

Marilyn L. Brooks

MARY HAYS'S *THE VICTIM OF PREJUDICE*¹: CHASTITY RENEGOTIATED

*The article begins by looking at the rhetoric surrounding widespread notions of chastity as being protective, natural and the embodiment of virtue via its conflation with reputation. It then goes on to argue that Hays set out to challenge this configuration by separating female virtue from the presence of the hymen. Furthermore, *The Victim of Prejudice* dissects the consequent inevitability of 'ruin' after a seduction or rape by tracing the impact of a mother's 'fall' on the situation of the daughter. Hays's personal interest in determinism and cause and effect permits her to explore the implications behind this drama by allowing the daughter to refuse to accept the inevitability of ruin and to challenge the prejudices surrounding her illegitimacy. She attempts to become more than just the daughter of the mother and seeks to tell and live her own story. However, the pattern of telling inherent in the narrative structure ensures that a catastrophe is to be foreseen as the various stories impact upon each other. The daughter refuses to act out the traditional role of fallen woman and challenges, defiantly, the necessity to become socially invisible and submissive. The novel re-negotiates chastity, making it flexible and a manoeuvrable construct. The consequences of rape are shown to be based firmly on prejudices which, Hays argues, are constructed and, hence, removable. Thus Hays adds a new dimension to the novel of seduction and the supremacy of the social order.*

If ever I venture on an original composition, it will be for the declared purpose of combating, without fear or reserve, those pernicious prejudices which have prey'd upon the vitals of human virtue & happiness, & to which moral martyrs have been sacrificed in hecatombs.²

She, who forfeits her chastity, withers by degree into scorn and contrition; but she, who lives up to its rules, ever flourishes, like a rose in *June*, with all her virgin graces about her – sweet to the sense, and lovely to the eye. Chastity heightens all the virtues, which it accompanies; and sets off every great talent, that human nature can be possessed of. It is

not only an ornament, but also a guard to virtue. This is the great point of female honour, and the least slip in a woman's honour, is never to be recovered.³

In her "Advertisement" to *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799) Hays declared that:

In delineating, in the following pages, the mischiefs that have ensued from the too-great stress laid on the *reputation* for chastity in *woman*, no disrespect is intended to this most important branch of temperance, the cement, the support, and the bond of social virtue: it is the means only, which are used to ensure it, that I presume to call in question. (1)

Despite the conciliatory tone of this statement, what the novel actually accomplishes is a tearing apart of the ideological necessity for chastity's retention; of the reduction in self-valuation inherent in what it represents; of chastity's relationship to the prejudice and dependence which all of Hays's writings condemn. A letter to William Godwin of 1 October 1795⁴ had already located chastity as a site of error, and a *Monthly Magazine* article entitled "Improvements Suggested in Female Education" had argued that "sexual distinctions respecting chastity, an important branch of temperance, have served but to increase the tide of profligacy, and have been the fruitful source of the greater part of the infelicity and corruption of society".⁵ Conventionally, a breach of chastity was seen as the bringer of calamity, whereas Hays locates this calamity within the idea of chastity itself. *The Victim of Prejudice* confronts the consequences of both retaining, and of losing, a supposedly stable and inviolate female attribute and, moreover, reiterates Hays's pessimistic interpretation of determinism.

The rhetoric surrounding chastity concealed its confining nature, encouraging women to perceive these narrow boundaries as protective and, furthermore, natural.⁶ In a more threatening sense, inevitable punishment accruing on its loss further instilled the acceptance of it as the "ornament" of women. To be unchaste also signalled a subversive challenge to social order or, as Mary Poovey has shown, "to define oneself by some other category than the paradox of sexuality/chastity was to move wholly outside of social definition, to risk being designated a 'monster'".⁷ Where sexuality is the active manifestation of desire, chastity is the passive equivalent demanding non-response, whilst simultaneously indicating that response is an option. In fact, it is the demonstration of chastity's very virtues which made *The Victim of Prejudice*'s heroine, Mary, attractive in the first place. Her innocence makes her both vulnerable and seducible. Encoded within this rhetoric is the real purpose of chastity: to protect women from men, not from themselves or their desires. Concern for female reputation was a necessary protector of the male, who, it

was acknowledged, *did* and, importantly, *could* have desires. Women, as beings without such desires, would find it easier to resist temptation than the male, and so could take on the responsibility for *his* actions. A network of social necessities was conveniently promoted through the conflation of reputation and virtue, the former becoming a substitute for, rather than a protector of, the latter. Dr Fordyce made this clear by associating a woman's "virtue" with her "reputation", which he claimed "to a woman is in effect nearly the same".⁸ It is reputation which secures virtue and not the concept of virtue itself because

[...] virtue exists for its use to the woman's family and [...] therefore the reputation of virtue is what really counts [...]. The heroine who cares for the reality of virtue for her own sake finds herself in conflict with a society that cares mainly for the appearance of it.⁹

So, "it was natural for women then to endeavour to preserve what once lost – was lost for ever, till this care swallowing up every other care, reputation for chastity, became the only thing needful to the sex".¹⁰ The passive (chastity) has been made to house the active (virtue), as even *The Victim of Prejudice's* benign and rational Mr Raymond reluctantly acknowledged:

The good opinion of our fellow-beings is desirable: it is connected with usefulness, and ought not to be contemned [...] yet, reputation is but a secondary good; it wears the semblance of virtue, but, if prized before the substance, may accelerate the evil it was meant to avert. (102)

