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Although it is a distortion, Oliver Goldsmith (1730?-74) was and has been known as a lesser Johnson, a figure to be eclipsed by Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) or a person to illustrate Johnson's greatness. Goldsmith himself acutely knew the comparison and among others, James Boswell made fun of it. In his *Journal of a Tour to Hebrides* Boswell sneeringly records Goldsmith's humiliation as 'a good story of Dr. Goldsmith'. Rev. George Graham spoke to 'Doctor' and Goldsmith answered. To this response Graham said: 'No, ... 'tis not you I mean, Dr. Minor; 'tis Doctor Major, there.' Thus called as 'Dr Minor' against Johnson as Dr Major, Goldsmith "afterwards spoke of it himself. 'Graham, (said he,) is a fellow to make one commit suicide.'" ¹ Johnson's overwhelming calibre influenced his psychology in various ways, for better or worse in steering his literary career. It must have been overall beneficial, while it presents Goldsmith's place somewhat pathetic.²

What makes his life still more pathetic is his thwarted ambitions. He aspired to be a physician. Unfortunately he failed to take a medical degree at Edinburgh; 'Doctor' was the courtesy title. He aspired to go to Madras as a physician and surgeon, investing some money. He failed to meet the requirements to get a license. ³ Later in his literary life, he aspired to edit an

¹ *Boswell's Life of Johnson Together with Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's Diary of a Journey into North Wales* ed. George Birkbeck Hill and L.F. Powell vol. V (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 97.

² Johnson helped Goldsmith in various ways; for example, the manuscript of *The Vicar of Wakefield* was sold by Johnson to make some money for Goldsmith in penury; Johnson is said to have helped him in finishing his major poems; Johnson composed a Greek epitaph for him after his death.

³ John Ginger, *The Notable Man: The Life and Times of Oliver Goldsmith* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977), pp. 106-7, 111-12.

encyclopaedia (was this his ambition to square with Johnson's dictionary?). His plan was star-studded: Johnson writing on ethics, Sir Joshua Reynolds on painting, Charles Burney on music, and David Garrick on the theatre. If his plan had been realized, it would, not only have enlightened the contemporary purchaser of the book, but also illuminate, on behalf of students today, the intellectual world of the prominent men in their fields as well as eighteenth-century arts and culture.⁴ Thus even a cursory look at his life suggests, if putting aside the comparison with Johnson, pathos and frustration. Even after his success in literature, it did not make his life easy. He was not a worldly-wise kind of man who managed things to his best convenience. A Goldsmith by John Hawkins goes like this: Goldsmith told the Earl (later Duke) of Northumberland that he preferred booksellers to dependence on the aristocratic patron. Considering the writers' struggle in the transition of production of literature, this sounds like a very high-minded statement of a modern writer. However, the heroic refusal of benefit inspired in Hawkins not admiration but pity for his naivety.

Johnson summed up his distress when he died:

He died of a fever, made, I am afraid, more violent by uneasiness of mind. His debts began to be heavy, and all his resources were exhausted. Sir Joshua is of opinion that he owed not less than two thousand pounds.

He records the miserable state of a writer oppressed by debts. Johnson, who did much to elevate the status of writers, did not forget to add one more sentence to this report: 'Was ever poet so trusted before?'⁵ So, he mentions both the writer's financial distress and the credit Goldsmith enjoyed. Yes, Goldsmith was favoured with confidence worth 'not less than two thousand pounds'. Though his aspiration for a medical career was frustrated, his achievement in literature was considerable, bringing him fame, patronage,

⁴ *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, vol I, ed. Lars E. Troide (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 271. Charles Burney actually wrote his part and let Garrick read it.

