GENDER OUTLAWS:

A QUEER NARRATIVE STUDY OF LATE-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY WOMEN'S NOVELS OF PREJUDICE

A Thesis

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by

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by

Cody David Lynn Grey

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Department of English

Abstract

of

GENDER OUTLAWS:

A QUEER NARRATIVE STUDY OF LATE-EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

WOMEN’S NOVELS OF PREJUDICE

by

Cody David Lynn Grey

In this study, I analyze how the gothic heroines and narrative structures of three radical feminist-authored texts – Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Maria, or the Wrongs of Woman* (1797), Mary Hays’s *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), and Eliza Fenwick’s *Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock* (1795) – challenge pre-existing social prejudices against women as a public and private entity. At the conclusion of the eighteenth century, the definition of gender understood by British society takes a radical turn: where earlier decades understood gender to be projected or performed by dress and behavior, the 1790s bore witness to a rising, bio-essential understanding of gender as an undeniable quality one is born with. By and large, the fair sex and feminine gender is a popular subject with conduct books and literature promoting idealistic and sometimes unrealistic expectations for women’s social roles and conduct. By both answering Abby Coykendall’s call for queer narratology and elaborating on Sarah Winter’s notion of the “novel of prejudice,” I examine how these novels challenge social ideas and concepts pertaining to bio-essential understandings of gender in the final decade of the eighteenth

century. All three novels by Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Fenwick not only use similar gothic elements to project the narrative world into the realm of uncanny possibilities, but each gothic heroine's experiences of gender prejudice inform an audience of empowered feminine expressions defiant of social prescriptions of gender.

________________________, Committee Chair
Dr. Jonas Cope

____
Date

DEDICATION

To Narrative –

the only knowledge by which
we may understand who we are
and what our place
in the universe is.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: “The Personal is Political”

“If all Men are born free, how is it that all Women are born Slaves?” – Mary Astell

The final decade of the eighteenth century witnessed several revolutions and cultural upheavals, especially pertaining to gender. Three radical feminist authors – Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, and Eliza Fenwick – challenged both past and emerging ideas of gender as they pertained towards women in both their political nonfiction as well as their fiction. Through their fictional female characters, each feminist author challenged and conceived of a female gender unrestrained by past and current circumstances that not only promised the security of the heroines’ happiness and future but a future that may be realized by all women in England. Unlike many scholars, my reading of Wollstonecraft’s *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, Hays’s *The Victim of Prejudice*, and Fenwick’s *Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock* through a queer narratological perspective assesses not only an understanding of the novels under the subgenre of “novels of prejudice” but how key narrative aspects of each novel suggest not simply a feminist novel against eh status quo, but how each text demonstrates a queer understanding and presentation of gender England ultimately could not cope with at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Pitt’s Reign of Terror and England’s Gender Revolution

By the 1790s, England watched anxiously as Enlightenment ideology turned from thought to action. In 1789, a National Assembly was formed by the French commoners who, exhausted by the amount of disparity and famine gripping the lower social orders, sought change. With the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789 and the execution of

the French monarchy between December 1792 and January 1793, many in the British middle and upper classes looked on with terror and anxiety over the implications of the French Revolution could inspire at home with these violent turns of event. William Pitt the Younger, Prime Minister of England, began enacting laws nicknamed the "gagging acts" and took several literary and political writers to trial for their Jacobin sensibilities. Both the censorship laws and treason trials effectively affected the literary, political, social, and intellectual landscape of England for years to come, for better or worse.

While the overt war against the pressed raged on against Pitt, another war of ideas occurred between the sexes pertaining to natural rights, equality, and personal freedom. The onset of the French Revolution, according to Gary Kelly, inspired a parallel cultural revolution in England, for several areas of strife emerged by the first decade of the eighteenth century around issued of class conflict, economic development, national identity, rising literacy rates, and an ever-growing "reading public" (1-9). All these micro-conflicts became small fissures, revealing a system of faults and discord occurring not just in France but, to anti-Jacobin dismay, in England as well. Print and literature became vehicles by which people might feel connected through and over these emerging fault lines and fissures that now subdivided the nation. Thus, for women – especially Mary Wollstonecraft – writing became one of the dominant forms for the communication of ideas. By writing, then, women sought to center public – especially male, for they held a vast majority of social power – attention in order to reveal how women were systemically limited regarding their education, self-consciousness, and suffrage.

From conduct books to satirical poetry, many writers and social critics had much to say about women as a social category. It is little wonder that a struggle against the rest of British society for an *improvement* of women's personal and social conditions emerged. Some women writers and social critics held a candle towards the cause for improvement while others held torches and lit bonfires, so to speak. Although once defined as an active "britches" actress, Hannah More positioned herself squarely on the side of conservatives by the end of the eighteenth century. Published in 1799, More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, combatted the much more radical writings of women like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays by simultaneously recoding women's public and private roles while also advocating for a change in their educations. For example, regarding women's practice of the fine arts, More writes:

> The profession of ladies, to which the best of *their* instruction should be turned, is that of daughters, wives, mothers, and mistresses of families. They should be therefore trained with a view to these several conditions, and be furnished with a stock ideas and principles, and qualifications ready to be applied and appropriated, as occasion nay demand, to each of these respective situations: for though the arts which embellish life must claim admiration; yet when a man of sense comes to marry, it is a companion he wants, not an artist. It is not merely a creature who can paint, and play, and dress, and dance, it is a being who can comfort and counsel him; one who can reason and reflect, and feel, and judge, and discourse, and discriminate; one who can assist him in his affairs, lighten his

> cares, sooth[e] his sorrows, strengthen his principles and educate his children. (vol. 1, 97-98).

In sum, the role of women as productive members in a society did not include the fine arts but instead a mastery of household and familial affairs. A man, according to More, deserves a “wife,” a woman to manage his family, and household management is where women ought to focus their “talents.”

However, for radical women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* dominates feminist discourse and writing during the late eighteenth century, a reallocation of women’s “talent” from the arts to family management does little to liberate the female sex. According to Wollstonecraft and her radical contemporaries, access to “rational schools of thought,” for the kind of education that which men receive, is more than just necessary. In her *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft writes, “Only ‘absolute in loveliness,’ the portion of rationality granted to women is, indeed, very scanty; for, denying her genius and judgment it is scarcely possible to divine what remains to characterize intellect” (96). Wollstonecraft’s subtle yet pointed attack on contemporary discourse regarding women – the necessity of being “beautiful” in image and/or talent – means absolutely nothing if such loveliness is attached to a dim-witted mind. Although More does suggest an ideal wife, mother, and mistress to be able to “reason and reflect, and feel, and judge, and discourse, and discriminate,” Wollstonecraft argues there is not enough emphasis on these key traits that More and her conservative cohort include in their writing. Therefore, access to what is considered as a more “masculine” education – emphasis on rationality, logic, reason, and philosophy – is

necessary as an equal education for women to rise and be equally productive citizens. In hindsight, such requests – an equal or added emphasis on teaching rationality and reason as part of a woman's education – seems rather trivial or easy to grant. However, such suggestions only fueled the debate between the sexes well beyond the final decade of the eighteenth century.