The transformation of chastity into an essential feminine requisite was, therefore, more than a moral expedient, it was also a socially necessary one. Such a conflation is typical of a discourse which adopts a rhetoric of paradox in order to camouflage its specious underpinning. As Ellen Pollak points out, "chastity was a comprehensive virtue embodying a complex ideal of female behaviour that extended far beyond the literal avoidance of illicit sex".¹¹ If chastity could be exposed as socially constructed rather than as natural, then the tragic consequences of its loss could also be given a social and, hence, less inevitably damaging outcome. In the terms of Hays's chosen philosophy, the social construction may be changeable and therefore changed.¹² The consequence of its loss could become negotiable rather than inevitable: "loss" could become "gain", and "ruin" could become "fulfilment".

The strength of the traditional stress on the consequent fall is through a "natural" inevitability which is made to act as a deterrent. It is by exposing this inevitability as spurious that Hays is able to challenge the whole causal chain of "fall" being equivalent to "ruin" by making it a socially constructed one.

Hence the “natural” aspect of the discourse, in itself a “prejudice” in Godwinian terms¹³, had to be challenged in order to free women from a position of weakness which, they had been led to believe, was a natural consequence of their *sexual* weakness: a position aptly demonstrated by the paradox of the sexual double standard by which man “has hitherto been solicitous at once to indulge his own voluptuousness and to counteract its baneful tendencies”, producing consequences which were “not less tragical than absurd” (1). More importantly, such consequences were promoted as inevitably punishing to the defaulter, woman. In order to free her “victim” from social control, Hays typically adopts Helvétian methodology to expose the specious reasoning behind the discourse appropriated to secure chastity’s retention. Instead of concentrating on the *consequences*, whose inevitability is already secured, Hays demands that “*man* revert to the sources of these evils; let him be chaste himself, nor seek to reconcile contradictions. — Can the streams run pure while the fountain is polluted?” (1–2).

Hays also needed to isolate virtue, as active choice, from chastity, as precept or habit. As she says elsewhere: “do not then expect to join the extremes of active virtue, and passive obedience, in the characters and conduct of women, for they are incompatible”.¹⁴ Until female virtue could become unconnected with female chastity, participation in the radical debate was limited because it was largely unchosen, untruthful or, in Godwinian terms, not “candid” nor “sincere”. Moreover, if female sexuality does not exist and, importantly, does not exist because it is a mode of expression, then the need for chastity similarly does not exist. Women’s entry into the radical movement, therefore, was being hindered by the passivity necessitated by their very attempts to be virtuous. *The Victim of Prejudice* explores the paradoxes used to deny women power to negotiate their own terms of self-expression. Because of virtue’s sublimation into chastity, Hays does this through a redefinition of chastity itself and, by so doing, she attempts to reposition woman socially and philosophically. Hays had to remove the idea of chastity as a filter between expression and the “candour” of radical thought so that rather than being “philosophically irrelevant”¹⁵, chastity was of the greatest philosophical importance. It enabled Hays to contribute to radical progress, as her heroine insists that chastity be dislocated from what she wants to achieve: an expressive response to the concept of virtue.

The Victim of Prejudice has two plots but mainly focuses on the innocent plight of Mary, the story of whose mother—“the wretched victim of sensuality and vice” (61)—introduces the suggestion of inevitability surrounding the circumstances of the fallen woman, a conviction of which is ultimately adopted by the daughter. In the mother’s “history of my disgrace” (61), she reveals her seduction, pregnancy and subsequent betrayal, “thrown friendless and destitute upon the world, branded with infamy, and a wretched outcast

from social life" (63). She asks: "How far shall I go back? From what period shall I date the source of those calamities which have, at length overwhelmed me?" (62–63). Linking the two plots is the mother's plea to her daughter's guardian to protect her and

[...] shelter her infant purity from contagion, guard her helpless youth from a pitiless world, cultivate her reason, make her feel her nature's worth, strengthen her faculties, inure her to suffer hardship, rouse her to independence, inspire her with fortitude, with energy, with self-respect, and teach her to condemn the tyranny that would impose fetters of sex upon mind. (69)

The first prejudice Mary meets is towards her illegitimacy, which becomes one of the strongest links in her determinist "chain", proving "a prelude [...] to those anxieties and sorrows which have since pursued me with unmitigated severity, against which I have vainly struggled, and whose overwhelming consequences, I am no longer able to combat or evade" (9). Her situation is made worse because she refuses to accept her tainted position, as this would be to collude with a very real social prejudice, and Mary defiantly proclaims: "I am ready to renounce [her unsuspecting lover] the moment my reason is convinced that virtue demands the sacrifice" (54). The "guilty" Mary's lover is removed from her as is her guardian, who dies, leaving her exposed to the "insults" then overtures of her landowning neighbour, Sir Peter Osborne. Refusing to superintend his house and family, she moves to London where she ultimately suffers a "brutal violation" at his hands (117). However, in a reversal of conventional response, it is *she* and not her attacker who refuses to acknowledge the significance of the deed, arguing that: "No one has a right to control me [...] Think not, by feeble restraints to fetter the body when the mind is determined and free" (117–18). Mary later rejects Sir Peter's offer to make her "mistress of my fortune as of my heart" (119). The rest of the novel charts her "inevitable" descent, despite her proud belief in "the dignity of INDEPENDENCE" (138). She finds herself rejected by all she applies to, consoling herself that "in no one instance had I been wanting to myself, but, passive and helpless, a victim to circumstances over which I had little power" and beset by "difficulties almost insupportable, difficulties peculiar to my sex, my age, and my unfortunate situation [which] opposed themselves to my efforts on every side" (141). Despite this, her bosom "swelled with honest indignant pride" and she determined to live (141). Preferring to go to prison for debt rather than accept Sir Peter's settlement offer, she is freed and taken to the farm of "honest James", which unfortunately belongs to Sir Peter. Coincidental but credible circumstances ensure that the plot escalates to demonstrate Mary's predictable helplessness on the death of her protector