⁵ *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Bruce Redford, II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 146

and some money.⁶ It is beyond question that he deployed remarkable versatility in a variety of literary genres: poetry, essay, novel, biography, and play.⁷

However, as far as his novel is concerned, Goldsmith's place is rather problematic. It can be surmised by the apologetic tone of the editor of a recent popular edition of *The Vicar of Wakefield* (first published in 1766), who attempts to justify the awkwardness of Goldsmith's techniques in novel writing.⁸ He points out, for example, that the writer does not manage the digressions well; the improbable plot requires too many coincidences to make up the denouement. It derives, of course, not from the misunderstanding of the editor, Arthur Friedman, but from his sympathetic defence of Goldsmith. Although the author himself begins his advertisement with 'There are an hundred faults in this Thing', the introduction to this edition admits the technical faults of his writing too readily, leading the reader even to wonder why such a flawed story is worth reading. After reading the text, Friedman's intention can be understood as an invitation to the reader to feel the pleasure of reading Goldsmith and overwhelm the dissatisfaction caused by the imperfections, by means of foretelling the reader what faults criticism has found in it.

Writers and critics have tried to interpret and explain why this fault-laden story gives such a pleasure of reading. Henry James admired its 'amiability'. Goethe juxtaposed Goldsmith with Sterne in analyzing what had framed his view of life; for him, they represented 'high, benevolent irony':

This high, benevolent irony, this just and comprehensive way of viewing

⁶ *The Traveller*(1764) earned him Lord Clare's patronage; he was one of the original members of the Club, a select group of the culturally prominent.

⁷ Goldsmith's poetical works include *The Traveller* (1764) and *The Deserted Village*(1770); he wrote for Smollet's *Critical Review*; he wrote biographies of Voltaire and Richard Nash; his *She Stoops to Conquer* was a success at Covent Garden. Samuel H. Woods, Jr. reviews Goldsmith scholarship, beginning with the difficulties scholars face: subtlety and complexity of his works, biased biographical information, and his versatility to stride over various genres ('The Goldsmith "Problem" ', *Studies in Burke and His Time* 19 [1978]: 47-60).

⁸ Arthur Friedman's introduction to *The Vicar of Wakefield* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), vii-xvii.

things, this gentleness to all opposition, this equanimity under every change, and whatever else all the kindred virtues may be termed, - such things were a most admirable training for me, and surely, these are the sentiments, which in the end lead us back from all the mistaken paths of life.⁹

The degree of sincerity and irony in Goldsmith's language has always been the question. Hopkins in *The True Genius of Oliver Goldsmith* argued the story is consistently satiric. Finding his emphasis on satire too thorough, Martin Battestin searched for a different reading, recognizing satiric force to a certain extent, not so comprehensive. Showing a careful parallel between Goldsmith's story and the Book of Job, Battestin found Goldsmith's sophisticated technique to fabricate a comedy that involves the assertion of religious concerns. James Lehmann questioned the degree of sincerity in the Job analogy. He brought to light Goldsmith's handling of the new way of reading the scripture.¹⁰

Thomas Preston also places the fiction in conversation with religious discourse, regarding it as 'a kind of mock moral apologetic or comic antiparable about the downside of following a Christian moral life'.¹¹ Analyzing the description of the gap between the religious ideal and the human reality deriving from Goldsmith's view of the fallibility and imperfection of human nature, Preston argues that the vicar's story contests and subverts the commonplace religious moral discourse and, further, the optimistic view of possibility in human moral achievement:

The vicar's story is not, then, a parable about the ease of the Christian

⁹ G.S. Rousseau ed., *Goldsmith: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 68, 278.

¹⁰ Martin C. Battestin, *The Providence of Wit: Aspects of Form in Augustan Literature and the Arts* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 193-214; James H. Lehmann, 'The Vicar of Wakefield: Goldsmith's Sublime, Oriental Job', in *Oliver Goldsmith* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 73-89.

¹¹ Thomas R. Preston, 'Moral Spin Doctoring, Delusion, and Chance: Wakefield's Vicar Writes an Enlightenment Parable', *The Age of Johnson: A Scholarly Annual* ed. Paul. J. Korshin and Jack Lynch, 11 (2000): 237-81; this quotation is from p. 238.

moral life and the likely interposition of Providence to relieve distressed virtue, but about the failures of the Christian moral life, its occasional moral and worldly but always deficient triumphs, its endless deferral of moral and spiritual perfection and the always impending reward for moral striving, hardly an endorsement of Enlightenment moral progress.¹²

The story is told by the Vicar of Wakefield, Doctor Primrose. He begins with his misfortune of losing his fortune. His family, moving to a rented farm, meet a Mr Burchell, who is benevolent though somewhat mysterious. Another new acquaintance, Mr Thornhill, their landlord, quickly curries favour with his wife and one of his daughters, Olivia, with his suave manners. He turns out to be, quite expectedly, base, unprincipled and dissolute. Meanwhile the family is attacked by misfortune after misfortune: their daughter's disappearance just before her planned marriage, a fire, an abduction of the second daughter, the detention in the debtor's prison, etc. The wickedness of their landlord adds to their affliction.