"Novels of Prejudice"

Writing – and by extension, publication – became a dominant discourse by which writers, especially women, were able to express different ideas regarding women's reality and selfhood that did not necessarily conform to socially-dictated ideas and standards regarding women's conduct. Thus, contention between who a person is against what we or others prefer to see them as is the stuff of prejudice. In "The Novel and Prejudice," Sarah Winter identifies a subgenre of fiction she calls "novels of prejudice" as "characterizing and plotting the damaging results of traditional social biases," so that the novel of prejudice undertakes "an important early role in framing the experience of prejudice as a significant epistemologically, political, and ethical problem of modernity" (77). While she turns towards novels such as Mary Godwin Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Winter focuses more on the prejudices of the protagonists and on how other characters, experiences, and social forces within the narrative shape and challenge (as well as possibly reform) the prejudices held by both the fictional protagonists and intended audiences of these texts.

For the interests of this study, however, I want to look beyond the prejudice held by a protagonist and instead focus on the victims impacted by prejudice, namely the

heroines of Wollstonecraft's, Hays's, and Fenwick's novels. In each text, the heroine experiences gender-related prejudice against her for her lack of conformity or even for simply being a woman in the first place. While several readings have been done on these novels under the scope of feminism and gender, I have yet to find a scholar who has analyzed the gender prejudice in these three novels under the narrow scope of the 1790s, the decade that also saw a shift in cultural perception of what gender is and how is it signified. This study, then, seeks to expand on Winter's initial introduction of the "novel of prejudice" subgenre and include gender prejudice experienced by fictional heroines of 1790s radical feminist gothic novels in order to suggest that gender discrimination is beyond the surface of just being a woman, but of being a particular *gender expression* of femininity.

Queering Gender: Judith Butler and Dror Wahrman

Given the lack of personal autonomy afforded to women against the backdrop of a revolution abroad, inspired by natural human rights and personal freedoms, women writers also turned to fiction to dramatize many of their critical thoughts and ideas. However, before engaging with each of Wollstonecraft's, Hays's, and Fenwick's novels, a brief yet crucial review of what "gender" means in the context of today and in the 1790s is necessary in order to understand how nuances of gender fueled these debates regarding women's roles in society and, by extension, their own identities.

Before we can understand how complicated gender as a construct was in the late eighteenth century, we need to understand how gender operates in our present moment. Gender theorist Judith Butler, whose groundbreaking text, *Gender Trouble*, both

reformed and succinctly articulates what our contemporary understanding of gender is and how gender operates in our society. Early in *Gender Trouble*, Butler defines "gender" as "a shifting and contextual phenomenon;" it "does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations" (15). Put another way, "gender" is less something having substance but more as having a form of cultural and historical discourse by which we, as individuals and as a society, may be able to articulate the proximity of our cultural relationships through a variety of differential axes, such as race, class, nationality, perceived biological sex, self-determined self-expression, and religion and/or spirituality. After delving into the difficult and sometimes impenetrable intellectual and philosophical debate raised between Jacques Lacan and Monique Wittig, Butler concludes her text with an elaborated definition of gender:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way win which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute he illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constructed social temporality. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed

> identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief. (179, emphasis in original)

More simply, gender as we understand it to be since *Gender Trouble*'s publication in 1992, is a performance of impressions by which we elicit a particular response from others to see us as a kind of person. One of Butler's oft-cited examples of gender construction and gender performativity are drag queens, who are oftentimes cisgender men or trans women who groom, dress, and literally perform as highly exaggerated caricatures of femininity. While many who watch a drag queen know the person to be "biologically male," clothing, make-up, persona, and humor combine into a compounded, highly-exaggerated feminine expression. In understanding gender as a form of constructed identity and performativity, Butler's definition will assist in our understanding of how the definition and cultural conception of gender has continuously kept us in thrall throughout the decades.

In order to understand how gender was perceived in the historical moment of England's final decade of the eighteenth century, I turn to Dror Wahrman, whose fascinating work, *The Making of the Modern Self*, thoroughly traces social understanding and articulation of gender, identity, and sex from the *ancien regime* in to what we now understand as the more "modern" (or even postmodern) sense of identity. To clarify, the *ancien regime* sense of identity encapsulates ideas of gender pertaining to the kinds of clothes and accessories one adorns oneself with, and how or what was worn signified gender identity as opposed to an individual's innate physicality (i.e. the body an

individual was born with and has developed into). For example (one which Wahrman discusses at length as it is an excellent example), during the early to mid-eighteenth century, actresses acquired and performed “breeches parts,”[1] or parts featuring male characters, such as Sir Harry Wildair of George Farquhar’s *The Constant Couple*, played by women. Although the audience understood them to be women, the actresses were commended for their ability to enact and impersonate male behavior. In a more succinct way, Wahrman states that “at the heart of the distinction between the *ancien regime* of gender identification and the new sex-gender regime that came to replace it was whether gender identity was understood to be *assumable* – so it could be learned, imitated, performed, donned, and doffed at will – or whether it was understood as innate, essential, and predetermined by sex” (48). Once modernity arrived with the nineteenth century, “gender play” and theater no longer became a possibility for both sexes to explore the fringes of the other.

What makes the transition from the *ancien regime* to the modern sense of identity so interesting, and what Wahrman labors to illustrate through several media in order to convey social attitudes and understandings of gender and identity, is the distinction between those who don masculinity for playacting and those who have incorporated it into their lifestyles, such as the Chevalier d’Eon, the (in)famous French diplomat who wooed England with their cross-dressing and gender deviance, leaving many to speculate if the chevalier is a man or a woman. Whether it may be a lifestyle or a breeches part,

[1] Recall that Hannah More, the conservative writer of female education by the end of the 1790s, once was a “britches” actress and played parts like Sir Harry Wildair of *The Constant Couple*.

> Within a remarkably short period of ten or fifteen years [1770s-1790s], the various components of this eighteenth-century cultural environment either vanished, lost their resonance, or reversed their meaning. … the dense web of interlocking eighteenth-century practices and forms that had capitalized in one way or another on the relative elasticity of former perceptions of gender became socially unacceptable and culturally unintelligible. (21).

Wahrman's important study of social perceptions of identity and gender throughout the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries ultimately reveals "a dense web" of shifting attitudes and cultural complications as the source for the transition between the *ancien regime* and modernity. His study not only vividly depicts the complexity of the decades leading up to and including the 1790s through which Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, and Eliza Fenwick have witnessed, but it also forms one of the key cornerstones for this study: the presence, the struggle, and the resilience of women authors and their fictional female protagonists during a period in which gender play and exploration suddenly produces "panic" and social stigma. The heroines of *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, *The Victim of Prejudice*, and *Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock* are not transgressive in the sense of their physicality but more so by their ideology and beliefs in equal access to education and social survival much like their male counterparts.

