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Emancipated “Lions in the Den”: Godwin and the Other Mary

When Mary Hays started writing her novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* in the autumn of 1795 as an attempt to remould her unrequited love-affair with the dissenting Minister William Frend into an artistic creation her major influence and support when venturing into such a risky, self-revealing project was, the philosopher, William Godwin. Their curious friendship, based on an Enlightenment spirit of truth-seeking and emancipation, has commonly been dealt with only in parenthesis by biographies, as though constituting something of an embarrassment to a man of fame. What began as an experiment in intellectual companionship between the sexes, in line with a radical ideal, was to turn into an indefinable and chaotic power-game, the development of which can be traced in Hays's letters, recently made available through Marilyn L. Brooks editing of her correspondence.

From their very first contact, Mary Hays had inadvertently drawn William Godwin into her private sphere. She wrote to him for the first time on 14 October 1794, to ask if she could borrow a copy of his *Political Justice*, under the pretext that it was hard to come by, being too expensive for the circulating libraries. By then, Hays considered herself an established enough reviewer and journalist to approach the renowned author with such a request, referring her interest in the work to a “testimony” made of its greatness by “a respected friend, Mr Wm Frend, late of Cambridge” (*Correspondence* 383). Mentioning William Frend, must have been just as much a thrilling confirmation of her private acquaintance with him, as it was a case of conscious name-dropping.

Mary Hays began her letter by commending Godwin’s novel *Caleb Williams* (1793) for its “originality, force, & genius”, taking the opportunity also of addressing her own main concern, which was the nation’s “worse than neglected, perverted, female education” (*Corr* 383). She was anxious to point out their similarities in outlook, promoting an image of herself as a radical-minded individual, whose “governing principles” were “an ardent love for literature & an unbounded reverence for truth and genius” (*Corr* 384). When she had picked her pen, it was in the hope of being accepted as a valid partner in a dialogue on intellectual subjects.

About two months later (December 7th 1794), after she had read *Political Justice*, Hays presented a distinguished analysis of it, combined with characteristic gushes of enthusiastic praise. Assimilating Godwin’s optimism, she informed him of sharing his vision of an enlightened future society, enriched by “the gradual diffusion of knowledge, like a soft & plentiful shower of dews, imperceptibly fructifying the sterile soil, & preparing it for future abundant harvests” (*Corr* 384). Although the word “perfectibility” was rarely mentioned between them, it was a notion that

pervaded their correspondence, understood and shared by them both.

A noticeable trait in Hays's letters was her own desire for intellectual enhancement, what she termed her "inexpressible ardour for the acquisition of knowledge", in her case, potent enough to approach "the limits of pain" (*Corr* 391). Godwin did his best to tone down these hyperbolic private urgings, reinforcing his own concern for the multitude and proclaiming only actions carried out for the sake of public welfare as morally defensible. Hays was not fearful of contesting this view and they engaged in a lively and recurring debate on the question of the role of the individual in society, during which she would refer to her favourite French philosopher, Helvétius, to support her differing standpoint. She understood that her passionate indulgences could be taken for a selfish singularity and made an effort to counterbalance her passionate outbursts with demonstrations of personal philosophical insight.

Mary Hays was hoping to spur William Godwin to engage in a written correspondence that would furnish her with regular supplies of "calm, cool, philosophic investigation" (*Corr* 407). Yet, as stated by his biographer, Peter H. Marshall: "Godwin, for his part, did not want to get too involved with Hays"... "Nevertheless, he still called on her regularly"(Marshall 176) . Not that he lacked interest or concern, but it was clear that he did not wish to exert himself through the use of his pen. Mary was not too taken aback by his failure to write lengthy replies, yet she would often remind him to bring her letters with him to their reunions, since she would "sometimes forget their contents" and then "recollect something unsaid" after their meetings (*Corr* 407). She explained that she preferred seeing his opinion in writing, since verdicts in that form "make a greater impression than in words". What she demanded of him was unabashed honesty and relentless assessments.

Mary Hays never feigned to be in total agreement with Godwin. Sometimes, she would even brave herself to tease him a little about his key concepts from *Political Justice*, such as those of Necessarianism, suggesting that her letters to him were "the antecedent" to his "consequent" visits to her home. On a more serious note, as a Unitarian, she was deeply disturbed by his atheist views. Her letters provide evidence of her many attempts to convert him into a belief in "the existence of a Supreme Power" (*Corr* 391), and she warned him against associating his Radicalism too closely with a lack of faith: "A professed atheist, say they, a contemner of all law &c, has no motives to be virtuous, & they draw a frightful picture & persuade themselves that you sat for it" (*Corr* 409). Her attitude to him was clearly protective; she was already aware how easy it was to be made into an object of slander as a non-conformer.

It was quite natural that their religious discussions should embrace the subject of marriage. Hays did her best to reason him out of his negative view of institutionalised co-habitation, almost, in the guise of a mediator in a family conflict. Living together with someone in "a compact of

mutual forbearance”, she insisted, could give “birth to talents and great heroic exertions”. The point she was trying to get across was really a product of his own making that a rational mind ought to be able to steer clear of marital problems because of its capacity of only making sensible choices (*Corr* 411).

