Studies in Scottish Literature

Volume 22 | Issue 1 Article 13

1987

Charitable Actions Reevaluated in the Novels of Henry Mackenzie

Elaine Ware

Elaine Ware

Charitable Actions Reevaluated in the Novels of Henry Mackenzie

Many critics, notably David Spencer, suggest that Henry Mackenzie supported the ideals of his age in order to suit audience taste rather than out of fervor of belief. Spencer points to the practicality of the Scottish lawyer as well as to his seeming lack of sentiment for his contemporaries as evidence of the true Mackenzie hidden behind the facade of benevolence.[1] Should we condemn Mackenzie then as a mere literary opportunist? I think not. Mackenzie was under no financial duress to please the reading public; therefore, his motives lay elsewhere. It is true that Mackenzie may have joined the benevolence bandwagon, in part, because of the popularity of sentimentalism, but I believe that he wrote out of a sincere concern for man's moral duty towards man. Mackenzie's treatment of benevolence is not superficial. The development and exposition of the philanthropist and the misanthrope, which most of his contemporaries made the mainstay of their writings, are only introductory to Mackenzie's main concern. Mackenzie centers on a much deeper moral consideration: the effects of charity on the recipient. Mackenzie delves into the physical as well as the psychological effects of charity on the poor, and he emphasizes the negative results in his treatment. This theme is implied in embryonic form in *The Man of Feeling* (1771), but it develops further in *The*

---

[1]David Spencer, "Henry Mackenzie, a Practical Sentimentalist," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 3 (1967), 314.

Man of the World (1773), and finally explicitly matures in *Julia De Roubigné* (1777).

In an age rebuking actions based solely on rational motivations, many writers including Mackenzie examined emotion and feeling as directives for action. Rather than the seventeenth century's belief in man's depravity, the eighteenth century's moral philosophy was based on the innate benevolence of man. One of the most important tenets of the ethics of the period was the notion of charity, or benevolence. Modern readers immediately think of almsgiving, but Mackenzie's contemporaries thought of charity primarily as a deep concern for the welfare of another. That inner conviction, of course, must not remain a mere abstraction but must be transformed into charitable action.

Many writers of the period tried to define charity and to give directions for its proper administration. Late in the seventeenth century the clergy fervently preached charity in sermons. According to R.S. Crane, the clergy's religious guidance established the early foundations for the eighteenth century's "man of feeling."[2] One important theologian, Issac Barrow, preached frequent charitable themes. In one sermon he offers a twenty-page definition of charity. To Barrow, "Loving our neighbor doth imply that we should value and esteem him...." Charity is "a sincere and earnest desire for his welfare.... Hence readily should we pour forth our prayers, which are the truest expressions of good desires for the welfare of our neighbor."[3] Barrow continues to explain the offices of charity, and only towards the end of his exposition does he briefly mention benevolent acts and notes that action does not stop with prayer. Charity also implies "readiness upon all occasions to do him good,"and the willingness to give "to his neighbor all kinds of assistance and relief, according to his neighbor's needs and his own ability" (354, 355). Harold William Thompson claims that in addition to religious leaders, the philosophers Shaftesbury, David Hume, and Francis Hutcheson also showed concern for the "moral sense, which determines its possessor to approve Benevolence."[4] Similar concern, or "sympathy," for others was expressed by Adam Smith, a friend of Mackenzie, as "fellow-feeling." Smith states that "To man is allotted the care of his own happiness, of that of his

---

[2]R.S. Crane, "Suggestions Toward a Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling,'" *Journal of English Literary History*, 3 (1934), 205.

[3]Issac Barrow, *The Theological Works of Issac Barrow, D.D., Vol. II*, ed. Alexander Napier (Cambridge, 1859), pp. 338, 342, 343.

[4]Harold William Thompson, *A Scottish Man of Feeling: Some Account of Henry Mackenzie Esq. of Edinburgh and of the Golden Age of Burnes and Scott* (London, 1931), p. 15.

family, his friends, his country."[5] Still another contemporary of Mackenzie, Henry Fielding, expounds charity as "Good Nature...that benevolence and amiable Temper of Mind which disposes us to feel the Misfortunes and enjoy the Happiness of others; and consequently pushes us on to promote the latter...."[6] Although the advocates of benevolence often expressed charitable feelings in different terminology, they agreed in spirit about man's beneficent impulse and his responsibility to aid others.