In sum, Dror Wahrman and *The Making of the Modern Self* introduces a British cultural history of how westernized societies of today arrived at what can be understood as a modern sense of self, or the modern idea that gender and personal identity hinges upon the biological sex and related sex characteristics one was born with in the body.

Until very recently, this view of gender has pervaded much of European and American history and society for the last two hundred years or so. More importantly, Wahrman's work reveals a cultural understanding of gender identity, construction, and performativity very similar to what Judith Butler presents in *Gender Trouble*: a definition of gender built upon an arrangement of appearance to suggest representation of a gender identity or group going well beyond biology and anatomy. What makes Wollstonecraft's, Hays's, and Fenwick's texts so fascinating in the scope of gender, then, is that these novels are written in a historical moment where a whole cultural perception towards gender changes, and these texts introduce heroines who were exposed to the age of the *ancien regime*, of being beyond their biological sex and who now find themselves trapped in the emerging modern definition of gender and self, one that now entraps them in rigid gender stereotypes. Thus, the transgressions made by the fictional heroines of these three women authors suggest more than pushing back against restrictive codes of conduct or protesting the lack in female education, but these transgressions also suggest deviances away from the new social codes of gender, thus marking them all as "queer" women.

Methodology: Queer Narratology

Narratology, or the study of narrative, is but one of few bastions left of an older (or, as some may say, more classical) way of reading and thinking about literature. Works akin to Gerard Genette's influential *Narrative Discourse*, published in the 1970s, established an image of narratology as methodical, systemic, and structural – a methodology current scholars in narratology are still trying to shake. Simply put, narrative studies emphases all the elements having to do with the structure and formation

of narrative, including but not limited to characters, the "story-world" where the narrative unfolds, and the minute details of sentence structures or word choice that may impact how a narrative is conveyed to the reader. Niche emphases, such as cognitive studies, rhetoric, and cultural studies, bring new scopes and lenses to narratology in order to move beyond the traditional applications of classical narratology. However, despite the emergences of these hybridized approaches, as a discipline, contemporary narrative scholars still struggle to firmly and fully recognize these new approaches, especially queer and feminist readings. In "Toward a Queer Feminism," Abby Coykendall observes that

> Exemplary scholarship in narrative studies only broaches feminist or queer issues on an ad-hoc basis, as outlying regions towards which a specialist need not ordinarily venture or logically stray. Seldom acknowledged are the profound structural ramifications that feminist and queer studies have had on the discipline of narrative studies as a whole, most tellingly, on its persistence as a discipline in need of discipline, as a territory rife with boundary disputes, staunch surveillance and periodic efforts towards determination and quarantine. (328-29)

In other words, queer and feminist emphases in narrative studies are seldom taken seriously unless these perspectives and issues are beneficial readings to some narratological scholars. Otherwise, these emphases are considered too disruptive for serious consideration, contemplation, and inclusion.

Thus, a queer feminist emphasis in my narratological readings of Wollstonecraft's, Hays's, and Fenwick's novels are crucially important. First, a queer

narratological reading is more sensitive to the subject of not just how gender operates within these texts but also in broader social dialogues regarding multiple representations of woman and female as gender roles. Second, such an emphasis (being subject to prejudice itself within scholarly conversations and circles) is also better equipped to reveal nuances of gender prejudice within these three novels than just a feminist and/or narratological reading. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, a queer narrative reading of these texts is crucial because, as a self-identified queer and trans scholar, more studies and readings from this perspective is especially important. The so-called discontinuity within queer studies and emphases observed by Coykendall as too disruptive, as in need of "discipline" for the discipline, such disruption reveals more perspectives as well as new kinds of narrative never before observed because it does not neatly observe the structures narratology deems convenient – just as Wollstonecraft, Hays, and Fenwick with their heroines do not neatly fit into gender categories and representations of women and female that were considered socially and structurally convenient for England in the1790s.

Despite the variable applications of queer and feminist studies in narratology, the methodology employed in this study does, indeed, possess some form of structure. The collaborative effort of David Herman, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson, and Robyn Warhol in producing *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* in order to capture both the steady commitment to narrative studies as well as each author's "interdisciplinary" twist that now adds variety to narratology served

as a critical guide for my own narrative study. From this text, I draw my method from rhetorical narratology and feminist narrative study.

Discussion of rhetorical narratology is facilitated by Phelan and Rabinowitz in *Narrative Theory*, for whom narrative serves "primarily as a rhetorical act rather than as an object" or a product as a result of an act. More specifically, however, they declare "*narrative is somebody telling someone else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something"* (Herman et al. 3, emphasis in original) Narrative, including printed texts like the eighteenth-century gothic novel, are thus viewed as a mode of communication in which we observe how rhetoric is employed by the author in communicating certain kinds of ideas or principles to a particular audience. For Robyn Warhol, a feminist approach to narratology is similar in many respects to rhetorical narrative theory except for an added emphasis in observing and providing sociological and historical contexts so we, as critics, may understand the authors and intended audiences in question. She goes further to state, "Nothing in any of the contemporary versions of narrative theory prohibits attention to gender, sexuality, class, or other grounded differences. What chiefly sets feminist narrative theory apart is its insistence on placing those issues at the center of the inquiry" (11). Taken together, a queer narrative analysis, based upon the socio-historical emphasis of narrative as an act as opposed to an object of study, takes various representations of gender present within a text and compares them with not just one another but also compares the effects of transgression from the acceptable social norm of that gender. Therefore, my study analyzes the gender transgressions of the female protagonists in Mary Wollstonecraft's

Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman, Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice*, and Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock* in order to not only gauge the possibility of social sympathy for these heroines but to also reveal the oft-overlooked multiplicity of the female gender at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 2

"Out-law" Femininities in *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*

In Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, Maria Venables regains consciousness in a private madhouse after being committed by her husband, George Venables. Although she befriends her warden, Jemima, and experiences a kind of romantic interest for another inmate, Henry Darnford, Maria is frequently distracted by the unknown fate of her infant girl, who was seized before Maria arrived at the institution. Maria eventually goes to trial to save Darnford from a trial for adultery; however, from that moment on, critics (myself included) can only speculate on what happens next for Maria Venables, for Wollstonecraft died before the novel's completion.

Scholarship pertaining to Mary Wollstonecraft and her writings number in the hundreds with no signs of relenting. As Kirstin Wilcox notes, Wollstonecraft's magnum opus, *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman*, "has escaped the antiquarian repository into which many other like-minded texts of her time have fallen because *she invokes an unpredictably fluid notion of female identity that could not be contained by the gender categories of her time*" (448, emphasis mine). What is it about Wollstonecraft's ideas that continue to draw our critical attention, never mind inspire the great number of sophisticated and nuanced readings of her works? Perhaps it is her ideological persuasiveness, as Wilcox points out, which continues to inspire more and more critical readings. Or, perhaps it may be the same "unpredictably fluid notion of female identity" that inspires this queer narratological reading of *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*.