The reader expects the virtuous vicar will be relieved somehow or other. Going forward, the reader comes to be suspicious of his relief in this world, as the expectation of his happiness is discouraged again and again. Indeed, his misfortune succeeds one another, making the reader foresee yet another misfortune lying ahead. The reader is at the end surprised to see all is suddenly changed to make the vicar happy in this world. Towards the end, the eccentric and kind Mr Burchell turns out to be Sir William Thornhill, Squire Thornhill's uncle, who works as *deus ex machina*.

Raymond Hilliard argues that this fiction describes the trouble and affliction of a *paterfamilias* placed in a difficult position in the changing relationships in a family in the eighteenth century. The tension between authoritative patrimony and 'affective individualism' found descriptions in novels with such themes as discordance in a family, especially the daughter's dilemma in her choice between filial obedience and personal attachment. The anxieties of fatherhood are focused on in the Goldsmith's work as the

¹² Preston, pp. 273-74.

vicar behaves ineffectually and inconsistently. The vicar's first-person narrative is a skilfully chosen method of telling the distressed mind of a father in a family.¹³

David Murray's analysis also highlights fatherhood. In his argument, with the general tendency of private personality invading the public realm, the father's role changed from an authority based on the property transactions (a patrimonial father) to an emotional and ethical stay (a paternalistic father). Following this pattern, in Murray's reading Dr Primrose transfigures himself from a patrimonial paterfamilias to a paternalistic father through the misfortunes.¹⁴ Although the story can be placed in the alteration of patrimony, his claim of the vicar's establishing himself as a paternalistic fatherly figure is unconvincing. Murray's ground of finding a new paternal role in Dr Primrose lies in the vicar's role in his prison reform, instead of his role in his family. A question remains if Dr Primrose becomes affectionate enough to justify the change in his attitude toward his family members.

Rather than bringing into focus the fatherhood or relationship within a family, my reading focuses on virtues in society. My emphasis is on Goldsmith's attempt to describe a benevolent manly hero who is without the sentimental tears. Although the virtuous heroines, such as Pamela and Clarissa, expressing themselves in the first person, achieved remarkable successes, even Richardson could not make his worthy hero Sir Charles Grandison as popular as Pamela or Clarissa. Pamela to a certain extent and Clarissa could do it, winning the readers' sympathy and admiration, but as Bloom puts it, 'No one proclaims his own virtues without alienating us, and no one recites his own sufferings without embarrassing us.'¹⁵ In the fictional world at least, a virtuous heroine could appeal to the reader, while an upright man of virtue had some difficulties.

In the literary domain in the mid-eighteenth century, the association

¹³ Raymond F. Hilliard, 'The Redemption of Fatherhood in *The Vicar of Wakefield*', *SEL* 23(1983): 465-80. Harold Bloom regarded this choice of the narrator as 'singular audacity' in the Introduction to *Oliver Goldsmith* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 3.

¹⁴ David Aaron Murray, 'From Patrimony to Paternity in *The Vicar of Wakefield*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 9(1997): 327-36, esp. 329-32.

¹⁵ Bloom, p. 3.

between women and virtues was promoted and reinforced. In his examination of the cult of sensibility in the eighteenth century, G.J. Barker-Benfield spotlights the connection between material changes in society such as the rise of consumerism and the restructuring of feelings and manners conducted by women's consciousness. Following Norbert Elias's vision of women's reformation of men's manners in the civilizing process, he emphasizes women's role in defining the culture and also its ambivalent legacy to women.¹⁶ Drawing on wide range of literature and various kinds of writings, this study reveals the central role of women and feminization of culture; instead of somewhat barbaric masculinity, the distressed but virtuous femininity was in fashion.