An eighteenth century Scotsman needn't read religious or philosophical tracts to be aware of charitable ethics; he need merely to glance at a newspaper or periodical. The Scottish presses not only presented the local writers' ethical views, but they also drew heavily from the English presses, often reprinting ethical essays from sources such as *The Rambler* and *The Spectator*. Mary Elizabeth Craig's survey of Scottish periodicals reveals the ethical concerns of the era. *The Scots Magazine* presented a general review of religious, political, and literary subjects.[7] The theme of charity no doubt was also included in the *Exhortation*, a periodical solely consisting of sermons (4). *The Scots Spy or Critical Observer* exhibited concern for the poor as evidenced by a poem entitled "The City Beggar" (26). This publication later became known as *The New Scots Spy or Critical Observer* and proclaimed as its aim: "to give every encouragement to such gentlemen as incline to devote their performances to...virtue and morality" (27). Mackenzie, himself, was involved as editor and chief contributor of *The Mirror* (1779-80), later to be renamed *The Lounger* (1785-87). This journal presented a series of essays on morality, literature, propriety, and refinement. The theme of charity frequently recurs in tales of benevolent philanthropists offering aid to the needy.

The novels of the day also abound in charitable themes. Even as early as Richardson's *Pamela* (1739) charitable actions towards family and servants were recommended. Fielding, too, shows that benevolent characters like Parson Adams and Joseph from *Joseph Andrews* (1742) prosper. Goldsmith praises benevolence in *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) when the Vicar is rescued from poverty and jail. Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* (1759) also shows the goodness which occurs as a result of Toby's charitable acts towards Le Fever. Even Smollett in *Humphrey Clinker* (1771) touches on the charitable and hospitable people whom Bramble encounters in his travels. All of these novelists showed some interest in the positive aspects

---

[5]Adam Smith, *Adam Smith's Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. Herbert W. Schneider (New York, 1948), pp. 74, 250.

[6]Henry Fielding, *Miscellanies by Henry Fielding, Esq.*, ed. Henry Knight Miller (Oxford, 1972), I, 158.

[7]Mary Elizabeth Craig, *The Scottish Periodical Press, 1750-1789* (Edinburgh, 1931), p. 33.

of charity. In short, the spirit of charity and benevolence was at its peak in all types of literature throughout Scotland and England during the eighteenth century.

Mackenzie's thematic treatment of charity does not wholeheartedly endorse benevolence; he shows that charitable actions can have dubious results. To investigate the effects of charitable actions, Mackenzie develops two types of characters; philanthropists and misanthropes. The philanthropists fall into two distinct subtypes in Mackenzie's writings: 1) the benevolent man, for example Harley in *The Man of Feeling*, who generously helps the needy and seeks only personal satisfaction in return, and 2) the philanthropist who gives to the poor in exchange for public recognition as a benevolent man. Of course, the anonymous giver is the pure type. Counterpoised with benevolent characters are Mackenzie's misanthropes. There are types here too. The first type is a benevolent person at heart whose benevolence is constantly thwarted by an indifferent world. Like the nameless misanthrope in *The Man of Feeling*, this type withdraws from the world and from charitable action, yet his nature and impulses, if cynical, remain benevolent. The second type is the false philanthropist who outwardly professes benevolence but is inwardly evil. Mackenzie splits the development of this second type in two directions: 1) some misanthropes, for example the nameless gentleman in Chapter XXV of *The Man of Feeling,* remain evil, and 2) others, like Sindall in *The Man of the World,* change their evil ways in the closing pages of the work.

In spite of the contrasting motives of the misanthrope with those of the philanthropist, Mackenzie's poor characters suffer at the hands of both. The physical and financial sufferings at the hands of the misanthrope are easily discerned, but suffering due to truly charitable works is more difficult to trace. In the case of true benevolence, Mackenzie illustrates the negative psychological effects of charity on the pride of the recipient. Not only is the recipient humbled by the reception of good works and money, but that humility is emphasized by the poor man's inability to repay the kindness he receives. This consideration of the recipient's position is important and continues to mature in each of Mackenzie's writings.

Mackenzie's friend, Adam Smith, and his acquaintance, Samuel Johnson, were also concerned with this problem; perhaps they contributed to or at least exchanged ideas with Mackenzie concerning the recipient's dilemma. Smith claims that "the poor man...is ashamed of his poverty." He feels that "Nothing is so mortifying as to be obliged to expose our distress to the view of the public." The poor man's shame seems emphasized because "gratitude...approaches nearest to what is called a perfect and complete obligation" (91, 116). Johnson, too, expressed that "To be obliged, is to be in some respect inferior to another." He understands from personal experience that the poor want to repay kindness:

> Kindness is generally reciprocal; we are desirous of pleasing others, because we receive pleasure from them; but by what means can the man please, whose atten-

> tion is engrossed by his distress, and who has no leisure to be officious; whose will is restrained by his necessities, and who has no power to confer benefits....[8]

That Mackenzie also was distressed about the recipient's embarrassment becomes evident in his novels.