While her *Vindications*, especially pertaining to the *Rights of Woman*, may be considered her magnum opus, many other texts in her oeuvre have also received fair amounts of critical attention. Her unfinished novella, *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, is of special interest to this study and there is no shortage of critical attention towards it either. One rather original and fascinating reading of Wollstonecraft's *Maria* comes from Adam Komisaruk, who recognized one of the "most sustained fictional treatments" given to the subject of "criminal conversation" (or "crim. con." for short). However, for Komisaruk, a kind of "tug-o-war" exists between the dual readings of criminal conversation and Wollstonecraft's unfinished work; instead, he "turn[s] this paradox on its head, positing crim. con. Not as the liberatory discourse that Maria nevertheless rejects, it as a repressive discourse which *Maria* has much in common" (34). While Komisaruk's reading of *Maria* draws nuance from the novella's similarities with criminal conversation as opposed to its protestations, he is far from the only critic who supplies Wollstonecraft scholarship with so-called "against the grain readings.

Not all scholarship pertaining to Wollstonecraft may be considered as "against-the-grain;" instead, they are notable for sophistication or nuance drawn from highly specific and/or angles previously unconsidered. An example may be found in Janice Peritz's reading of the prostitute-figure in the character of Jemima, who comes to signify as "a figure of responsibility, a working woman whose sensible discourse not only undercuts the melodramatic 'stage effect' of [Edmund] Burke's rhetoric but does so in a way that foregrounds the passive to commensurate – not Burke's 'sacred bond of marriage' as what makes us social and human" (259). Peritz's reading of Jemima not

only complicates the dichotomy of female archetypes prevalent in the late eighteenth-century – repentant Magdalen versus prostitute as social pathogen – but also suggests Jemima as Wollstonecraft's rhetorical tool in a continued conversation about the representation of women as Wollstonecraft has debated against Burke and his antagonistic *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). No matter how we may approach any of Wollstonecraft's texts, as critics we continue to discover more and more nuance in her writing than ever before.

Taking inspiration from Wilcox's suggestion of Wollstonecraft's advocacy for an "unpredictably fluid notion of femininity," my queer narratological reading to *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* will provide clear and vivid examples of varying representations of femininity in the contrasting comparisons of Maria and Jemima. The queerness of Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel does not just stop at the characters, however, as the uncompleted plot suggests several possible futures for the novel that challenge the young tradition of structure already started by novels in the early eighteenth century, and the novel's gothic elements add definitive queer aspects, for the gothic and queerness already share an intimate history. Because of these queer qualities, Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Women* presents itself as an early novel of prejudice, spelling out the transgressions of the world against the female sex in all its gender variety.

Unfinished: Implications of an Incomplete Plot

It is somewhat difficult to pinpoint where exactly Mary Wollstonecraft intended to go with a work like *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*. Not only was this novella first published posthumously by William Godwin, but, according to the same man, "very few

hints exist respecting the plan of the remainder of the work" (Wollstonecraft 285). Included in the miscellaneous leftovers are fragmented sentences, four plot trajectories, and a seemingly unconnected section to possibly be included later in the plot's progression. Thus, given the unpolished and fragmented state of the work, I will focus on the plot and its progressions from its beginnings through Maria's trial and epistolary defense; second, I will consider the implications of the four possible trajectories upon the work, its possible meanings, and its effects. Lastly, considering both how the narrative is and what it could have been, I will discuss how this shape of the novel demarcates it as queer.

Narrative as It Is

Chapters one through seventeen detail Maria's struggles to absolve herself of her husband's, George Venables, accusations of adultery and her paramour, Henry Darnford, of being guilty for seduction and criminal conversation. Aside from this overt narrative progression, Wollstonecraft also weaves other women's narratives within the plot, including Jemima, her maid-servant Peggy, and those of others who all these characters come to interact with. From a feminist perspective, the question of "who is speaking" is answered by those who are the most oppressed within the novella, namely Jemima and Maria, even though we learn more about Maria's narrative in detail than others, like Darnford's. Whoever occupies the narrator's focus ultimately drives the narrative in a direction highlighting their plight and present situation. Although I do not wish to place too much precedence upon the title of the work, the title itself, *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, also suggests the substance of the story we are bound to encounter: that of

Maria, the titular character of course, but also "Woman" as Wollstonecraft understands her to be through composing the second *Vindication*, and how she – "Woman" – situationally and repeatedly disables herself from achieving her own independence.

Given the fragmented state of the novella, the plot turns on the single point of Maria's criminality in the eyes of her legal husband, George Venables, as well as the moral compass upon which the implied reader also operates. Put another way, the fragmented state of the novella offers an interesting point of conclusion: even though Mary Wollstonecraft passed before finishing her vision for *The Wrongs of Woman*, the point at which we, as readers, are left on is a judge's response to Maria's written testimony. As Michelle Faubert and Gary Kelly note, Maria's testimony, while unlikely, is performative in the sense that women have no viable way to legally represent themselves because marriage makes "her legal 'personality' […] 'covered' by that of her husband" (281n2). Therefore, Maria's letter to court does not hold any validity at all; there is no legal way to dissolve her marriage with George Venables by her own terms since the laws already favored men. As the judge declares in court,

> What virtuous woman thought of her feelings? -- It was her duty to love and obey the man chosen by her parents and relations, who were qualified by their experience to judge better for her, than she could for herself. … Too many restrictions could not be thrown in the way of divorces, if we wished to maintain the sanctity of marriage; and though they might bear a little hard on a few, very few individuals, it was evidently for the good of the whole. (284)

Wollstonecraft's unintentional point of departure (for lack of a better term) leaves the reader with the decision to either agree with Maria and Wollstonecraft on the subjugation of "Woman" and many other voices within and without the novella, or at least ask the questions of who is the law written for? Who is benefited by the law? Who is burdened by the law? What are the consequences on all parties as a result of a certain set of laws? As the judge remarks (which, interestingly, also serves as the final word in the most sequential portion of the novella), subjugation of the Other – of "Woman" – results in situations like Maria's, Jemima's, Peggy's, and a slew of others in the work. Not only are these women and "Woman" in general are subject to suffering, but their suffering results in serving "the good of the whole" – the whole of England, and, most especially, English men.

What are we to make of the sequential portion of the narrative, as it stands? No doubt the moments where we depart from Maria in the courtroom leaves those readers who sympathize with her also reeling from the dread evoked by how feminine experience of the early to mid-1790s is captured within the text, most especially by the judge's final comments. If virtuous women thought of their feelings last, what kind of woman does that make Maria or the rest of us who may conduct themselves similarly as she has? While this major fracture resulting in the plot at its most straightforward construction asks first where Maria's legal case stands, the scene – and the conclusion – also asks what exactly makes a woman. More intimately, the novella also leaves us pondering upon those ideas in which women or other marginalized entities may consider comradery in suffering, to be united by commonalities and strengthened by diversity. Yet as the final

decade of the eighteenth century folded over into the dawn of the nineteenth, questions posed at the turn pertaining to personal identity, gender, and community may only be answered by grim options, just as the miscellaneous possibilities left by Wollstonecraft afforded little opportunity for Maria and readers to look towards happily ever after.