James, a further offer of marriage by Sir Peter and another arrest for debt. Social processes, which accord with Mary's notions of philosophical causality, are recognized as part of the inevitability she is trapped within. Her fated descent is underscored by the rhetoric's insistence on using the past tense: "I seemed hitherto to have been surrounded by invisible agents and hidden snares, that had blasted my purposes, beset my paths, and frustrated my most sagacious plans" (157–58). On the point of suicide, Mary's liberty is procured and she is taken home "where the body survived, but the spirit was fled" (171). After the deaths of her friends, Mary anticipates her own in the hope that:

[...] the story of my sorrows should kindle in the heart of man, in behalf of my oppressed sex, the sacred claims of humanity and justice. From the fate of my wretched mother, (in which, alas! my own has been involved,) let him learn, that, while the slave of sensuality, inconsistent as assuming, he pours, by his conduct, contempt upon chastity, in vain will he impose on woman barbarous penalties, or seek to multiply restrictions; his seductions and example, yet more powerful, will defeat his precepts, of which hypocrisy, not virtue, is the genuine fruit. (174)

The novel ends with Mary's perception of herself as "the victim of a barbarous prejudice, society has cast me out from its bosom [...] I have lived in vain" (174).

It is fitting that the narrative begins with Mary looking back over her life which, in effect, began before she was born, and she offers her story as a warning of social causation, the consequences of which have determined her life and narrative. Mary is presented as being threatened by the inevitability which traps her into being a victim figure, so that she has to be made into more than just the daughter of the mother. In *The Victim of Prejudice*, we see an insistence on the individual being perceived as such, in her own time and space, outside the limitations of parentage and inheritance. Indeed, she wishes to be rid of the causally limiting influence of parentage.

Paradoxically, Hays would seem to be concurring with her heroine's culpability, similar to that preached by conduct-book writers, through her readiness to adopt the conventional punishments associated with the crime she was trying to refute. Her heroine's acquiescence with her fate and offering of herself as social victim suggests that the impasse is, indeed, impassable; yet Hays does attempt to break out of this bind by, again, returning to the foundation of her philosophical thinking: causation. So she transfers the "inevitable" consequences of the act out of the "natural" and into the deterministic site.

So, whilst *The Victim of Prejudice* has shown (through Mary's refusal to acknowledge her violation) that the concept of chastity *can* be made negotiable, a matter of attitude, it has simultaneously proclaimed it as philosophically non-negotiable within the constraints of determinism. Hays's former mentor and friend, William Godwin, would likewise have argued that whilst the virtue of women embodied within chastity is based on falsity and hypocrisy, it cannot be productive of good. Thus, chastity is prejudicial because of its causal basis, which necessitates the distortion of the chaste and the ruin of the unchaste. Neither can have access to virtue until the terms of chastity are renegotiated to accommodate active response and moral choice.

Two years earlier, Hays had written condemning the social emphasis on chastity's irredeemable nature in the *Monthly Magazine*, under the more general topic of female education:

Sexual distinctions respecting chastity, an important branch of temperance, have served but to increase the tide of profligacy, and have been the fruitful source of the greater part of the infelicity and corruption of society [. . .] One of the principal causes which seems to have given rise to the present dissolute and venal motives by which the intercourse of the sexes is influenced, is perhaps the dependence for which women are uniformly educated.¹⁶

Female education is one prejudice which perpetuates the further prejudice surrounding chastity. Until this "cause" is changed, the effect of prejudicial chastity cannot be removed and progress will be impeded. *The Victim of Prejudice* makes clear that, for women, chastity is merely an acknowledgement of their marketability, being "deeply entangled with the system of property" and, moreover, is "one of those evils flowing from feudal institutions; the baneful effects of which can only cease with the renovation of civil society".¹⁷ Clearly, civil society is the producer of the "baneful effects" which *inevitably* follow on a breach of chastity. Inevitability has to be challenged because this is, in itself, creating another link in the causal chain of dependence. Challenge anticipates its removal and negotiates independence, but Hays's redefined "virtue" has been powerless to help Mary repulse such inevitability:

I have sought to beguile my woes by tracing their origin and their progress [. . .] Involved as by a fatal mechanism, in the infamy of my wretched mother, thrown into similar circumstances, and looking to a catastrophe little less fearful, I have still the consolation of remembering that I suffered not despair to plunge my soul in crime, that I braved the shocks of fortune, eluded the snares of vice, and struggled in the

trammels of prejudice with dauntless intrepidity. But *it avails me not*.
(168)

Mary's innocence, yet treatment as if guilty, is an even greater indictment of society's exclusion of the "frail, unfortunate being" who finds that "great care is taken to bar up every avenue against" her return to society and virtue.¹⁸