In *The Man of Feeling* Mackenzie shows the negative aspects of both false and true charity in rudimentary plot elements. First, he illustrates false charity when the seduced Emily falls victim to a seemingly benevolent woman. The false philanthropist early offers shelter and kindness to the forlorn Emily, but once Emily's "dependence" is secured, the evil nature of the procuress comes to the surface.[9] Emily becomes financially dependent and must submit to prostitution until rescued by Harley.

Mackenzie not only depicts suffering at the hands of a false philanthropist but secondly shows the psychological suffering of recipients due to true benevolence. The first example is Mountford, the penniless gentleman to whom the rich Sedley offers the tutorship of Sedley's son. Mountford, in Mackenzie's words, is "a proud fool" who is reluctant about being dependent on Sedley. The elder Sedley responds that there is "no such word" as "dependence" between friends (89-90). Mountford's negative reaction to charitable acts is Mackenzie's first indication of the poor man's disinclination to accept charity.

An even more poignant example of the negative psychological effects of charity on the poor is seen in "The Pupil" in the story of the sick, imprisoned man. Having received charity from Mountford, the wife of the imprisoned wretch "crawled" on the floor clasping Mountford's knees in expression of gratitude. Her husband responds to her actions with, "Compose yourself, my love." This phrase along with his request of the philanthropist to excuse his wife's behavior seems to be an indication of the man's embarrassment. Mackenzie's choice of words shows the degradation of the recipient. After the younger Sedley has also given money to the man, the recipient asks a question: "'I do not mean attempting to thank you' (he took a pocket-book from under his pillow) 'let me but know what name I shall place here next to M. Mountford?'" (91-92). This seemingly trivial incident becomes significant upon examination. The poor man writes down the names of his benefactors because he intends to repay the generosity shown him. Mackenzie illustrates in *The Man of Feeling* that the recipient, often averse to accepting charity, will when in dire circumstances accept money with full intention of reciprocating at a later date.

---

[8]Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, ed. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven, 1969), p. 118.

[9]Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, *Miscellaneous Works of Henry Mackenzie, Esq.* (New York, 1837), p. 56.

Not all of Mackenzie's recipients of charity in *The Man of Feeling* experience problems. Old Edwards gracefully receives the small homestead and good will of Harley, but even Edwards makes "some attempts towards an acknowledgment for these favours" (78). At this period in his writing Mackenzie was still able to show the good that could result from true benevolence. But as his work develops over the years, he places less emphasis on the good effects of charity, and gives more attention to the negative effects of charitable acts.

Most charitable works in *The Man of the World* are disguised evils performed by Sir Thomas Sindall, a would-be benefactor. Young Billy Annesly falls victim to the villainous Sindall because of false philanthropy. Sindall's offers of charity to Billy are cloaked methods to gain access to Billy's sister, Harriet. Sindall shelters and offers his companionship to Billy, who is at first happy to receive seemingly benevolent attentions. After receiving many kindnesses from Sindall and his friends, Billy becomes "indebted" to them and feels a certain responsibility to comply with their wishes in much the same way as did Emily in *The Man of Feeling*. Eventually, after much prodding Annesly falls from "innocence" and participates in their "vice".[10] Sensual pleasures plunge Billy into debt only to be retrieved by Sindall, thus to be under more obligation. Sindall takes advantage of his recent benevolence towards Billy to propose that Harriet become Sindall's mistress. Upon Billy's rejection of the proposition, Sindall calculates further seductions to gain control over Billy and, consequently, over Harriet. Sindall's schemes are eventually successful, and Billy falls again into poverty. "Though his pride for a while kept him quiet, it was at last overcome," and Billy borrows money, thus diving into deeper debt (219). Forced to the depths of gambling and armed robbery in order to survive, Billy is arrested and sentenced to fourteen years exile. But before Billy's deportation "He called in an exact account of his debts, those to Sindall not excepted, and discharging them in full, much against the inclination of Sir Thomas, who insisted, as much as in decency he could, on canceling every obligation of that sort to himself. But Annesly was positive in his resolution" (241). As in *The Man of Feeling*, the poverty-stricken man abhors charity but is forced by circumstances to accept. As a last resort to free himself of many debtors and to regain integrity, Annesly calls upon his father's credit to repay the loans, thus owing money only to family. BIlly has suffered physically as well as psychologically because of false philanthropy.