Narrative as It Could Be

While it may be simple enough to examine the rhetoric of *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* insofar as it pertains from Chapter One up to the Conclusion as outlined by the Editor, William Godwin, queer feminist narratology seeks to understand all aspects and elements of narrative conversation, including those tiny bits and pieces that do not necessarily fit in with the whole for one reason or another. Rejected passages, crossed out words or sentences, and earlier drafts demonstrating writing and thinking processes reveal more about the writer just as these "cutting room" clippings enhance the narrative to the extent of what it was, where it could have gone differently, and what was considered along the way for it to become the "published draft." For Wollstonecraft's fragmented novella, these pieces may have to be entirely reconsidered given the specific circumstances that surround the work and the author: the author passed away before the work could be finished, and she left a variety of scraps with affirming or diverging ideas and plot points. As editor, Godwin sought to memorialize Wollstonecraft's intellect and working genius by attempting to put them in an order that may have been acceptable by her. Regardless of her approval (for we will never know), the idea of an ending with possibilities means a variety of impressions the implied reader may be left with. While I do not wish to repeat myself verbatim, considering the implications of the narrative and

plot "as it could be" necessitates that I revisit some of the questions, points, and details discussed earlier.

According to Godwin, "very few hints exist respecting the plan of the remainder of the work," in which he presents to the reader "two detached sentences" and "scattered heads" demonstrating where Wollstonecraft was considering taking the story further (285). First, let us consider the two detached sentences:

1. "Darnford's letters were affectionate; but circumstances occasioned delays, and the miscarriage of some letters rendered the reception of wished-for answers doubtful: his return was necessary to calm Maria's mind."
2. "As Darnford had informed her that his business was settled, his delaying to return seemed extraordinary; but love to excess, excludes fear or suspicion."

Several themes and elements are shared between each sentence: both mention letters from Darnford; both describe Darnford's tardiness to return to Maria; both convey a sense of anxiety for Darnford to return to Maria. If these sentences were to be sequential in the narrative, then the narrator depicts Maria experiencing a long and somewhat painful separation from Darnford. However, these sentences can also be considered as two iterations of the same idea or feeling, in which they both share the same message: Maria and Darnford are separated by the latter's business abroad and the former is pining for his return.

One crucial difference between these fragments exists, in which the second sentence alludes to Eliza Haywood's *Love in Excess; Or, The Fatal Enquiry*. Eliza Haywood, then a prolific novelist as well as actress, penned *Love in Excess; Or, The*

Fatal Enquiry in 1719-1720, exploding social customs by which women were expected to obey, regardless if it is to their detriment, especially in matters of love and marriage. Haywood's early novel includes several love triangles and centers around the Count D'elmont, a man ruthless in matters of attraction and affection whose ambition leads him to marry out of necessity instead of feeling like many of the women in the novel (and wider society) are reinforced to believe. While Haywood's novel emulates theatrical plots and patterns reminiscent of Restoration theater, Wollstonecraft's allusion to *Love in Excess* serves as recognition of an earlier rebellious authoress who sought to expose women's subjectivity through humor while the title, *Love in Excess; Or The Fatal Enquiry*, alludes to the kind of chaos Maria may have walked into should Wollstonecraft had the opportunity to finish. Thus, the allusion not only carries further Wollstonecraft's fascination of the theater (to be discussed in further detail below) but also forecasts a warning by the narrator of what is in store for Maria and her affections for Darnford.

Next, Godwin supplies the reader with four "heads" under which Wollstonecraft considers *Maria*'s continuation. They are:

1. "Trial for adultery – Maria defends herself – a separation from bed and board in the consequence – Her fortune in thrown into chancery – Darnford obtains a part of his property – Maria goes into the country."
2. "A prosecution for adultery commenced – Trial – Darnford sets out for France – Letters – Once more pregnant – He returns – Mysterious behavior – Visit – Expectation – Discovery – Interview – Consequence."

3. "Sued by her husband – Damages awarded to him – Separation from bed and board –

   Darnford goes abroad – Maria into the country – Provides for her father – Is shunned – Returns to London – Expects to see her lover – The rack of expectation – Finds herself again with child – Delighted – A discovery – A visit – A miscarriage – Conclusion."
4. "Divorced by her husband – Her lover unfaithful – Pregnancy – Miscarriage – Suicide." (285-6)

At least three of four heads share similar plot points: trial for adultery, Darnford goes abroad, Maria becomes pregnant once again, Darnford returns, divorce, and "discovery" (possibly Darnford's betrayal hinted at in the fourth head). Aside from the first head, Wollstonecraft's plans for the novella's future is just as bleak as the existing plot already is. One cannot help but wonder why Wollstonecraft would consider writing fiction that does little to empower the motives of women. Wollstonecraft, however, is not so much an optimist as she is a realist. In her fiction, as well as her *Vindication*, she portrays the sufferings and mistreatment of women as society – not just the occasional man – disempowers them. As much as *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* does to uplift the voices of women in the narrative by sharing their individual paths and histories under the abuses of family, lovers, and the greater whole of society has been conditioned to treat them, the miscellaneous Godwin provides at the novella's conclusion appears to contradict much of this feminist work. As readers, we grow into rooting for Maria as she struggles against her husband's abuse and in gaining self-sufficiency and escape from the

madhouse. We grow to feel sympathetic and moved as Jemima shares details of her abuse as a younger girl. Ultimately, the narrative as it could be is utterly pessimistic, even if feminist. It does little to present and illustrate how British society of the late eighteenth century can begin to move beyond the contemporary injustices towards women during Wollstonecraft's lifetime. Perhaps its utility rests in presenting things how they are and what they can be if nothing changes for the better of "Woman" (even if the woman is of Mary's social ranking). Unfortunately, though, there is lacking evidence to support any conclusion regarding the novella's ultimate potential in affecting late eighteenth-century Britain and beyond.

While Wollstonecraft's death was unprecedented, the remains of *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* is much queerer because of it. Unlike many (if any) other novels in her day, her unfinished novella saw the light of day under Godwin's editorial decisions very quickly after the author's death. None included the miscellaneous information that suggested where the novel could have gone (thus inspiring speculation in generations of readers and critics). Beyond the unfinished façade, however, Wollstonecraft's novel was very unlike other novels of its time because it captured a visceral and palpable sense of realism. Like Charles Dickens or Mark Twain to follow, Wollstonecraft's novella aggressively sought and captured the realities of women across ranks and social strata. After all, to be queer is to be strange, eccentric, unconventional – all three things Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*'s plot structure certainly appears to be.