A letter from Hays to Godwin traced to January 1796 clarifies her position regarding chastity: "chaste, virtuous, & individual, affection, I believe to be one of the highest, most delicate, & most ineffable, sources of our satisfactions".¹⁹ Her chastity is, hence, liberating and not confining, as traditionally depicted. Hays was claiming a right to enlargement and rejection of protective restraint. This broader attitude to affection enables Mary to disregard the rules of punctilio in her conduct; rules which insist on the infallibility of chastity as an indicator of female virtue and, at the same time, stand as barriers to sincerity. Clearly, chastity, the embodiment of all other virtues, is here only one aspect of the larger one of affection, where affection is a question of individual choice and is, therefore, negotiable and outside social control. This can occur because chastity is determined according to the truth of one's response to another. Chastity has become morally active rather than passive (although still non-initiatory) and could provide an entrance into radical utility (albeit in a supportive role). Hays had earlier written that:

I regard chastity as an important branch of temperance, yet I likewise suspect that, on this subject many mistakes have been made, mistakes that have rendered the generality of men dissolute, & have divided women, with but few exceptions, into two classes of victims — Those who are necessitated by the worst kind of prostitution to exchange their persons for a subsistence: (for this traffic is no uncommon basis even of matrimonial arrangements) & those whom superior spirit & taste, or the want of meretricious allurements, condemn to the severe task of stifling every natural affection, & of exposing themselves, unprotected, weakened by education & habit, to insult if not to penury.²⁰

Hays's letters also demonstrate the extent to which she felt that affection could provide this entrance. In a letter to Godwin on 6 February 1796, Hays argued, regarding her own experience with William Frensdorff: "I pursued what I was convinced, if attained, would be, comparatively *a certain good*".²¹ *The Victim of Prejudice* demonstrates that it is the prejudice within the concept of chastity which was the impediment to the attainment of its active virtue. Just as chastity denies sexual desire, so the passive virtue entrapped within it may be transformed into an active one, paradoxically through sexuality, as Emma Courtney had sought to prove. Mary's refusal to perceive that a violation to

her had, in fact, taken place was her strength and also her failing. This was questioning the whole basis of her society, which required women to live in fear of the very thing Mary saw as a non-event. Her innocence enables her to scorn and refuse to accept such a conflation:

My honour say you, can never be restored to me? Oh! 'tis base as barbarous! Its lustre, which you have sought to obscure, will break out, in your despatch, from the temporary cloud which envelops it, with undiminished brightness. My spirit, superior to personal injury, rises above the sense of its wrong, and utterly contemns you! I spurn the wealth you offer, the cursed price of innocence and principle, and will seek, by honest labour, the bread of independence. You have afflicted, but you cannot debase me [...] I defy and despise you! (119–20)

She contradicts the terms of chastity with a discourse of flexibility and movement. Significantly, even though a “fallen” woman, she sees herself as rising. Paradoxically, by refusing to consider chastity as anything other than a mere technicality, Mary has, in fact, turned it into a dynamic facilitator of self-power. Mary exposes it as the symbol it has always been. Focusing on causality, Hays reveals its presence as an accessory of a threatened society, ready to ensnare the already vulnerable woman by removing any freedom she might have over the consequences of either willed or imposed sexual activity. Consequently, *The Victim of Prejudice* radically challenges the traditional warnings to young women, whereby reputation (as we have already seen) becomes the valuation of virtue. Despite the conventional punishment meted out to her heroine, Hays knew, and her “Advertisement” shows, that virtue and reputation were very different things. She revealed chastity to be a negative, rather than a positive, virtue, as well as being a social controller upheld by the spurious presence of reputation in the configuration. As Mary continues to show, her *virtue* is intact if her hymen is not. Whilst conduct-book rhetoric insinuated that chastity’s limitations were actually aids to protective freedom, Hays’s rhetoric insisted on its limitations being seen as such.²² By changing the terms of chastity, Hays transformed it into something which is liberating through its new, self-determined nature. Rather than just a precept or a habit learned, it became a matter of personal choice.

Yet, Mary is already tainted before her own violation because of her sullied birth. Her birth ensures her victim status, yet by refusing to become what society demands of a fallen woman, Mary challenges what society allows in sexual terms. Ty discusses the way Hays “demonstrates through Mary that women become marginalized not because of what they are, but because of what society expects them to do and to be”.²³ In *The Victim of Prejudice*, by implication, chastity is representing a woman’s denied sexuality, in that

the need to demand chastity of its women suggests a fear that women are, indeed, sexual creatures. Chastity is made into a manoeuvrable construct. In essence, the rape is immaterial but helps Hays to focus on the nature of prejudice, which the text shows to be constructed and, hence, removable. Mary is not only deemed culpable because illegitimate, but also because her evaluation of her "nature's worth" destabilizes her perception of her social worth. According to the daughter, it is only in social, inherited terms that a crime has been committed by her. The plight of a "reasoning" fallen woman is an excellent example of where a consequent collision takes place.