Her brother Billy's life is disrupted by false philanthropy, but Harriet's life is destroyed by Sindall's "benevolence." Believing that Sindall has been a true benefactor to her brother, "at the sight of him, her cheek was flushed with the mingled glow of shame for her brother, and gratitude towards his benefactor" (230). This juxtaposition of shame and gratitude

---

[10]Mackenzie, *The Man of the World*, *Miscellaneous Works*, p. 204.

recurs throughout Mackenzie's work, thus pointing to the degrading aspects of receiving charity. Harriet, too, is caught in the deceptive web of Sindall's charity. He secretly plans the kidnapping of Harriet in which he feigns to be her rescuer. After the "rescue" she is drugged and raped by the hypocrite. Her resulting pregnancy, madness, and death occur because of Sindall's tortures.

Harriet not only suffers at the hands of a villain, but she also psychologically suffers because of the kind acts of Mr. Rawlinson, a true benefactor. When Rawlinson gives her a large sum of money, she responds: "Though I feel sir...with the utmost gratitude, those sentiments of kindness and generosity you have expressed towards me, you will excuse me, I hope from receiving this mark of them." The proud Harriet, although she needs the money, fears that some show of affection would be owing to Rawlinson in return. Rawlinson responds to her rejection with: "I see, and her pride will no more than her affections submit itself to my happiness." Mackenzie's choice of the word "submit" indicates that the recipient has lower status than the benefactor. Harriet's father, too, is a proud person and is at first unwilling for his daughter to accept the money. Mackenzie through the mouthpiece of the elder Annesly explains the dilemma of the poor: "There is a delicacy my best friend, in our situation; the poor must be ever cautious, and there is a certain degree of pride which is their safest virtue" (255). Mackenzie seems to be issuing a warning to the poor to avoid receiving charity and becoming obligated to others. As in *The Man of Feeling,* the poor characters in *The Man of the World* suffer negative psychological effects from charity whether it be motivated by false or by true benevolence.

While Mackenzie emphasizes the misanthropic character in Sindall, he still creates a few admirable philanthropists who help to offset a totally dark vision of charity. Lucy, Miss Walton, Bolton, and Rawlinson all are examples of true benefactors. The poor respond to the charitable acts of these philanthropists with "benediction on...knees," and "lips...pressed" to hands (287, 289). Both responses raise the status of the giver while relegating the recipient to a lower footing. That some good is also done by the philanthropists cannot be denied, but Mackenzie, for the most part, accentuates the negative effects of charity.

In *Julia De Roubigné*, Mackenzie only mentions in passing the good done through charitable works; instead, he stresses the negative results of true benevolence. Montauban early shows admiration for Julia because of her charitable works: "she dispensed mirth and gayety to some poor families in our neighborhood."[11] Mackenzie tells that the recipients express gratitude towards Julia but gives no further detail; this is the only instance of charity in the novel in which Mackenzie does not show the negative as-

---

[11]Mackenzie, *Julia De Roubigné, Miscellaneous Works*, p. 366.

pects of charity. The rest of *Julia De Roubigné* illustrates the charitable transaction and resulting disaster for Montauban, M. Roubigné, and Julia and also depicts Savillon's dependency on his uncle. In all of these incidents charity does not finally comfort the recipients.

Mackenzie presents Montauban as an example of the worthy benefactor who searches for a humane way to approach the poor. The rich Montauban makes an acquaintance with M. Roubigné "not by offering favors, but by asking one." This psychology is very effective in putting the poor man at ease because it gives Roubigné "back the power of conferring an obligation" (361).

To be able to repay Montauban's kindness is a must for M. Roubigné's pride. When Roubigné was rich he charitably saved Savillon's father from debt. Here too "arose a sort of dependence on the one side." Julia interprets her father's former psychological attitude toward charity: "he thinks of a man as his inferior, only that he may do him a kindness more freely" (374). That Roubigné saw the low nature of the recipient when he, himself, was a benefactor is quite evident. That he would have difficulty in accepting charity when he is in need seems only natural. Montauban, learning that Roubigné is in debt, anonymously forwards the money to the debtor. Roubigné "would die before he would ask such a favor of any one, so high minded he is, notwithstanding all his misfortunes" (391). After his bills are paid "some remains of that pride, which formerly rankled under the receipt of favors it was unable to return" appear in M. Roubigné (393). He truly suffers because he is unable to repay Montauban. And Julia "is now the partner of his humiliation" (394).