Haunted: Gothic Forces Shape the Narrative World

Confinement to a madhouse coupled with rapturous yearning for release and the mystery of the strangely rational inmate undoubtedly lends Wollstonecraft's novella the eerie liminality associated with the British gothic. By the 1790s, the gothic genre became predominantly a woman's genre, as fiction and the novel were already perceived as lesser productions than the sciences, philosophy, and poetry of men. This moment of the 1790s is to observe what kind of role the gothic writing form played in the narrative discourses of the novels mentioned above in this study. Why is it that women like Mary Wollstonecraft and her fellow feminists, Eliza Fenwick and Mary Hays, imbue their fiction writing with varying degrees of nuance from the gothic, a genre that since its conception aims to displace the reader from her place in England to the distant past of Italy or the Spanish Inquisition?

In the mid- to late-eighteenth century, the gothic genre of fiction writing was not considered to be a high form of literature when compared to the work of Henry Fielding or Samuel Johnson. However, as George Haggerty succinctly notes in his introduction to the influential *Queer Gothic,* the gothic genre "emerged rather suddenly as a popular form," able to stand stringent historicizing while simultaneously supporting some of the most mind-bending theories regarding human psychology (1). To some extent the gothic became the genre that bears it all, the liminal space where historical detail persists as critics and scholars continue to historicize these texts while proponents of psychological approaches are also able to find subsistence for their literary research as well. For Wollstonecraft who penned very, very few works of fiction before composing *The*

Vindication of the Rights of Woman, the gothic genre is a liminal space of fiction where the uncanny – the sense of familiarity towards something unfamiliar – becomes a tool for her didacticism.

The gothic in *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* provides not just more tools for Wollstonecraft's stage but also a veiled backdrop against which she may cast her play. The novella opens with the following description:

> *Abodes of horror* have frequently been described, and *castles*, filled with *spectres and chimeras, conjured* up by the *magic spell* of genius to harrow the soul, and absorb the wondering mind. But, formed of such stuff as dreams are made of, what were they to the *mansion of despair*, in one corner of which Maria sat, endeavoring to recall her *scattered thoughts!* (161, emphasis added)

The italicized portions of the above quotation are stock words or phrases usually found in the gothic genre, for each of them contribute to the evocation of the unknown, seemingly distant and mysterious. However, the gothic is much more than just a collection of tropes binding the genre together. For critics like Haggerty, the gothic genre affords writers an opportunity to demonstrate relationships usually considered as unacceptable and not the proper stuff of fiction. The gothic is a genre for women, not men; for pleasure, but not serious study; for fancy and imaginative play, and certainly not for thought. But in women's writing, like Mary Wollstonecraft's novella and Hays' and Fenwick's that follow, the gothic crafts a suspended yet believable narrative world the reader cannot entirely dismiss because of its blended use gothic theatricality and feminist philosophy.

In fact, the gothic lends itself hand in hand with many of the same principles as theater. In her intriguing essay, "'Stage Effect': Transgressive Theatricality in Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*," Lisa Plummer Crafton turns Wollstonecraft's nuanced juxtaposition of her fiction with "stage effect" and reveals the theatricality behind Wollstonecraft's novella many critics before Crafton had yet to examine. According to Crafton, "Wollstonecraft explicitly alludes to two popular heroines whom she saw interpreted on stage by [Sarah] Siddons in the 1790s, and, in fact, much of Wollstonecraft's work uses theatrical tropes for moral discourse" (368). Crafton cites Wollstonecraft's earlier nonfiction, namely *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) in order to establish the breadth of Wollstonecraft's fascination with the theatre. In *Letters*, Wollstonecraft writes:

> *All the world is a stage*, thought I; and *few are there in it who do not play the part they have learnt by rote*; and those who do not, seem marks set up to be pelted at by fortune; or rather as sign-posts, which point out the road to others, whilst forced to stand still themselves amidst the mud and dust. (121, emphasis added)

To Crafton, passages such as these allow Wollstonecraft use of "theatrical tropes for moral discourse," meaning Wollstonecraft depends on her audience's knowledge of theatrical tropes in order to convey an ethical meaning (368). In *The Wrongs of Woman,* Wollstonecraft conjures the specter of theater not just through her provocative "stage effect" mentioned in the Author's Preface stitched together by Godwin, but also in the immediate start of the novella. As Michelle Faubert observes in her Broadview edition of Wollstonecraft's short fiction, the author combines the dramatic with allusions to *The*

Tempest, coupled with the gothic trope, in order to undermine the reader's expectations for the narrative about to unfold (161n1). By also channeling Shakespeare's sense of theatricality[2] here in her *Letters* as well as in *The Wrongs of Woman,* Wollstonecraft instills a sense of role-playing by representing various social strata, complete with amenities for some and consequences for others. Through the narrative world now set as a stage, the reader as a theater-goer are more receptive to the kinds of "wrongs" women commit towards each other as well as the injustices they endure. The novella's theatrical elements, then, serve a dual purpose for its rhetoric: it characterizes the narrative world existing within the novella's pages but only to the extent that the authorial audience possesses a similar understanding and knowledge of theater that Mary Wollstonecraft also possesses. Even further still, Wollstonecraft's earlier use of allusion to the theater the nonfictional *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* already primed readers into expecting some theatrical quality in the everyday. In other words, because reality is already slightly exaggerated with descriptive allusions, it is not very difficult for the seasoned reader of Wollstonecraft to also believe in some reality present in the gothic *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*.

In sum, the double-force of the gothic with theatricality within *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* provides a kind of cranial sandbox, an imaginative play-space within

[2] Consider the opening lines to William Shakespeare's "The Seven Ages of Man" monologue in *As You Like It* and how Wollstonecraft's observations echo the beloved bard:

> All the world's a stage,
> And all the men and women merely players,
> They have their exits and entrances,
> And one man in his time plays many parts,
> His acts being seven ages. (2.7.146-50)

which Mary Wollstonecraft may provoke uncanny responses from her audience. With the gothic's dominance of liminal space by transporting the reader to the familiar yet not-too-distant, a space as probable as the Twilight Zone yet enough for a wiggle room of comfort, Wollstonecraft's theatrical allusions to memorable, popular theater suspends readers in a story-world, equally plausible yet distant enough – even if barely. Theatrical and gothic devices open the reader to the possibility of a story and roots them into the didactic conversation the novella facilitates; these devices also open the mind to possibility when other media – the essay or the treatise, for example – and their dependence on logic and reason can penetrate so far. With theater and the gothic, Mary Wollstonecraft has a chance to penetrate her readership where it matters just as much as reason: *pathos*.

Queer Yet Different: Maria Venables and Jemima

There are few pairs in fiction that provoke intrigue like Maria Venables and Jemima do in *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*. Once their friendship is established, it is never broken; none of the miscellaneous leftovers Godwin included in the posthumous publication of the novel point to a significant lag in their relationship. What exactly draws them together? How essential are they to one another's existence? Even more importantly, how do they contribute to the fluidity of the female gender? Although unfinished, Wollstonecraft's novella encourages us to examine women's relationships among and between each other in ways that shape who we are and our very being.