Most of the discussions of her letters took place while having tea, at Mary's home, in Hatton Garden or in Godwin's house. Their talks were not always held tête-à-tête, however, but brought her into contact, with other writers of her time. The most frequent extra participant in their teatime reunions was, Godwin's close friend, Thomas Holcroft (1745-1809), who had been his partner in dialogue when writing *Political Justice*. A note from Godwin on 24 November 1795 shows him to have been keen on including them both in their conversations: “Mr. Godwin & Mr. Holcroft will do themselves the pleasure of drinking tea with Miss Hayes on Friday, if convenient. If no answer be returned to this note, it will be considered an affirmation”(*Corr* 413). Although she humorously alluded to Holcroft's participation as being a “consequent” to Godwin's “antecedent” of having made it a habit to come and see her, Mary was not happy about a third member being included in their pact. Holcroft had translated Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* from German and her awareness of his preoccupation with physical appearance, made her turn fidgety and self-conscious, in his presence.

Hays's one-to-one meetings with her mentor were not only disturbed by Thomas Holcroft. Other female writers, such as Elizabeth Inchbald and Amelia Alderson, also relished spending time with the renowned philosopher. Godwin's appreciation of their company was painful for Mary to observe. She tried to curb her jealousy by notifying him, peevisly, of other people's gossip. Godwin, the womaniser, was not a persona she was wont to recognise, since it seemed to preclude his role as a proponent of female rights. Relying on male support had always been a vital ingredient, in her endeavours to promote female emancipation.

At the beginning of the following year, the tone in Hays's letters became increasingly personal and appealing. It seems that through a combination of flattery and complaint, she was trying to involve Godwin more and more in her private problems. She had not got over her unsuccessful affair with William Frennd and tried to explain her low spirits as a recurring “morbid depression”, expressing deep gratitude to Godwin for putting up with her lamentations: “I am affected by the pains you take to heal & benefit my wayward mind, still more by the humane & delicate consideration which, amidst your just reproofs, you shew for my feelings, & I grieve that those pains have not been more efficacious!” (417). The relationship between them was now developing into something beyond a stimulating exchange of politico-philosophical ideas. It was turning into a therapeutic role-play, requiring an extraordinary degree of empathy from the person acting as mentor.

The impression of Godwin, gained through Hays's letters at this stage (Jan 1796), is that of a slightly patronising, yet quite gentle and caring, partner in dialogue, who did not have the heart to decline participation in her personal, emotional sphere. It was a case in point, that she seemed curiously confident about his discretion and balanced judgements. Only at times did she show a need to remind him that her "communications will be of a delicate nature, they must therefore be held sacred, to yourself alone!" (*Corr* 417).

Despite the gradual shift into a more private form of discourse, their debates over public issues never waned. There was still one unbridgeable hiatus between them, which was Godwin's lack of faith, but she chose to interpret their differences as a token of the freedom of thought characterising their unique and rewarding friendship. When disagreements were quite forceful, Mary Hays welcomed this as a confirmation of her courage and ability to give and take in rational, logical argumentation, and of daring to oppose him as an authority. Another corner-stone of his philosophy that she questioned was "disinterestedness". Bearing in mind her experiences with William Frend, she reacted with irony over the rigidity of Godwin's beliefs, asserting that she could certainly never be "sufficiently disinterested as to expect to be happy" (*Corr* 443). The Reason and Passion contention was constantly acted out between them, both as an area of philosophical debate and as a hurdle in the handling of her emotional disposition.

Godwin must have found Hays's forthrightness stimulating since he continued his regular contact with her. He knew her as a person who invited challenge and who was not afraid of having her beliefs shaken. What he was probably not aware of was that she was exerting a double-bind influence over him. She was asking him to break down her defence mechanisms, and at the same time demanded that he take full responsibility for restoring her faith in herself after undergoing such personality changing experiments: "Point out to me the weaknesses & the defects of my principles, prove to me wherein they fail: but after destroying my fabric, if it indeed be void of foundation, allow me to claim your assistance in erecting one more consistent, more solid, more consolatory!" (*Corr* 400).

Referring repeatedly to Godwin's intellectual superiority, concomitantly, Hays was eager to point to the basic psychological traits that united them, their fearlessness and integrity, and she made use of animal imagery to describe the solitude which singled them out from others: They were like "the noblest animals who live alone – while the weak & the timid, conscious of their defenceless state, flock together" (*Corr* 453). By "noble", Mary meant not just solitary, but powerful and strong. They lived "like the lion in his den, while other people, who might be named, herd together, like pigs in a sty" (*Corr* 453). The metaphor, with its Burkean connotations, was not chosen only to claim kinship with her mentor. Hays needed to prove that strength could be found in isolation as she was backing off from her scepticism towards Godwin's anti-marriage and co-

habitation creed. Disillusioned by the outcome of her involvement with Frenn, in April/May of 1796, the independent form of living Godwin had professed in *Political Justice* seemed more of a viable and necessary option. Ironically, Godwin's inclinations at this stage were travelling in the opposite direction, having been introduced, through Mary Hays, to Mary Wollstonecraft, a second time.

