

Narrative levels in *The Inhumane Cardinal* (1696) by Mary Pix

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ABSTRACT

The Inhumane Cardinal is a work of transition written in the early years of the narrative tradition in England. Following the mastery of renown precedents like Aphra Behn, Pix explores the possibilities the new genre offered her, standing on the liminal space between an old-fashioned mode — romance and its aristocratic conventions — and the new literary and social space opened by the novel, which leaves the elevated topics and audience of romance writing behind. She does so by creating a work of great narrative complexity, characterized by a multiplicity of subplots inserted in the narrative as embedded stories. The main plot deals with Cardinal Antonio Barbarino's lustful plan to obtain young Melora's sexual favours, aided by Donna Olympia, an influential woman in the court of Rome. The seduction episode, which encircles the narrative, is interspersed with a number of romantic stories that are devised to induce Melora into accepting the Cardinal's proposal, whom she believed to be the destitute Duke of Ferrara. All the texts inserted are meant as examples for the too innocent Melora, who is taught by way of romantic love affairs and their happy results to act likewise. She realizes her folly too late, and her story works as a cautionary tale for prospective women readers. The value of Pix's project in this work resides, then, in her peculiar use of the concepts of fiction and truth, as she relates them to different narrative levels, associating the former with the conventions of romance, and the latter — the sad events of Melora's 'true' story — with those of the novel.

The Inhumane Cardinal (1696) is one of the rare prose fiction works authored by the Restoration writer Mary Pix. So far, it has achieved little public recognition, perhaps because Pix wrote mostly for the stage, and as a member of the so-called "Nineties Generation" she became above all a successful comedian. We find only slight mention of her narrative work in Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* (1986) and in Backscheider's (1987) article about women prose writers of the Restoration, and no attention is given to it in recent critical works about the early novel. For the purposes of this paper,

I will focus on this *novella*, *The Inhumane Cardinal*, and suggest that it is an interesting work to be rescued and taken into account, mainly for two reasons. First, it is the result of different subgenres in a time in which there was a common effort to configure the new narrative form of the novel; second, it marks a standpoint in this narrative evolution, as its very structure plays with the notions of 'truth' and 'virtue', the questions that Michael McKeon addresses in explaining the origins of the novel in his famous study of the same title.

The Inhumane Cardinal is characterized by its narrative complexity. The reader finds up to three narrative levels, the first of which corresponds to the main plot, and the other two are embedded stories, which actually become more prominent than the former. The main plot deals with Cardinal Antonio Barbarino's desire for young Melora, the Ambassador's daughter in Rome. To help him with his seduction, Barbarino counts on Donna Olympia, an influential Roman lady and Pope Innocent X's favourite, who makes friends with Melora and takes her to live with her most of the time. Olympia's trick on the girl consists in telling her stories, "the History of Alphonsus and Cordelia," and later on, "the History of Emilius and Lovisa," making them appear as true. The seduction episode, then, with which the narrative opens and concludes, is interspersed with a number of romantic stories, tinged with the shine and the status of historical truth, and devised merely to persuade Melora to fall into the Cardinal's snare. Out of the first story, she is deceived into believing that Barbarino is the destitute Alphonsus, the only heir to the Duke of Ferrara, lately deceased, nowadays in the hiding, and trying to recover his dukedom. The second story is but an example of true romantic love and marriage bliss between two people, Emilius and Lovisa, who had to fight against all odds — public duties and parental opposition — to be together. After listening to both tales, which include all the elements of romance, Melora accepts to marry Barbarino-Alphonsus, without her father's knowledge, and realizes her folly too late.

In terms of form and genre, as many other contemporary women fiction writers, Pix exploits in her *novella* a number of conventions taken from the traditions of romance and the new sentimental vein, and imitates as well some of the principles of the popular scandal chronicles of the time. The male protagonists of the two "histories", for example, belong to the ideal world of romance: they display and represent an aristocratic ideology, not only because they are noblemen in disguise and live at court, but most importantly because the relations among the sexes are also ideal. The situation these characters present differs a lot from that of the real protagonists of Pix's *novella*, Melora, Antonio Barbarino and Donna Olympia, who represent the main female and male prototypes of the scandal *novella*. In *Popular Fiction Before Richardson*, Richetti affirms that the

form of the scandal chronicle and its basic myth — the seduction of a virtuous heroine by an aristocratic male libertine — are at the heart of many eighteenth-century novels (1969:124).

