

Mary Hays (1760-1824)
by Elma Scott

In the 1790s Mary Hays made her name as a novelist and essayist, but became notorious on account of her radical feminist writings. In the present day her work, like that of her contemporary and friend < link to Mary Wollstonecraft biography > **Mary Wollstonecraft**, is now receiving new critical evaluation.

Little is known about Mary Hays's childhood. She was born in 1760 into a family of Rational Dissenters, and spent her youth in the family home in the London suburb of Southwark. At the age of seventeen she fell in love with John Eccles, who was from a similar Dissenting background, although possibly slightly socially inferior to the Hays family. In 1779, when they hoped to marry, both families opposed the match, and the two were forbidden to see one other. John Eccles had no employment and Hays no fortune, but these drawbacks did not cause them to part. Since Eccles lived near to Hays's home in Gainsford Street, it was not difficult for the two to meet secretly for walks. They also exchanged letters (over a hundred of which survive) which earnestly profess their devotion to each other. The letters also reveal that although Hays was spirited and bold and ready to make secret assignations with Eccles, she was also greatly concerned to appear decorous: 'Be the guard of my honour and character, and attempt not liberties, which I must blush at the recollection of'.[1]

Parental opposition was at last overcome and the two became engaged. However, tragedy struck, and shortly before their proposed marriage in August 1780, John Eccles died of a fever. Hays was heartbroken, and wrote to his sister, 'the best beloved of my soul! - all my pleasures - and every opening prospect are buried with him'.[2] With his death ended Hays's chance of becoming a wife and mother, the conventional aspirations of eighteenth-century women. She did fall in love again, but never again was her love reciprocated.

Hays turned to study and writing to overcome her grief. She led a quiet life for about ten years. During that time she wrote poetry as well as essays, some of which found their way into print. Her short story *Hermit: an Oriental Tale* was published in the *Universal Magazine* in 1786. It combines an exotic setting with a warning about the dangers of excessive passion (a theme to be taken up again in her first novel). During this period, too, she began a correspondence with Robert Robinson, a Dissenting minister and advocate of the abolition of the slave trade. Through Robinson, she became acquainted with leading Dissenters of the day, such as Joseph Priestley and John Disney. By the end of the 1780s, she was attending lectures on politics and religion at the Dissenting Academy in Hackney.

Under the pseudonym Eusebia, Hays published a pamphlet, *Cursory Remarks on An Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public or Social Worship* (1791). The pamphlet was written in response to one by Gilbert Wakefield, which condemned the emphasis placed on social aspects of worship. Hays's pamphlet argues for public worship and against the established church. This publication received favourable critical reviews,

and William Frend, a Cambridge scholar who had recently lost his fellowship, wrote to her to commend it. Mary fell in love, but sadly for her, although Frend seems to have shown some initial interest, it turned out to be a one-sided affair.

In 1792 Hays was given a copy of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and was deeply impressed. Soon after she made Wollstonecraft's acquaintance at the home of the publisher, Joseph Johnson. Johnson and Wollstonecraft were members of a group of Jacobin intellectuals, with which Hays became associated. The two women became friends.

Mary Hays was just then preparing her own work, *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793), on which she asked Wollstonecraft to comment. Wollstonecraft suggested that Hays should change the preface: she should make no apologies for her lack of education and let her work speak for itself.[3] Hays's admiration for her new acquaintance is several times expressed in this work: 'the rights of woman, and the name of Wollstonecraft, will go down to posterity with reverence, when the pointless sarcasms of witlings are forgotten'.[4] Although Hays's name alone appears on the title page, the book contains a small amount of material by her sister, Elizabeth. Some of the material, which included short stories and poems, had already been published in magazines. The subjects not only concerned domestic life and manners, but also philosophy, religion and political liberty, subjects at that time associated with masculine writings. Like Wollstonecraft's work, this book strongly advocates that women should be suitably educated, so that they could attain financial independence.

Letters and Essays received mixed reviews. The *Analytical* was complimentary, but others were dismissive: the *English Review*, for example, condemned Hays for trying, by her writing, to show that 'woman possesses the same powers as men'.[5]

Around this time Hays decided to leave the family home. She found herself lodgings at Kirby Street, Hatton Garden and intended to support herself by her writing. After reading William Godwin's novel *Caleb Williams* and a review of his *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, Hays wrote an admiring letter to him, with a request to borrow the latter work, which she could not afford to buy. Godwin obliged, and a correspondence as well as a friendship began, in which Godwin became her mentor, following the earlier pattern set by Eccles and Robinson. Hays confided in him her unrequited love for Frend, which she was to use as a subject for her next work.

Her new work was *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), a partly autobiographical novel in which she utilised both her own love-letters to Frend as well as her correspondence with Godwin. The most shocking element of *Emma Courtney* was its avowal of female sexual passion. It tells the story of the eponymous heroine's love for, and pursuit of, Augustus Harley, the son of a friend. In her letters to him, Emma describes herself as a 'woman, to whom education has given a sexual character'.[6] Emma has always felt that women are confined by society to a 'magic circle' from which they dare not break free.[7] Shockingly for conservative eighteenth-century readers, Emma offers herself to Harley without marriage when financial circumstances make marriage difficult for him.