Mary's refusal to become Sir Peter's mistress, and later his wife, shows her refusal to compromise herself by courting society's approval. Whereas chastity is invisible, loss of it demanded the woman's invisibility. Mary's initial uncowed presence challenged this acceptance of wrongdoing. As she says: "I am guiltless, [...] why should I then affect disguise, or have recourse to falsehood?" (140). Hays's projected chastity would no longer be a social construct, but be self-determinable, dependent on an act of will which has nothing to do with physical retention or loss. The presence of the hymen becomes negotiable and is largely irrelevant, and Mary's sense of this distinction helps her ignore the physical nature of the violation. As Ty points out: "while we may be bothered by Mary's stubbornness and her insistence on her freedom at all costs, we cannot help but sympathize with her lack of choice as she desperately clings to the only thing left intact: her self-esteem".²⁴

In many senses, the novel form which Hays adopts militates against her. The narrative of the mother passed on to the daughter via Mr Raymond ensures that the mother's past is seen to intrude on the daughter's present. Similarly, the daughter's experience has also been turned into history for the benefit of a future prisoner. Private experience is made to confront public condemnation, and the oratorical tone of much of the language underlines the powerlessness of the individual towards Mary. By Hays making both histories for the benefit of others, Mary's attempt at self-expression and autonomy is doomed to failure. The continuity of the narratives is important in establishing the links between their very different experiences. However, this very form also reinforces the ruthlessness of social pursuit and punishment. In other words, the narratives themselves become an agent in helping to formulate an oppressive link in the plot's inevitability. As Mary expresses it: "I was destined once more to be dashed on hidden shoals, and swallowed up in an unfathomable abyss" (160). Like Helvétian optimism, Hays's plea for female independence can only be a future eventuality. Sacrifice now may bring about independence later. The punishment traditionally meted out to the "fallen woman" also holds sway in *The Victim of Prejudice*. The triumph Mary anticipates is denied her, not only because of the prejudicial circumstances her victimization exposed, but also because the

deterministic discourse Hays had adopted had already consolidated Mary's failure. Moreover, even the hopeful future change may also be denied because of the narrative structure. With its emphasis on the conventionality of punishment, it could be read as bolstering up the very image which Hays was so determined to challenge: that of the punishable deviant offender. Her concentration on the inevitable nature of her punishment, whilst exposed as social rather than natural, might be wilfully misconstrued as demonstrating a need for protective punishment in the same paradoxical rhetoric that conduct-book writers used. The novel might well deter women from gaining "independence", "energy", "self-respect", until a time when such behaviour was not condemnatory. A pattern of telling has been established which might be as binding as the ideological construct in which the narrative sought to intervene. Mary herself can only look forward to a conventional escape through death, despite her own "unconquerable spirit, bowed but not broken" and her belief in her "unsullied life" (3). Once again, future success is dependent on present failure as:

[...] ignorance and despotism, combatting frailty with cruelty, may go on to propose partial reform in one invariable, melancholy round; reason derides the weak effort; while the fabric of superstition and crime, extending its broad base, mocks the toil of the visionary projector. (174–75)

The final image is a salutary one. Any vision Mary might have will be of a time after her death. However, the narrative ensures that Mary's experience remains particular, despite the public nature of the discourse. Mary is *not* representative; she must remain *the* rather than *a* victim, much as Wollstonecraft's Maria could not fully encapsulate "the wrongs of woman".²⁵

Whilst the narrative argues for flexibility in the face of inevitability, its structure presupposes that such inevitability is fixed. Aspects of the plot convincingly demonstrate the rigidity of Mary's position by augmenting the sense of claustrophobia and oppression which Mary experiences. Each time Mary looks forward to her independence, the plot intervenes and refuses her access to this. Similarly, it is mainly through the repetition of her "story" or "history" that Mary's problems occur. She suggests that if she, and others (mainly Mr Raymond), had not known her mother's history, then her future calamities might have been avoided.

The declamatory tone of much of the writing, especially surrounding the mother's sense of injustice and her own doom, reflects Hays's central concern with the inevitability of her descent, as the relentlessness of the rhythm and build-up of clauses in the following typical example shows:

The despotism of man rendered me weak, his vices betrayed me into shame, a barbarous policy stifled returning dignity, prejudice robbed me of the means of independence, gratitude ensnared me in the devices of treachery, the contagion of example corrupted my heart, despair hardened and brutality rendered it cruel. A sanguinary policy precludes reformation, defeating the dear-bought lessons of experience, and, by a legal process, assuming the arm of omnipotence, annihilates the being whom its negligence left destitute, and its institutions compelled to offend. (68–69)²⁶

The mother's perception of her own imprisonment is being reinforced by her apparent acceptance of a chain of prejudices. Similarly, although Mary confidently refuses to accept the consequences of her rape, the dramatic, recitative style again suggests the inevitability of the trap Mary is forced to enter:

My appearance in his chamber, alike unexpected and extraordinary, – the hour, my solitude, – my defenceless situation, – my confusion, my terror, – my previous exhaustion, – the anxiety and fatigue I had sustained during the past week, – his native impetuosity, heightened by recent scenes of riot and festivity, by surprise, by resistance, – combined to effect my ruin. Deaf to my remonstrances, to my supplications, – regardless of my tears, my rage, my despair, – his callous heart, his furious and uncontrollable vehemence, — oh! that I could for ever blot from my remembrance, – oh! that I could conceal from myself, – what, rendered desperate, I no longer care to hide from the world! — I suffered a brutal violation. (116–17)

The problem is that, as Jane Spencer points out:

[...] by idealizing the heroine as an innocent victim of men and fate, the novel of seduction sometimes reinforced rather than challenged the oppressive ideology of femininity. Ruin could be portrayed as an inevitable tragic destiny rather than an assailable social wrong.²⁷

Hays is in an even more fragile position because of the emphasis given to causality in all her writing. Given the form of narrative histories, the inevitable has already been charted and this suggests, if not presupposes, that its chain will continue. In novelistic terms, this terminates in the heroine's death, which is what Mary anticipates as a "welcome and never-ending repose" (3).

