellent understanding, to which was added intuitive taste, a fine perception of whatever was presented to her mind 'of beautiful and good,' and a faculty of pursuing and combining ideas not often found in early life" (41). The bright and playful Betsey, who is eleven when her father dies, is saved by her "excellent education" from becoming "that dangerous thing, a female wit" (42).

Just as the boys do in *An Officer's Widow*, the eldest daughter here gives up her own aspirations in order to help stabilize the family situation. Maria, who is studious, is temperamentally inclined to be a

teacher, but she correctly observes that she is under-qualified for that occupation but over-qualified for a governess and too young for either in any case, just as she is too young to be a lady's maid. She therefore chooses to devote herself to what she believes to be her appropriate station—that of milliner. This scheme will, she reasons, provide funds to sustain her mother and to send Betsey to school. When Sarah, who is decidedly impractical, asks Maria what *she* is to do, Maria responds, "You must muse and draw, and poetize, and nurse little Henry, my love, and comfort our mother; you can do nothing better than *that*, my dear Sarah, for then you will do us all good" (48).

In fact, Maria is taken on as an apprentice by a local milliner, Mrs Ideson, who offers to let Mrs Gardiner and her younger daughters learn glove-making from her to help make ends meet. Betsey is set up in an inexpensive boarding school. Sarah, left somewhat on her own, is at home one day when a brusque older woman calls; Sarah confides to her that she has a fondness for drawing. When the woman subsequently returns, Sarah inadvertently insults her, for which she is made to feel great shame. The blustery woman is actually Lady Barbara Blount, herself a widow of a wealthy man whose two children had died within a single week of scarlet fever and whose current brusque manner to children masks her keen sensitivity to them. She befriends Sarah and her family and sees to it that Sarah receives instructions in drawing from a young Mr Montgomery, whose patron Lady Barbara is.[39] By the end of the novel, Sarah becomes proficient in her art, and she becomes the wife of her young instructor. Meanwhile son George is taken up by a distant cousin, John Staniland, who learns of the Gardiners' misfortune and whose only son has died. Now aged fourteen, George is soon dispatched to his new residence, where he is subsequently apprenticed in the medical profession. Mrs Gardiner receives a letter indicating that Mr Staniland is so impressed with George that he intends to make him his full partner when he

39 Mr Montgomery is, in many respects, based on Hofland's second husband, Thomas Christopher Hofland (1777–1843), whom she married in 1808. During the early years of their marriage, her writing provided an important part of their income, since her husband's greatest distinction as a landscape painter came only later in his life. Theirs was universally acknowledged to have been a bad marriage. Ramsey, for instance, makes much of the unhappiness inflicted upon Hofland by her husband's apparently brutish behaviour. The later comment of W.J. Roberts is typical: "In 1808 she married Mr Hofland, an event which crowned her troubles for, although outwardly there was no sign of it, there is every certainty that the overbearing selfishness of Hofland, and his lack of consideration for any but himself, made their home-life almost unendurable." Roberts, *Mary Russell Mitford: The Tragedy of a Blue Stocking* (London: Andrew Melrose, 1913), 185.

reaches the age of twenty-three. William, who has been residing with the Gooches, is granted a position at Christ's Hospital in London, where he also thrives. The youngest child, Henry, remains a difficulty, for no one sees any way of directing or providing for his future.

Maria, however, receives a marriage proposal from a very eligible young man, Mr Clarkson, whose proposal has the approval of both his father and Maria's mother. When Maria rejects his proposal, both parents are startled and not a little annoyed; only later do we learn she is in love with the young curate, Mr Wallingford, whom she eventually marries—happily of course—when he is set up with his own curacy. Soon comes a letter announcing a settlement upon Mrs Gardiner of twenty-five-hundred pounds, an arrangement concluded through the agency of Lady Barbara. Betsey, now turned nineteen, is betrothed to that same Mr Clarkson whom her sister Maria had earlier rejected.

With all these good things settled, Mrs Gardiner moves back to her home parish, near Maria and her husband, and Henry visits his mother frequently. William, we are told, has gone off to college, George is thriving, and Betsey remains the good-humoured centre of the household. Lady Barbara now turns over her house and possessions to her artistic young protege, Mr Montgomery, which makes it possible for him to propose to Sarah, who quickly accepts. Hofland reports at the end that, the year having reached 1810, these are the developments: Maria has given birth to two young Wallingfords; the Montgomerys are both enjoying fame; Betsey has married Mr Clarkson; George has married John Staniland's daughter and taken over his father-in-law's business; William has obtained a fellowship in his college, where he is much admired; Henry has taken a position with the elder Mr Clarkson; and Mrs Gardiner is living happily "in a pretty cottage near the parsonage, where she enjoys the daily sight of her grandchildren, and the society of their invaluable mother [Maria]" (180).