Rejected by Harley, Emma carries on a philosophical correspondence with Mr Francis (who is based on Godwin). He warns that giving way to excessive emotion is a dangerous trait in a woman, and advises that she needs to forget her disappointed love and become independent. Emma, however, retorts that independence has been denied women by 'the barbarous and accursed laws of society'.[8]

Memoirs of Emma Courtney had some positive reviews. The *Analytical* saw it as 'the vehicle of much good sense and liberal principle' and the *Monthly* praised it for its display of 'great intellectual powers', but the *British Critic* and the *Critical Review* were wary of the apparently revolutionary political implications of the novel.[9]

Hays was now contributing articles (on the desirability of having realistic not idealistic characters in novels, for example) to the *Monthly Magazine*, a new periodical for liberal Dissenters. She was also reviewing novels, first for the *Critical* and then the *Analytical Review*, where Mary Wollstonecraft was now fiction editor. Hays is credited with bringing Godwin and Wollstonecraft together again (their first meeting had not been a success). They married in 1797, and a baby, < link to Mary Shelley biography > **Mary (later Shelley)** was born, but the new Mrs Godwin died ten days later. Mary Hays helped nurse her, and afterwards wrote a warm memorial of her for *Monthly Magazine*. Later she wrote another obituary for the *Annual Necrology* (1797-1798). By 1800, the friendship with Godwin had faded, for no clear reason. Hays was now friendly with some of the Romantic writers, like Southey.

Memoirs of Emma Courtney, taken to be a factual account of Hays's own life, was now causing her to be caricatured and mocked. She was sneered at in the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, she was one of the women lampooned in 'The Unsex'd Females' (1798), a poem by the Reverend Richard Polwhele, and caricatured as the ugly Bridgetina Botherim in Elizabeth Hamilton's novel *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800). Coleridge, who did not like her, described her as 'a Thing, ugly and petticoated'.[10] (The only known admirer of her looks was her first love, John Eccles.)

The next work attributed to Hays is the anonymously published *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798). Hays's *Appeal* lays out some of her feminist ideas, principally that education for women must be improved, and it defends women against the charge of being inherently inferior. The following year she published her new novel, *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), a strongly feminist work which challenges the idealization of patriarchy. In addition, it is implicitly critical of a society which values people according to wealth and class. The anti-hero, Sir Peter Osborne, has no sense of kindness or obligation towards his tenants. The heroine, Mary Raymond, who has been brought up by a guardian, is educated and beautiful, but becomes a social outcast when her parentage is known. Her mother had been seduced, abandoned, and reduced to prostitution. She gave birth to Mary, and later murdered her lover, for which crime she was executed. History seems to repeat itself when Mary is raped and abandoned. *The Victim of Prejudice* is Mary Hays's feminist version of Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-1748), whose eponymous heroine she had criticized for being too perfect.[11] (*The*

Victim of Prejudice is, however, a slim volume in comparison to Richardson's lengthy work.)

Towards the end of the 1790s, the climate in England had turned against Jacobins and strongly radical ideas, due largely to reaction to the Reign of Terror in France. Hays's personal life, her known feminist stance and radical views may have influenced reviewers, and *The Victim of Prejudice* received some unfavourable reviews. The *Critical Review* suggested that Hays's ability was 'employed in a manner highly dangerous to the peace and welfare of society'. [12] In her personal life, Charles Lloyd pretended to his friends that there was more to their relationship than a sentimental friendship conducted in letters. He falsely maintained that she had wept and offered herself to him. Hays was thus unkindly presented to the public as a hysteric rather than a thinking woman. [13]

Hays still continued to write to improve the standing of women. *Female Biography; or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of All Ages and Countries* (1803) took three years to write and ran to six volumes. It was an ambitious project, which covered the lives of 294 women. Hays followed this work with a novel and then historical works intended for the young. The novel was *Harry Clinton: or a Tale of Youth* (1804), which, like the novels which followed it, was more conservative than her earlier work.

Around this time, she moved to Camberwell in Surrey, where she carried on a correspondence with various well-known figures of the day, including Henry Crabb Robinson and the writer, Eliza Fenwick, a devoted friend. Robert Southey made suggestions to her on what work she might undertake, and she was on friendly terms with Charles and Mary Lamb. She knew, and was known to, many in the literary world: William Blake, Thomas Holcroft, Elizabeth Inchbald, Mrs Barbauld, to name a few.

Hays moved several times in the next twenty years, finding it difficult to live on her small annuity. Her last two novels, *The Brothers, or Consequences* (1815) and *Family Annals, or, The Sisters* (1817) are of a different order to her first two, being didactic and moralizing. She produced *Memoirs of Queens* (1821), her last work, at the request of her publishers. In 1824, she moved back to London, and died there in 1843, aged 83.

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- 2 Wedd, p. 204.
- 3 Wedd, p. 225.
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- 12 Kelly, p.124.
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