Thus, the continuity of the narrative between mother and daughter is both structurally and philosophically necessary to point out the social inevitability of

the “fall” awaiting women, *and*, in Hays’s viewpoint, the intervention of causality in life. When Mr Raymond advises Mary to “preserve the manuscript which contains the fate of your unfortunate mother: [because] I can give you no stronger lesson”, he misleads her, as society refuses to allow a lesson to be learned (102); the innocent daughter can never escape the taint of her mother’s crime for “the misfortunes of your birth stain your unsullied youth” (69). By insisting on stoical, rational resignation, Mr Raymond, as Mr Francis before, was colluding with the very prejudices he was advising his young charge to reject. As mentors, these men are dubious at best, damaging at worst.

However, one advantage of this narrative form is that more sympathy is directed towards the victim who tells her own tale but, when the outcome is already known, the victim can only remain a victim and, as her own challenge is so apparently inefficacious, the reader’s involvement in her struggle may be similarly undermined as “we leave her declining to an early grave, wretched with the sense of her wasted energies and unfruitful talents”.²⁸ In the daughter’s case, the narrative form insists on the ruthlessness of the oppression which she has so patently failed to surmount.

I would also argue that Hays has altered the parameters of “the novel of seduction” in order to place emphasis on the political aspect of these male/female relationships. In a sense, the *Critical Review* is correct in that there did exist ways back into society but, as Susan Staves and others point out, these ways were acknowledgements of sexual transgression.²⁹ Mary is neither seduced nor repentant, and this position challenges the novel of seduction. I suggest that, because much of the foregrounded “inevitability” of Mary’s victimization is, perhaps, unfounded or anachronistic, Hays was deliberately manipulating a situation which had become a literary subgenre into one which could help her focus on the original foundation for this subgenre becoming necessary. The fiction of ruin has also helped produce the reality of ruin, in the same way that Hays’s chosen narrative has. Katharine Rogers points out that, although suspicion of illegitimacy might be a useful narrative device, it “had to be cleared up by the end of the novel, since a lapse in chastity on her mother’s part would, by hereditary influence, have blemished the flawless purity required in the heroine”.³⁰ Hays turns this convention on its head by deliberately flaunting Mary’s inherited “blemish”, thereby deflecting criticism away from the heroine’s “error” and towards what makes this error prejudicial and specious.

In a similar way, Hays adopts the genre’s cliché of aristocratic oppression and deconstructs its demonstration of class struggle back into the more simple one of sexual victimization, through which Hays shows how the oppressor-libertine was able to nullify a woman’s worth in one brutal action.³¹ This use of the “myth of seduction” would seem to uphold the established value of

chastity, which “accepted that seduction was the worst thing that could happen to a women, but blamed the upper class for this phenomenon”³², but, although Hays does utilize the conventional apparatus of position, wealth and power, the oppressor, as the relentless rhythm suggests, is too big and controlling to be Sir Peter, or even the class he represents.³³ The oppressor is the concept of chastity, which, although intended to uphold that class, had been reified into woman herself. In *The Victim of Prejudice*, Hays attempts to strip chastity of its metaphoric complacency.

It is significant that the young Mary’s “warning” is issued to man and not woman, as her mother’s had been (and as Hays’s was in her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain, In Behalf of Women* of the previous year), as if in agreement that Mary has been forced to recognize that women are “bound by chains, of such enormous weight and complicated form, that the more they are considered, the less hope remains of being able to unloose them by perseverance, or break through them by force”.³⁴ Any lesson which might have been learned from the *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is illusory whilst the prejudices of society persist, as even Mr Raymond had to acknowledge:

[...] the imperious usages of society, with a stern voice, now command us to pause. Her mandates, often irrational, are, nevertheless, always despotic: contemn them, -the hazard is certain, and the penalty may be tremendous. Some vigorous minds dare to encounter these perils: doubtless, we are indebted to them: they help to shake the fantastic fabric [however] I wish not to see the name of my girl enrolled in the tragic list either of martyrs or of victims. (31–32)

Merely being, for Mary, constitutes victimization *and* martyrdom, as she has inherited her stigma *and* been educated to challenge it in vain. Consequently, she perceives that: “I sink beneath a torrent, whose resistless waves overwhelm alike in a common ruin the guiltless and the guilty” (168).

Awareness of this ruthless nature of the enemy brings despair. It is not until the resistless torrent of a socially constructed inevitability is perceived by her that Mary loses her defiant attitude towards society and turns to despair, whereas the worldly Sir Peter could immediately and complacently point out to her that “the stupid prejudices of the world” will forbid her “honour and character [...] be restored. [...] Who would support you against my wealth and influence?” (119). Mary is a victim of the contract society. Her character and her individual moral worth have no importance to a world in which only material possessions have value. She would have been making a direct challenge to femininity itself by bringing an action against the aggressor. Such an attitude prevailed well into the late nineteenth century, according to Carolyn Conley, who cites three counts for raped women to be considered

“suspect”: “they were female, they had been temporarily outside the supervision of male guardians [...], and they were publicly announcing their loss of sexual innocence”.³⁵ Sir Peter could confidently anticipate that a judge and jury would hardly “credit the tale you mean to tell” (119). Mary is naively trusting in a sense of virtue which has no place in socially determining terms.