Maria Venables

The titular character of Wollstonecraft's novella provokes curiosity. Nuances of Maria's character paradoxically mark her both as a woman like and unlike other women of the late eighteenth century. In order to understand Maria and her queer femininity, we must understand her relationship with her uncle, her place in the tradition of gothic heroines, and, as gothic heroine, what illumination she provides to the plight of women according to Wollstonecraft.

Put simply, Maria's uncle is the adult whom Maria learns to model her social and gender behaviors from, despite the crucial difference between their sexes. According to Dustin Freedman, Maria's uncle undergoes a "calculated" self-fashioning, including a "forcible manner of speaking" and a "wildness of look and gesture" in order to teach his favorite niece. Her uncle uses his "personality and his body [as] a didactic tool," thus defying gender codes of male and female (442). While Friedman's observations are provoking in regards not just to our own sense of gender difference and embodiment, both in our current and in the late-eighteenth century sense of understanding, the shapes and forms of the relationships between characters like Maria seem to defy our contemporary understanding of what relationships of niece-uncle ought to look like. Such family relationships, especially those existing between older men and younger women that are more didactic than romantic in nature, effectively queers female protagonists like Maria.

Early in the memoirs penned for her daughter, Maria spends a considerable number of lines dedicated to her uncle's character more than anyone else in her family.

As noted, he uses his body as a didactic tool in order to instruct her, and the way in which he conducts himself also breaks gender codes and behaviors. The uncle's conduct, however, also possesses potential to affect Maria's future as well as her present. In recounting his history, Maria reveals a romantic relationship had gone sour when her uncle's close friend secretly courted the woman he desired to marry. The uncle subsequently grows ill and obstinate towards marriage and the rest of his family, excluding Maria. What is striking, however, are Maria's remarks pertaining to his behavior after sharing his unfortunate attempt at marital bliss:

> Endeavouring [sic] to prove to me that nothing which deserve the name of love or friendship, existed int eh world, he drew such animated pictures of his own feelings, rendered permanent by disappointment, as imprinted the sentiments strongly on my heart, and animated my imagination. These remarks are necessary to elucidate some peculiarities in my character, which by the world are indefinitely termed romantic. (Wollstonecraft 214)

"Romantic" or not, the uncle's attitudes towards any relationship – family, romantic, and friendly – significantly impacts Maria: he demonstrates to his niece that all relationships can only be detrimental to the individual. However, as the rest of Maria's memoirs suggest, she does not learn much from this example. On the contrary, love of family places Maria into her precarious marriage with George Venables. Going further, a crucial difference exists between Maria and her uncle: she is born with a uterus and is coded as female at birth; he, as a male. There are systems and codes in place that benefit men more than women, especially in the late-eighteenth century, regardless of how conventional a

woman may be. If the uncle decided to separate from his wife and legally separate bed and board, the laws and systems in place can make it happen. For Maria, however, this is not the case. While her uncle could stay content and comfortable for the rest of his life as a bachelor, the circumstances are simply not possible for women like Maria, as she ends up married to George Venables, her abuser.

All in all, Maria's didactic relationship with her uncle ultimately shapes her participation in a growing legacy of gothic heroines. How Maria fairs as a heroine in the context of late eighteenth century feminism, I turn to one authoritative scholar who writes much on the intersection of gothic and Romantic women's writing. In *Gothic Feminism*, Diane Long Hoeveler posits gothic fiction written by women provide a kind of coded survival guide to British society in the mid- to late-eighteenth century and beyond. Coded as "professional femininity," Hoeveler defines the term as a self-aware play-acting, of being conscious of the stereotypes willfully being enacted in order to survive, consisting of "a cultivated pose, a masquerade of docility, passivity, wise passiveness, and tightly controlled emotions" and how such positioning contributes to what she terms as an "increasingly powerful species of bourgeois female sensibility and subjectivity" (xv). In *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, Wollstonecraft's approach to Hoeveler's concept of "professional femininity" is to teach by negative example. In fact, this approach to teaching others is nothing new by the close of the eighteenth century. Many women authors who write conduct books and children's instructional books oftentimes rely on the negative example as a way of "scaring" children "straight." These stories usually consist of children identifying with a problematic character for one enticing reason or

another (for example, taking a nap instead of helping with the chores), and when the problematic character receives bad fortune and sometimes an unfortunate end, children learn to not behave like that character if they do not wish to share the same outcome. According to Susan Khin Zaw, Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories* is composed for the education of virtue in young children and "is remarkable for the number and the length of embedded stories in which dreadful and undeserved calamities overtake the good." However, where her contemporaries differ in making direct threats of violence towards the child audience, both within the text as well as the intended reader, Wollstonecraft, according to Zaw, instead turns to "contrary example, by their own everyday natural consequences, and by reasoning" (94-96). All the women in the novella – not just Maria – experience wrongs perpetuated against one another Instead of turning towards a dehumanizing violence, Wollstonecraft's novella depends on using the same methods of contrary example through the explanation of consequence and reason in order to demonstrate to her intended reader the effects of maltreatment of women in general and especially between women as well. As gothic heroine, Maria is the narrative center to which other women's stories and plight are drawn to; through her example as well as others, women are taught the reality of their prejudice towards others.

If *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* is a novella about the sufferings committed towards and between women, what "wrongs" has Maria, the gothic heroine, committed? At the most basic level, we could say that even though laws were unfair towards women in the late-eighteenth century, Maria's philandering with Darnford could be considered as a kind of "wrong." However, for Wollstonecraft, laws oppressing women do not

necessarily implicate Maria for being "wrong" per se, only that the system in place punishes all female bodies for a variety of reasons unlike male ones. When it comes to the narrative as it is, Maria's wrongs are nuanced but present; in the potential endings and plot progressions however, these "wrongs" of hers fester and ultimately surrender her into a rather unpleasant, final situation; as her relationship with Darnford creeps towards toxicity, Maria grows both neurotic and suicidal.

Ultimately, the qualities and traits her uncle teaches do not save Maria from the possibility of history repeating itself. In the miscellaneous material, the sentences and projected heads reveal Maria in an uncanny predicament like her uncle from his time abroad: she remains in England pining for her lover with little to no assurances of his love and devotion, just as her uncle once resided in India and relied on misleading love letters from his paramour. Both Maria and her uncle occupy a liminal space of doubt and hope, of a better future than what they have endured thus far. Unlike her uncle, Maria continues to pursue friendships and relationships, most of which set her back (Darnford, George Venables) more than move her forward (Jemima). Maria's "wrongs," then, were more hereditary than stemming from herself. The mindset and posturing she learned from her uncle to do little to keep her out of predicaments like marriage to George Venables or to the later hinted betrayal by Darnford.

Maria's queerness as a woman, then, is generally marked by the education provided to her by her uncle. These qualities make her inherently different from other women because there are nuances of masculinity that make her inherently different from other women because there are nuances of masculinity that manifest when fortune does

not look dearly on Maria, particularly when Maria writers a letter to read off in court at the novella's most sequential conclusion. She is also queer because she is a woman who, according to Wollstonecraft, may have her own faults but certainly should not be systemically punished for them simply because she is a woman. Women are queer creatures in every sense of the term – unhuman and often regarded as a separate, humanlike population. Maria, then, does not act like other human women would, but her weaknesses and role as a contrary example of a gothic heroine suggests a humanity worthy of pity from a prejudiced society, worthy of a respite that may never arrive.