Richetti also argues that these *novellas* display a strong moral antithesis, both social and sexual, that mirrors “the secular and the religious views of experience.” In this case, as it happens in Pix’s narrative, the libertine-seducer and the vicious woman behave as infidels, whereas the female heroine becomes the champion of religion (1969:148). Not only that, this state of political and religious corruption that *The Inhumane Cardinal* displays inevitably matches sexual corruption, that of the young and the innocent. In the play, the church authority of Pope Innocent X is contested by earthly powers, since he is said to be in strife with a different dukedom. Ros Ballaster relates this recurrent topic in the novels of Tory satirists like Pix to a very human frailty, the greed for power, which is the consequence of a system lacking a strong symbolic head (2000:203). According to Spencer, late Restoration and early eighteenth-century narratives such as this also reproduce the basic elements of the novel of seduction. In those lines, Pix’s *novella* presents “the myth of female innocence and male guilt” (Spencer 1986:112), which implies the identification of female purity and innocence with weakness, with the result that “the heroine was seduced precisely *because* she was pure and innocent, and therefore unguarded; it was virtue that made her likely to fall” (1986:112-13). Ultimately, as Spencer points out, the myth that these early novelists reinforce has conservative connotations, since it demonstrates that woman’s fate is to play the victim.

Most generally, Pix’s project in this work seems to follow the pattern that McKeon assigns to late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century prose fictions. He neglects the use of an old-fashioned typology which explains the origins of the novel merely in terms of borders and limits between genres, and re-elaborates instead on Ian Watt’s theory about the rise of the novel, and explains the beginnings and development of this genre as the result of a correspondence between what he calls “questions of truth” and “questions of virtue.” By that correspondence he means that epistemological choices in narrative of the kind “history/romance”, or “honour/virtue” always have an ideological counterpart:

Questions of truth and questions of virtue share a single concern with problems of cultural signification, and the various narrative responses to them follow the fundamental, dialectical pattern of reversal. The pattern is present, first of all, in the dynamic and ongoing progression of secularisation and reform. Within these perpetual movements, moreover, two recurrent patterns of “double reversal” can be discerned. Naïve empiricism negates the idealist epistemology of romance, and is in turn negated by a more extreme scepticism and a more circumspect approach to truth. Progressive ideology

subverts aristocratic ideology, and is in turn subverted by conservative ideology. It is in these double reversals, and in their conflation, that the novel is constituted as a dialectical unity of opposed parts, an achievement that is tacitly acknowledged by the gradual stabilization of "the novel" as a terminological and conceptual category in eighteenth-century usage. (McKeon 1987:267)

Following McKeon's categories, Pix's *novella* could be considered as exploiting naïve empiricism, and adopting a progressive ideology, since *The Inhumane Cardinal* rejects the dangerous examples that are set by romance; histories, or true stories, differ from romances in their relation to truth. This is also the difference between Melora's story and those she hears from Olympia and Francisco. They come to represent two incompatible plots, that of the individual progress and that of the aristocratic ideal. In fact, they symbolize two stages in the evolution of the novel, as McKeon delineates above.

In the dedicatory epistle to Princess Ann of Denmark, Pix opposes the true values of the aristocratic ideology, represented by the princess and her ancestors, to the present state of corruption, and in so doing she anticipates the purpose of her *novella*:

You are a Princess whose presence creates an universal joy and veneration in all your pleased beholders. We view in your majestic lineaments, the august air of your royal ancestors; whilst with this becoming majesty, something so agreeably affable is joined, that your humble creatures find their access both easy and delightful. (Pix 1696:3)

With these words, Pix makes use of a commonplace in romance writing by highlighting that Ann of Denmark is the true heir of a true ancestry, and that her mien mirrors her nobility. However, Pix seems to imply that this traditional, and true-to-nature correspondence between external appearance and morals does not work any more in the society of the 1690s.

Precisely, the belief in the ethics of aristocratic ideology is at the heart of Melora's deception, since she relies on Olympia and on the correlation between royal origin and goodness. When she is first told that a mysterious prince is in love with her, she exclaims:

'Now, Madam,' cried Melora eagerly, 'you must forgive my curiosity, and permit me, like my sex, to be wondrous inquisitive, for the title of prince, which you have given this unknown, and the brightness of these jewels, strike me into amazement. *I cannot believe your goodness would abuse my credulity with fictitious stories*; nor can I have pride enough to imagine a prince my lover.' (1696:22; my emphasis)

The verisimilitude of the prince's love at first sight is reinforced in the *novella* by means of the two above-mentioned examples: the embedded stories of two young members of the nobility – Alphonsus, Duke of Ferrara, and Emilius, the son of the Duke of Parma – who fall in love with plebeian but beautiful and virtuous women, and who have to fight against parental opposition or state duties to marry them. Both tales, inserted in the process of her enticement, become the perfect antidote to Melora's reservations, in spite of the fact that she often relates the stories to the ideal world of romance. Alphonsus in the first case is said to be dying for the love of Cordelia, to what Melora says that "the greatest miracle she found in the story was the gallant dying for love, that being, in these ages, altogether unpractised and out of fashion" (Pix 1696:98-99). Ironically, she will be tricked into marrying Barbarino, who will feign a fatal melancholy fit with the purpose of moving her. Other references to the fantasy world of romance people both the main plot and the embedded stories. When Cordelia and her mother arrive at Ferrara, they do not know about Alphonsus' true identity yet, and cannot help relating the splendour of the court to the world of romance: "At length, said Sulpitia, either we are in one of those enchanted castles we read of in romances, where all seen is illusion, or that person in the Duke's chair is really my son-in-law Don Pedro" (1696:82). Not only that: these characters also wonder about the love discourse that romances promote. In a conversation with her cousin and the friar that helps Alphonsus, Cordelia opts for the romantic principles, particularly because they are uttered by a religious authority:

'I aver,' answers her cousin, 'that nowhere but in romances, persons fall in love at the first sight; and only conversation and a long acquaintance can produce a violent affection.'
'I grant you,' replies the friar, 'that love increases, and grows to a height by continual conversation but still I say, a beautiful idea seen once, may make an impression either in man or woman, sufficient to take away their repose.'
(Pix 1696:53)

This claim also contributes to gradually change Melora's mind in favour of Barbarino.

The destitute son (preferably when he is the younger son of noble parents) is a typical figure commonly found in both progressive and conservative narratives, according to McKeon (1987:218). In romances, this circumstance is solved by means of the convention of discovered parentage, thus following aristocratic ideology once more, and usually living up to aristocratic expectations, but in seventeenth-century progressive fictions authors looked for other means of reinstating these characters. In *The*

Inhumane Cardinal, however, the case is different. Olympia tells Melora the story of young Alphonsus, the heir of the Duke of Ferrara. After the Duke and the Duchess died, and since Cordelia had not been aware of the Duke's identity when marrying him, Don Ferado, his father's opponent, starts a question about the son's legitimacy. All the witnesses were dead except for Aminda, Cordelia's friend and lady-in-waiting, but as the narrator affirms: "one woman's word would never convince a world, that is generally fonder of lies than truth" (Pix 1696:85). This circumstance, together with the fact that Barbarino stands for young Alphonsus and that Olympia affirms that she heard the story of his origins from him, makes the tale only a piece of mystification of the young heir and of the Cardinal himself. Its effect on Melora is simply foreseeable:

A scene of greatness strait appeared to Melora, and she with the eye of fancy, beheld herself seated in a palace, attended by persons born above her. Women are generally ambitious, and opinionated of their own merit, and though Melora might justly boast she had one of the largest portions of wit and discretion, yet she was a woman pertook of the frailty of her sex: was willing to believe this fine story, and let these glorious thoughts appear pleasing. (1696:88)

The gendered reading of Pix's use of romance conventions may also be of interest for our purposes. The female protagonists of both embedded and romantic stories, Cordelia and Lovisa, and especially the latter, conform to the ideal of femininity, and Pix stresses precisely the gendered ideological content in romances. In *Emilius and Lovisa's* story, the Duchess' attempts at changing Lovisa's resolution about marrying her son are expressed in the following terms:

'The heart of Emilius is heroic,' said the Duchess, 'and force is lost upon him: 'tis you only have power to charm him into obedience. Take then your choice, be greater than a sovereign princess; rule your passions, let your looks deny what's acting in your heart, and tell Emilius that your altered soul abhors his love; else unite with my unhappy son and meet destructive ruin both.' (Pix 1696:167)

At times like these, the moral height of non-aristocratic women, again in consonance with the progressive ideology of the early novels, corresponds to their self-sacrifice for the sake of others. When thus prompted by the Duchess, Lovisa neglects her own passion and Emilius', a gesture that confers her a new dignity in everyone else's esteem: "Lovisa's eyes were full of majesty and resolution" (1696:170). Her act of abnegation, together with a twist of fate, by which Emilius' father dies and permits his son to

marry the woman of his choice, are set as examples of femininity for Melora, who from then onwards will act against her will, but following romance precepts for women, thus finally consenting to marry Alphonsus-Barbarino. Her acceptance means her death: to avoid detection her husband and Donna Olympia will poison her.

By setting Melora's case as a warning to ladies, Mary Pix advises other women to beware, and to protect themselves not only from the lies of men but also from those of women like Olympia. In a very traditional epilogue, from a gendered point of view, she sets female reputation as "that inestimable and never to be recovered jewel" (Pix 1696:243), and blames Melora for marrying without her father's consent, although admitting that this is her only fault. As Doody contends, the novel in the seventeenth century becomes a political affair (1996:263), and so it happens in *The Inhumane Cardinal*. Pix's politics extend to the private domain, and sexual corruption mirrors political corruption, both of them brought about by a degenerate state of things. The author's conclusion about "fiction" is also very conservative: fantasy is dangerous for women, who must follow the guidance of fathers or lawful husbands. According to Mary Pix, they must be virtuous and follow the example of their princes and princesses (like Ann of Denmark), in a time which she sees as "polluted", and in which the dreams that romances propounded do not find a counterpart in everyday life.

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'Nothing but papers, my lord'

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