Finally, in *The Merchant's Widow*, a comparable history unfolds. Here, though, the widow is even better able to attend to her own affairs and is even more unlike the abject and paralysed officer's widow. This fact undoubtedly reflects Hofland's own experience; her first husband, Thomas Bradshawe Hoole, a merchant, died in 1798 after two years of their marriage, and the failure of the company entrusted with his estate left her penniless with a young daughter (who soon died) and an infant son. She subsequently published a volume of poems to bring in a bit of money, opened a boarding school at Harrogate (which

soon failed), and turned to writing for a living before marrying for the second time.[40] Mrs Daventree, whose husband dies of apoplexy brought on by the ruin of his international trade when the Peace of Amiens fails in 1803, steps in after the catastrophe of her husband's death, devises a plan to pay his creditors, sustain the family, and get on with life. Not all widows in similar circumstances succeeded as Mrs Daventree does; Hill cites the case of a London silk mercer's widow, left with three children in 1780, who found herself unable to maintain her dead husband's business, lost everything, "took to drinking and died."[41] The key lies in each child's willingness to make a conscious choice to opt for the role in family and professional life that benefits the family, even at the cost of the individual child's aspirations. Again there are seven children, the oldest being the sensitive, retiring thirteen-year-old Henry and his generous but impetuous twelve-year-old brother Charles, and the youngest being Anne and Eliza, who are described at the outset as "pretty infants, the darlings and playthings of the rest" (6). I will not detail the entire novel, which is characterized by a greater than usual number of ingenious twists and surprises in the plot. I want to note, however, that these children prosper as well, and that one of them, Edward (the "middle" son) is taken up by no less than Sir John Soane, described as "the generous, intelligent friend to whom they looked for instruction and assistance in the branch of art to which the young enthusiast was so completely devoted" (87), who becomes his patron when Edward displays an unusual ability at architectural studies.[42] As she does with Sarah in *The Clergyman's Widow* and the young Edmund in *An Officer's Widow*, Hofland permits Edward to pursue his chosen interest in life, this course of development made possible by the sacrifices and generosity of others, including most notably his siblings.

Hofland says more—and says it in more particular detail—about the merchant's widow, Mrs Daventree, and her personal standards,

40 *Poems* (1805). The "little volume" (as the author called it in her dedication) is in fact a considerable one, running to 256 pages. In her preface, she points indirectly to the frankly economic necessity behind her publication, observing of her poems that "it is well known in the circle of [the author's] acquaintance, that they have not been printed from motives of ambition or ostentation" (iv).

41 Hill, 245. Hill draws this example from *The Autobiography of Francis Place, 1771–1854*, ed. Mary Thale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 88.

42 Hofland would later publish *Sir John Soane's Museum and Library, London: Description of the House and Museum on the North Side of Lincoln's Inn Fields, the Residence of Sir John Soane* (London: Levey, Robson, and Franklyn, 1835).

beliefs, and behaviour than she does about any of the other widows. Early on, for example, she observes that the "higher power of self-denial and holy resolution Mrs Daventree derived from her piety, which was sincere, humble, and efficacious, and which united with her affection for the memory of her beloved husband, and the sense of justice to her fellow-creatures, [combined] to produce that line of conduct she had marked out for herself" (59). Her entire family thrives and, through a number of happy circumstances, the Daventree financial fortunes are largely restored, so that by the novel's end:

> happy in her children, easy in her circumstances, beloved by her friends, and respected by all, Mrs Daventree is enabled gratefully to adore that Providence whose will she obeyed, and whose mercies have led her, step by step, "through clouds and thick darkness," to a quiet resting-place for the evening of her days, and has enabled her not only to answer every lawful demand of the creditors of her late husband, thereby fully absolving his good name from reproach, and honestly satisfying all who might suffer from his misfortune, but likewise permitted her to reward the kindness of those who befriended her in the hour of distress, or who now demand her compassion as objects of charity. (174–75)