Considering this, Goldsmith's endeavour is as daunting and ambitious as his enterprise of the aborted encyclopaedia. It is because Goldsmith tries to resist the feminization of heroes, and furthermore resist the feminization of virtues by creating a composed hero who writes about his own sufferings in the first-person narrative, making parallel with the celebrated heroines. The choice of the vicar as the narrator causes annoyance to some, but it is a calculated challenge.

In Goldsmith's text, 'sensibility', which was so much in fashion during his time, appears only four times.¹⁷ When he describes Miss Arabella Wilmot, who was about to marry George Primrose but separated for the unfortunate turn of fortune in Primrose family, he uses the word twice: she has 'an happy sensibility of look' and 'too much sensibility'.¹⁸ Sir William's susceptibility to the unfortunate in his youth is described as influenced by 'a sickly sensibility of the miseries of others' in a detached analysis by Mr Burchell. Another 'sensibility' is referred to in the prison scene, but it is not used to describe Dr Primrose.

Not only sentimental heroines but heroes of feeling are inundated with

¹⁶ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 1992), esp. pp. 79-83, 287-89.

¹⁷ I depend on 'Eighteenth-Century Fiction' CD-ROM in counting the frequency of this word and the following few words.

¹⁸ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, pp. 14, 100.

tears, but the vicar is not. 'A tear' or 'tears', appearing eighteen times together, are not shed by the vicar. His wife, Olivia, and Sophia are easily affected and helpless in tears. The people surrounding Dr Primrose, not only the female part of his family, are in tears, but the vicar is not. The most telling scene to illustrate the vicar's uniqueness is in chapter 17, where the topic is Olivia's disappearance just before her planned marriage to farmer Williams. The wife is molested and upset, 'who could scarce speak for weeping'.¹⁹ The vicar reaches for pistols. Instead of weeping or crying in inaction, he is quickly determined to revenge her. His passion of anger against the villainy of the abductor is so violent that his son tries to appease him, saying that 'your rage is too violent and unbecoming. You should be my mother's comforter, and you encrease her pain. It ill suited you and your reverend character thus to curse your greatest enemy: you should not have curst him, villain as he is.'²⁰

In this work women are conspicuously degraded. The vicar markedly looks down on women. Though he claims that 'we loved each other tenderly, and our fondness encreased as we grew old', his wife does not seem to deserve his affections; his claimed fondness for her is only condescending. In his view women are those devoid of integrity because of their poor education. Mentioning that his wife 'could read any English book without much spelling', Dr Primrose regretfully tells the reader about his wife's poor taste of insisting on calling their first daughter 'Olivia' resulting from her fascination with romances during her pregnancy and overruling the vicar's intention to give her the name of 'Grissel' after her aunt.²¹ When his daughter, Olivia, is fascinated by Mr Thornhill's attractive but superficial conversation, the vicar remarks: 'It is not surprising then that such talents should win the affections of a girl, who by education was taught to value an appearance in herself, and consequently to set a value upon it in another.'²² Women are such that the harmony in the family is not supported by mutual

¹⁹ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p. 89.

²⁰ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p. 88.

²¹ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, pp. 9, 11.

²² *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p. 36.

esteem and respect among its members, but sustained by Dr Primrose. Always he is a man of righteousness; his wife is a mean coward who is easily overwhelmed by money and power, however immoral and inhumane its holder is, whether favoured or terrorised. Fanny Burney, who in the end sobbed over the book, formed a negative response to it drawn by the contemptuous description of women. Her overall assessment is: 'There is but very little story, the plot is thin, the incidents very rare, the sentiments uncommon, the vicar is contented, humble, pious, virtuous' She began to read it 'with distaste & disrelish'; she continues that 'the beginning of it, even disgusted me -- he mentions his wife with such indifference -- such contempt....'²³ The idyllic happiness of the family at the beginning and the vicar's fortitude through his misfortunes would not have been undermined by a supportive virtuous wife, who would not have alienated Burney from a more sympathetic reading, but Goldsmith chose to describe a man's isolated battle. Women are, for him in this work, a foil to the vicar's virtues.