The choice of the "lion" metaphor, proved how outspokenly possessive about Godwin Hays was becoming, as she insisted on repeating her adulation and gratitude for his forbearance and, for putting up with her "prattle" (*Corr* 451). She could not but be aware of the extraordinary and time-consuming undertaking that Godwin had pledged himself to and feared the day when he might tire. She continued trying to hold him under her power, through flattery and expressions of gratitude over his "gentle, courteous patient, yet impressive method of investigation" which had helped overcome her "timidity" (416). . That Godwin would waver back and forth in his attitude to her is a conclusion to be drawn from her recurring uncontrolled reactions to what had passed between them: "Punish me then! I have been tolerably disciplined in the school of humility"... "You are, at once, kind & cruel, polite & rude, tender & savage, candid & intolerant _ I cannot describe, how paradoxical you appear to me" (*Corr* 452). Outbursts such as these are revelatory of a stronger and more intimate connection between Godwin and Hays than what has previously been recognised. The binary opposites she uses to characterise him, seem to reflect the refractory motions of their intercourse. Godwin, at this point, had reverted to a standpoint of being cruel to be kind, while Hays tried to show that she was in control, granting him, as she affirms, "occasionally the privilege of being rude '& stupid', but not of staying away" (*Corr* 453). It is hard not to see a strong element of masochism in all this. As Mary urged William to continue his straightforward, brutal analysis of her personality, he readily carried out his task and was prepared to bear the brunt afterwards. In certain terms their communication seemed to be heading for a 'folie-à-deux'. What the outcome might have been, without the arrival of a new Mary on the scene, is a matter open to conjecture.

On 5 January 1796, Godwin wrote his famous letter to Mary Hays accepting an invitation to her house "to meet Mrs Wolstencraft"(421). A couple of days after the gathering, Hays commented on her friend's liveliness and "gaiety", which she had taken "to be very superficial", bearing in mind her recent suicide attempt. She took Godwin's positive assessment of Mary Wollstonecraft's capacity to enjoy the moment as criticism of her own personality, since he would often chide her for being so self-centred. Feeling "exquisitely miserable" (*Corr* 422), she ends her letter by engaging in excessive outbursts of self-pity, hard for anyone to endure.

It has been generally been construed that Hays was all in favour of the union between Godwin and Wollstonecraft. In the words of Godwin biographer, Don Locke, she had been playing "cupid" for her "two chosen oracles" (Locke 114). In *Mary Hays (1759-1843): The Growth of a*

Woman's Mind, Gina Luria Walker, too, claims that Hays had been “matchmaking” (Luria Walker 124). Yet, the tone and the contents of this letter together with the statement by the editor, Marilyn L Brookes, that “Much of the letter is blotted as if by tears” (*Corr* 422) tell a different story.

The intense therapy cum dialogue between William Godwin and Mary Hays lasted a year, from May 1795 to the beginning of June 1796. Over the period, from being a philosophical mentor and emotional guide, his role had been extended into being that of a literary adviser, as she had begun writing her novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. Drawing on her discussions with William Godwin, she determined that the governing principle for this semi-literary project should be 'perfectibility', exposing: “A philosophical delineation of the errors of passion, of the mischiefs of yielding to the illusions of the imagination”(430). She was counting on Godwin's participation to ensure its completion. At first, their cooperation seemed to be heading for a good start, but his verdict soon changed. The choice of epithets like “hopeless”, “persevering” and “unrequited” seemed to undermine any hope of gaining literary success. This time, when his comments concerned her creative ability and not her personal affairs, Hays was not ready to express gratitude over his harsh judgements. Refusing to rewrite her manuscript and changing the whole plot, which was what he had recommended, she reverted to characteristic outbursts of emotionalism calling him a “savage-hearted and barbarous critic!”, hoping that the world be spared from reviewers “as delicate and fastidious!”(*Corr* 457). She was finally stepping out of her dependency.

Mary Hays went ahead to write her novel the way she had envisaged it and included parts of her correspondence with Godwin. Although they continued to see each other together with Mary Wollstonecraft fairly regularly, their intense communication had come to an end in summer of 1796. After the death of Wollstonecraft, a year later, the rift was final. Neither Godwin nor Hays were able to communicate over their great loss. Perhaps, it was only natural for lions coming out of their den and facing a difficult and unfamiliar situation, to experience a sense of disorientation or, even, alienation. Their interchange had been an experiment in emancipation under guidance. For Hays it had meant empowerment through a mixture of aggressive intimidation and admiration. For Godwin, it had been a post-Political Justice entanglement from which he had been rescued by the prospect of a union with somebody else.

Helena Bergmann, July 2007

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