The result of this history is that

> When Mrs Daventree entered on her present establishment, although she might be said to resume her own situation in life only, yet she certainly experienced a gratification in the gifts of fortune which she had never known before; and as all riches and poverty are comparative, although her powers of expenditure are considerably less than they were in her early life, yet they appear to be *more*, and confer, apparently, many more gratifications to herself, and more extensive power of benefitting others; since there are many paths of economy taught only to those who are under the necessity of treading them; and notwithstanding the misfortunes which befell Mrs Daventree evidently tried one who was already a wise and good woman, it is only right to say that she came out of this ordeal a still *wiser* and *better* woman; for our Heavenly Father doth not afflict his children to no end; and where sorrow is sustained with Christian humility, patience, and hope, it purifies the heart, enlightens the judgment, leads us nearer to God, by faith and prayer, and unites us more closely to our fellow creatures, by a participation of their sufferings, and a sympathy in their feelings. (175–76)

Where does this leave us, then? Certainly we see in novels like these the early evidence of a change in values and priorities within the family structure, a change brought on in no small part by the reduction of the male population during the years of war with France. In these years, the casualties that were a fact of English life produced across the nation situations like those recorded in Hofland's three

novels. The strategies for coping with these family catastrophes, which the novels sketch for readers, were in many respects idealistic in terms of the happy twists of fortune within the plots. But they were eminently pragmatic in their reiterated prescription of the subordination of individual desire to the welfare of the family unit. In this program, Hofland addresses the needs not just of the children in the novels and the child readers or listeners, but also of the women, mothers, and widows in those novels—and, again, the women who read them privately or read them aloud to young and impressionable children. At the same time, we glimpse in the novels a clear suggestion that the presence of the father—and the patriarchal establishment he represents—impedes the full development of independence and self-reliance on the parts of the wife and children because it creates a sheltered environment in which none of these other characters needs to explore her or his potential fully. His presence not only perpetuates their dependency upon him, in other words, but also stands in the way of their own individuation and consequently leaves them "incomplete" as moral, spiritual, and—ultimately—economic entities. These novels bear significant implications for the situation of women and children at the time, as well as for some of the issues with which feminist inquiry is concerned in our own.

Writing in 1825 about another of Hofland's novels, *Moderation* (1825), a *Monthly Review* critic observed that the third and most purely exemplary daughter portrayed in that novel, Emma, who is "by nature tractable and sensible," acquires, by means of repeated trials, "*the regulation of her own heart*, so far that, in whatever relation she is called on to act or suffer, she is entire mistress over her feelings."[43] The emphasized phrase is particularly striking, for it is only a short step from the sort of things we see in the three novels by Hofland considered here (and in others that followed) to the remark that David Copperfield—himself the son of a young widow—makes repeatedly about the need to "discipline his heart" by abandoning "the airy dreams of youth that are incapable of realisation"[44] in favour of practical and profitable

43 *Monthly Review; or Literary Journal, Enlarged Series* 108 (September 1825), 88 (emphasis added).

44 The comment comes near the end, in chap. 48 (significantly entitled "Domestic") before Dora's death and while David is reassessing his situation in light of his wife's constitutional inability to be the practical, sensible "angel in the house" that we associate particularly with the prototypical Victorian wife (and mother). Dora is most like Maria Belfield in her inability to function effectively on her own and without aid and direction, especially from men; she is therefore decidedly unlike both Mrs Gardiner and—even more so—Mrs Daventree.

courses of action that lie within the reach of those morally earnest realists who are capable of seeing them, appreciating them, and following them. It may be no surprise, then, that Dickens, who was born in 1812—the year *The Clergyman's Widow* was published—should nearly forty years later depict the adult David Copperfield's eminently sensible marital transition from his dead "child-wife" Dora to the solid Agnes Wickfield, whose lifetime had inscribed a career of domestic management and whose emblem had been not a disordered household but rather a set of keys. Not the slight productions they have frequently been considered by traditional literary history, Hofland's novels constitute an early manifestation of the emerging strain of realism that would characterize the arts, sciences, and culture of later nineteenth-century England. At the same time, they outline an alternative, feminist model of women's (and families') response to sudden reversal that painted for generations of "younger" readers, in particular, a group portrait of principled personal development that was grounded in the evangelical principles of industry, humility, self-awareness, and the ennobling generosity of self-sacrifice that marks the fully individuated persona.

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