Among man's virtues, benevolence is repeatedly underscored. The word 'benevolence' appears eleven times in the text, mostly in crucial moments. It represents the quality shared by the vicar and Sir William Thornhill (alias Mr Burchell). Dr Primrose is a person who has won respect and gratitude among the poor. Because of his charitable deeds, the vicar is popular among the poor; when he has to leave Wakefield for the unlucky loss of his fortune, 'the poor, who followed us for some miles, contributed to encrease' the family's apprehension for their future.²⁴ The vicar has heard of Sir William as 'a man of consummate benevolence'. In his reply to this admiration, Mr Burchell self-critically assesses his former behaviour: 'Something, perhaps, too much so, ... at least he carried benevolence to an excess when young; for his passions ... led it up to a romantic extreme.'²⁵ What draws Primrose and Mr Burchell together when they first meet is the issue of benevolence. Burchell, who paid for an old soldier, now wants money. On knowing the distress of the kind man, Dr Primrose offers

²³ *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, pp. 12,13.

²⁴ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p. 18.

²⁵ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p. 20.

his money to Burchell, who appreciates his goodness by saying, 'I take it with all my heart, Sir, ... and am glad that a late oversight in giving what money I had about me, has shewn me that there are still some men like you.'²⁶ In addition, when introducing and describing other characters and events, benevolence is the key concept. When the author mentions a bookseller (whose model is John Newberry), he is introduced as 'the philanthropic bookseller in St. Paul's church-yard', and as 'the friend of all mankind'.²⁷ George, one of Primrose's sons, asks for a nobleman's patronage, but the rich aristocrat is inundated with petitions of the poor and he is unsuccessful. George's experience illustrates the slyness of the petitioners as well as their difficulties.²⁸ The villainous Thornhill, before his character is fully revealed, claims his own benevolent nature: 'I desire no other reward but the pleasure of having served my friend'.²⁹ In contrast with the rich's callous behaviour, the kindness of the simple and honest neighbour after the disastrous fire is appreciated as 'untutored benevolence'.³⁰

As Carolyn Williams examines in her paper, benevolence was principally concerned with adult males, mostly well-off and well-educated men.³¹ While benevolence has been analyzed as part of political manoeuvre by the privileged for the purpose of maintaining the status quo, it was referred to in the context of politics as well as religion. Benevolence is represented as a manly virtue in *The Spectator*, first published in 1711 and very popular through the century. For example, it is a virtue expected to work in solving the party struggle: 'it shall be the chief Tendency of my Papers to inspire my Countrymen with a Mutual Good-will and Benevolence.'³² Benevolence appears in the discussion of management of

²⁶ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p. 19.

²⁷ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p. 91.

²⁸ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, pp. 108-9.

²⁹ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p. 118.

³⁰ *The Vicar of Wakefield*, p. 127.

³¹ Carolyn D. Williams, "'The Luxury of Doing Good': Benevolence, Sensibility, and the Royal Humane Society" in *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (London: Macmillan Press, 1996), 78-9.

³² *The Spectator*, No. 556 (IV 501)

politics: 'Half the Misery of Human Life might be extinguished would Men alleviate the general Curse they lye under, by mutual Offices of Compassion, Benevolence and Humanity.'³³ It is a significant characteristic of *The Vicar of Wakefield* that benevolence, with its masculine political charge, not sensibility or tears, gets such an attention.

Thus, Goldsmith's purpose in this novel is to create a hero, different from other sentimental heroes: a person not drowned in tears and always armed with fortitude who is not numbed into inaction because of too much sensibility but can take action in adversity. Here again, Preston's insightful and persuasive examination of *The Vicar of Wakefield* is useful in its interpretation; Goldsmith's attempt is exploring how to achieve benevolence within the limitation of imperfect human nature. The susceptibility to deception and imprudence of both Sir William Thornhill and Dr Primrose caused by their intention of exercising benevolence is not described to no avail or for thoroughly satiric purpose, but it can be understood in this context. Whatever the reality in society, Goldsmith's scheme to resist the feminization in fiction had a significant meaning.

³³ *The Spectator*, No. 169 (II, 165)