The extreme desire of the poor to reciprocate, Mackenzie clearly reveals in Julia's sacrifice to repay Montauban's generosity. Julia announces

> Tell the Count de Montauban, that Julia De Roubigné offers that hand to his generosity, which she refused to his solicitation;—tell him also, she is above deceit: she will not conceal the small value of the gift. 'Tis but the offerings of a wretch, who would somehow requite the sufferings of her father, and the services of his friend (394).

This is the ultimate example of desperation by the poor to retain a sense of honor or status. Roubigné likens Julia's hand to a monetary commodity and tells Montauban: "That hand...is the last treasure of Roubigné. Fallen as his fortunes are, not the wealth of worlds had purchased it; to your friendship, to your virtue, he is blessed in bequeathing it" (395). Roubigné derives great satisfaction from this transaction, and he establishes himself on a plane more equal to Montauban than that of the recipient.

Unfortunately, the result of this exchange is disastrous because Montauban poisons Julia when he suspects that his "possession" is unfaithful to him. Montauban admits, "I purchased her consent, I bribed her, I bought her..." by giving money to M. Roubigné (441). Montauban knew the proud nature of the family, and he had suspected that Julia

would try to make some recompense for his benevolence. Montauban finally rushes to suicide after he realizes Julia's innocence. Both characters suffer, in part, because of excess emotion and uncontrolled impulse, but they also experience misery because of the tense nature of the charitable situation. Charity to Mackenzie implies one who is able and willing to give and another who is in need and forced to accept. It implies a great difference in status between the two parties, and it leaves the recipient obliged. Marriage as repayment of a debt carries the idea of obligation to an extreme. The marriage is doomed from the start because obligation does not make for binding relationships of the heart; only love or concern can do that. Perhaps Mackenzie is pointing out the folly in attempting to repay kindness, as well as the inadvisability of accepting charity in the first place.

Mackenzie quickly reiterates the disinclination of the poor to receive charity in Savillon's story. Briefly, Savillon is dependent upon a benevolent uncle for his livelihood. In spite of the uncle's kindness, Savillon "wish[es] for an opportunity to be assiduous in his service; till [he] can do something on [his] part, his uncle's favors are debts upon [him]" (413). The theme of debt and obligation has become of chief importance to Mackenzie in *Julia De Roubigné*.

To Mackenzie, the act of charity is riddled with problems and paradoxes. The truly benevolent man faces a dilemma. If he gives to the poor, he may hurt their pride; but if he does not, and disasters such as imprisonment, starvation, and death occur, then he may feel that he has failed to perform his moral duty. The poor man, too, faces embarrassment, dependency and obligation on the one hand, and comfort and physical well-being on the other. Since Mackenzie stresses the negative effects of charity, does it follow that he advocates the discontinuation of benevolent actions? This interpretation seems extreme. Mackenzie perceives potential problems in charitable actions, so his writing may be read as a warning or caution to both the philanthropist and the recipient. To the philanthropist he suggests a benevolent way to offer assistance and also discretion upon whom he bestows charity. Mackenzie warns the misfortunate against accepting charity except in times of dire need and then cautions that the poor man should be careful from whom he receives help.

Mackenzie moves from an emphasis on benevolence in *The Man of Feeling* to stress misanthropy in *The Man of the World*. His vision is noticeably darker in the second novel. With the development of the benevolently motivated Montauban in *Julia De Roubigné* one expects a return to a brighter vision, but Mackenzie shows that on the contrary even benevolent actions create problems for the recipient of charity.

In all of Mackenzie's novels the poor feel greatly indebted to and dependent upon philanthropists. They feel the distinction in status, and in order to raise their level to that of the benefactor they try to repay in some fashion. Mackenzie acknowledges the social class struggle of his day by

pointing out the rising class consciousness among the lower classes. The poor are no longer satisfied to receive charity, thus being relegated to a low rank. Perhaps Mademoiselle Roubigné's words best exemplify the new current of thought: "misfortune is not always misery" (403). Mackenzie may feel that the plight of the poor man is bearable as long as he can maintain his integrity and pride. Perhaps the physical comfort gained from charity is not worth the mental degradation that accompanies it.

Middle Tennessee State University