Susan Staves demonstrates that it was the father of “seduced maidens” (a term which would also include rape victims) who might be able to bring a seduction action for “the loss of her service”.³⁶ The absence of any father and then of her guardian makes Mary’s position not only more vulnerable, but it also accentuates her *personal* wish for redress, as rape was seen as a violation of the father’s rights rather than those of the violated. Accusations would be made in the name of the father, especially if a lower-class woman was involved. This legal position stresses the link between female virtue and property rights; a link which Hays sought to expose as spurious. Clearly, it is not Sir Peter but the distortion of chastity which ensures inevitable consequences, and which colludes with this helplessness. Sir Peter’s offer of marriage might be seen as ideologically magnanimous, as he is agreeing to align himself with a woman who is now unchaste.

Mary refuses to become guilty because she has no guilt, but more important is her refusal to comply with her mother’s acceptance of non-readmittance into society. Mary’s subsequent attempts challenge the function of chastity itself, which, to succeed as a socially necessary restraint on desire, insists on a recognition by society *and* the victim of violation, both physical and social, having taken place. The downward spiral which attaches to her failure is indicative of her ruin, and of the persistence of a society dependent on this inevitability being seen as a necessary part of social practice. In terms reminiscent of Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*³⁷, Mary is hunted down as if she carries the guilt of her mother, and Hays points out the similarity in their positions by reintroducing the mother at significant points, Mary’s narrative suggesting the repeated pattern of their experience:

Imaginary terrors, broken recollections, strange phantoms, wild and wandering thoughts, harassed and persecuted me. In some of these terrible moments, the visionary form of my wretched mother seemed to flit before me. One moment, methought I beheld her in the arms of her seducer, revelling in licentious pleasure: the next, I saw her haggard, intoxicated, self-abandoned, joining in the midnight riot; and, in an instant, as the fantastic scene shifted, covered with blood, accused of murder, shrieking in horrible despair, dragged to the scaffold, sinking beneath the hand of the executioner! Then, all pallid and ghastly, with clasped hands, streaming eyes, and agonizing earnestness, she seemed to urge me to take example from her fate! (123)

Hays's obsession with antecedent and consequent, cause and effect, would not allow this inevitability to go unchallenged. In several letters to Godwin, Hays discusses the terms' differences, and it is clear that Godwin altered the terminology between the first and second edition of *Political Justice*, which he was revising during this period.³⁸ Mary's refusal to acknowledge her role within the scenario of the "fallen woman" is also a confrontation with social order. Beyond this challenge Hays refused to go: her heroine still met the conventional punishment as due. The opening epigram from Moore's *Female Seducers* prepares for such a concession, and it is fitting that the novel begins with an extract from a conventional discourse, a poem lamenting the inevitable and acceptable plight of the fallen woman:

Her Trumpet Slander rais'd on high,
 And told the Tidings to the Sky;
 Contempt discharg'd a living Dart,
 A side-long Viper, to her Heart;
 Reproach breath'd Poisons o'er her Face,
 And soil'd and blasted ev'ry Grace;
 Officious Shame, her Handmaid new,
 Still turn'd the Mirror to her View
 While those, in Crimes the deepest dy'd,
 Approach'd to whiten at her Side.³⁹

Its inclusion belies the fact that *The Victim of Prejudice* sought throughout to undermine this flawed rhetoric and especially its causal foundation: indeed, the "means" of the book's opening "Advertisement".

Notes

- 1 The edition used throughout is Eleanor Ty, ed., *The Victim of Prejudice*, by Mary Hays (1799; Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1994). Page references to this edition are cited in the text.
- 2 Undated letter (c.1795) from Hays to an unspecified "dear friend", The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle, New York Public Lib., Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Hays's letters have been collected in Marilyn L. Brooks, *The Correspondence (1779–1843) of Mary Hays, British Novelist* (Lewiston: Mellen, 2004). Where relevant, page references to this edition have been given; Brooks, *Correspondence* 304.
- 3 Wetenhall Wilkes, *A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady* (1740), qtd. in Vivien Jones, ed., *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1990) 29.

- 4 Hays to Godwin, 1 Oct. 1795, Pforzheimer Collection, MH 7; Brooks, *Correspondence* 399.
- 5 "Improvements Suggested in Female Education," *Monthly Magazine* 3 (1797) 193–95 (194). All of Hays's *Monthly Magazine* articles are reproduced in Marilyn L. Brooks, ed., *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, by Mary Hays (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2000) 261–91.
- 6 See, for instance, James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, where threatening language is used to identify an alternative course to the one prescribed: "But if a person (supposing her disposition in other respects ever so good) will be always breaking loose through every domestic inclosure, and ranging at large the wide common of the world, those destroyers will see her in a very different point of light. They will consider her as lawful game, to be hunted down without hesitation". James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (1765) 102. Similarly, Wetenhall Wilkes saw it "as much the province of a licentious rake, to betray the young, the rich, the beautiful, or any female; as it is the quality of a fox to prey upon poultry" (Jones 31).
- 7 Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (London: U of Chicago P, 1984) 23. See also Ellen Pollak, *The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope* (London: U of Chicago P, 1985).
- 8 Fordyce 107.
- 9 Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 150.
- 10 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). See D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf, eds., *The Vindications: The Rights of Men, The Rights of Woman* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1997) 267–68.
- 11 Pollak 67–68.
- 12 The Helvétian School posited self-interest as the mainspring of motivation. Its basis was that environmental control determined one's being and this emphasis was seen to be liberating, especially for marginalized groups such as women, for a change in social expectations mainly through education would free them from their subservient position. Hays was a firm believer in Helvétian philosophy long after Godwin had rejected its self-interested basis.
- 13 The foundation of William Godwin's thinking was the motivation produced by the justice of any action. Once this was perceived, rationality would necessarily compel a person to take the correct action. Hence, Godwin's thinking was based on rational perception and the idea of one's self-oblivion in view of any action.
- 14 Mary Hays, *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain, In Behalf of Women* (London: Johnson, 1798) 63.
- 15 Gina Luria, "Mary Hays: A Critical Biography," diss., New York U, 1972, 120.

- 16 Mary Hays, "To the Editor of the monthly magazine", *Monthly Magazine* 3 (1797), reproduced in Marilyn L. Brooks, ed., *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1999): 278.
- 17 Brooks, *Memoirs* 277.
- 18 Brooks, *Memoirs* 276.
- 19 Hays to Godwin [Jan. 1796], Pforzheimer Collection, MH 24; Brooks, *Correspondence* 419.
- 20 Hays to Godwin, 1 Oct. 1795, Pforzheimer Collection, MH 7; Brooks, *Correspondence* 399.
- 21 Hays to Godwin [6 Feb. 1796], Pforzheimer Collection, MH 12; Brooks, *Correspondence* 429.
- 22 For example, James Fordyce argued that God had "raised a kind of fence about them, to prevent those wilder excursions into which the other sex are frequently carried, with a freedom unchecked by fear, and favoured by custom". James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (1765) 119.
- 23 Ty xxvi.
- 24 Ty xxv.
- 25 Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* (London: Johnson, 1798).
- 26 The *Critical Review* refers to this passage "as a specimen of the pathetic sophistry which we have censured". *Critical Review* new series 26 (1799): 450–52 (451).
- 27 Spencer 113.
- 28 J.M.S. Tomkins, *The Popular Novel in England, 1770–1800* (London: Methuen, 1969) 313.
- 29 Susan Staves offers an example from the Magdalen Asylum which had, by 1786, "admitted 2,415 repentant prostitutes and returned 1,571 to decent places in society". She quotes from their "Plan": "That nothing shall be omitted which can promote the great ends of preserving life, of rendering that Life useful, and of recovering those who are now lost to the Community". Susan Staves, "British Seduced Maidens," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 14.2 (1980–81): 109–34 (134).
- 30 Katharine M. Rogers, "Inhibitions on Eighteenth-Century Women Novelists: Elizabeth Inchbald and Charlotte Smith," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 11.1 (1977): 63–78 (67).
- 31 See Ty's introduction for a discussion of Lacanian "Law of the Father" and its application to the novel.
- 32 Anna Clark, "The Politics of Seduction in English Popular Culture, 1748–1848," *The Progress of Romance*, ed. Jean Radford (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986) 63.
- 33 See especially page 41 for an example of this relentless rhythm: "Entangled in a series of unavoidable circumstances, hemmed in by insuperable obstacles, overwhelmed by a torrent of resistless prejudice, wearied with

- opposition, and exhausted by conflict, I yield, at length, to a destiny against which precautions and struggles have been alike fruitless.”
- 34 Hays, *Appeal* 70–71.
- 35 Carolyn A. Conley, *The Unwritten Law: Criminal Justice in Victorian Kent* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 95. Conley also quotes an attorney’s warning to the House of Commons as late as 1873: “The more we make a woman feel that she was to look after herself and not yield to inducements to go wrong, the better [. . .] would it be for the whole female sex. It was not the really virtuous who were ready to expose their shame” (95).
- 36 Staves 128.
- 37 Godwin’s influential novel of 1794 had sought to expose social tyranny and error in the way his *Political Justice* had.
- 38 See letter dated 16 Dec. 1793 (Pforzheimer Collection, MH 10; Brooks, *Correspondence* 413–17) and especially that traced to Jan. 1796 (Pforzheimer Collection, MH 24; Brooks, *Correspondence* 417–21), where Hays claims to “clearly distinguish the terms cause and effect from antecedent and consequent – the former imply knowledge, the latter confess ignorance” (418).
- 39 The extract from Edward Moore’s *Female Seducers* appeared on the title pages of both volumes. It appeared in his *Fables for the Female Sex* written with Henry Brooke and published in 1744.

Marilyn L. Brooks gained her MA and PhD on Mary Hays from the University of London. She has taught for a variety of British and American universities, latterly as Staff Tutor in Arts for the Open University in the East Anglia region. She is now retired and living in the South of France where she continues to write and is at present working on a biography of William Frend. She has published widely on Dissent and on Mary Hays, and has edited the *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (Broadview, 2000) and *The Correspondence (1779–1843) of Mary Hays, British Novelist* (Mellen, 2004). [email: brooks3@wanadoo.fr]

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