Jemima

Jemima, interestingly, serves to both contrast and complement Maria in points of class and feminine gender. Unlike Maria, Jemima does not find herself susceptible to romantic idealization like Maria experiences and expresses towards Darnford. Instead, Jemima is highly capable of reason, but she is a woman who, as a result of a harsh upbringing and journey towards the present moment of the novella, yearns for having a broader purpose beyond all the pain and torture she has experienced thus far. After all, "the preserving of her situation was, indeed, an important object to Jemima." But what is Jemima's situation, exactly, beyond her present occupation as warden over Maria? As Jemima's history shows, her situation boils down to where her purposefulness lies. Throughout her life, Jemima struggles to find meaning and purpose to her own existence beyond receiving pain due to the displeasure of others. If one were to give Jemima a

female type, Jemima is the butch[3] to Maria's feminine self on consideration of her desire for utility, or purpose, her struggle to recognize herself as human, and especially for her deep emotional attachment towards Maria, even in servitude.

At the novella's offset, Jemima's sole motivation in life is to survive. Her survival rests on her purposefulness, and when it comes to Maria, Jemima is "easily prevailed upon by compassion, and that involuntary respect for abilities, which those who possess them can never eradicate, to bring [Maria] some books and implements for writing" (167). Jemima's search for purpose and utility results in a desire to please Maria, but her yearning also presents itself as a weakness for Maria herself to manipulate Jemima. For example, upon their first introduction, Maria observes Jemima possesses a "firm, deliberate step, strongly marked features, and large black eyes." By "surveying this woman's form and features" and establishing the mental differences between them – Jemima cares more about Maria eating her dinner while Maria is more distracted by her imprisonment – Maria turns to persuasion in order to slowly win over Jemima's sympathy, which suggests Maria's potential to manipulate Jemima's desire to serve Maria's needs (164-165).

Jemima's desire for usefulness does not simply just stem from a budding sympathy for her ward. While this study largely focuses itself on what discourses are being shared between parties, the rhetoric one uses to address themselves is equally important as well, especially when considering women. In Wollstonecraft's novella, there

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[3] According to the *OED*, to be "butch" is "aggressively or ostentatiously masculine in appearance or behavior" within a traditionally non-masculine person, such as "a mannish lesbian." Please note that being "butch" does not always correlate with being a lesbian.

are several rich opportunities to witness these "self-addresses" emerge through two main avenues: when the characters share their origins stories to each other (and, by extension, to the authorial and narrative audiences and in instances in which the third-person omniscient narrator privileges one character's thoughts and actions over another's in a certain instance. When it comes to Jemima, a kind of self-fashioning deserves attention here: her self-characterization and comparison with domestic animals and wild beasts.

The first hint of Jemima's animalistic self-fashioning is immediately evident in her first appearance to Maria. The narrator privileges the reader with a taste of what is to be later revealed in Jemima's story: her desire to continue as a warden in the private asylum stems from her past, from being "hunted from hole to hole, as if she had been a beast of prey, or infected with a moral plague" (167). Later, in recalling her upbringing, Jemima relates how every movement she made were perceived as wrong by her stepmother, yet she also characterizes her errors as self-degradation through animal comparisons:

> It seemed indeed the privilege of their superior nature to *kick me about,* like the *dog or cat*. If I were attentive, I was called *fawning*, if refractory, an *obstinate mule*, and like a *mule* I received censure on *my loaded back*. … I was the *filching cat*, the *ravenous dog*, the *dumb brute*, who must bear it all. (192, emphasis mine)

For Jemima, such treatments and characterizations, sufferings of which she endures time and time again, lead her to assume that everyone else around her "had been accustomed to view [her] as a creature of another species." After becoming "the prey of [her previous master's] brutal appetite," Jemima discovers she is with his child. Her emotional

maelstrom, a paradox of maternal love and horror of the life ahead for her unborn child, resolves in her determination that "a bastard appeared to me an object of the greatest compassion in creation," being a bastard child herself (194). Jemima, then, may be the single character within *The Wrongs of Woman* worthy of the full emotional gamut of sympathy and disgust towards social systems and laws perpetuating such abuses against lower-class women. Like other butch characters in queer literature, Jemima is forced to labor, be treated, and is convinced that she herself is in many ways unnatural and unlike other women. Put another way, by the time we meet Jemima in the asylum, Jemima is the shadow of a feminine self she can no longer lay claim to.

Jemima's deserving of the reader's sympathy may also be tied into the deep devotion she demonstrates in the fragmented marginalia Wollstonecraft left behind. Long after the trial is over, we reconnect with Maria at a moment of utter despair as she intends suicide by laudanum. Before the fatal dose unleashes its full effect, Jemima returns to the scene with Maria's daughter in tow, far from dead as Maria and the reader was led to believe throughout the earlier narrative. Jemima's intervention in both fates of mother and child presents lasting implciations: the child's appellation of "Mamma!" to Maria, and not the physical reunification preceding it, is the true cure to Maria's suicidal act. Not only does Jemima consider Maria a friend, but Jemima's demonstration of love and devotion results in saving both mother and child from a fate like Jemima's early life. With all the time and intimacy shared between them, Jemima knows better than most that Maria, indeed, would avoid to "leave her [daughter] alone in the world, to endure what [Jemima] have endured" (287). Given all of this, then, Jemima is one of few women

actively working towards rebuilding a better future not just for herself but also for Maria and her daughter, two more women just as susceptible to suffering wrongs perpetuated by and against women.

In a queer sense, then, Jemima is the butch woman to Maria's feminine needs and sensibilities. With all the animal comparisons, it is difficult to not imagine Jemima possessing enough strength to not only see herself through her own adversities but Maria's as well once they have come to really connect with one another. By meeting Maria's needs, by facilitating Maria and Darnford's secret rendezvouses, Jemima fulfills her innate desire to be useful to someone who will not abuse her or degrade her. Her dedication to Maria is unparalleled, even though Maria's dedication, according to the novella as it is, does not quite meet with Jemima's tenacity. Yet, in late-eighteenth century feminist fiction, one of the remaining plot points Godwin includes is a fragment where men are nowhere in the picture. Instead, we have Maria reunited with her long-lost daughter and Jemima, the woman who made the reunion happen, who loved Maria enough to bring a family back together from the margins of death.

Conclusion

There is more to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* than the narrative's feminist spark. Instead, it possesses more spunk and bite: being a novella with the aims of communicating the "wrongs" committed by the female population, it is only fitting that Wollstonecraft sought to include realistic depictions and examples of not just the wrongs and injustices by women and against women, but how "wrongs of woman" might have also included wrongs committed between different kinds of women. In the

narrative, Wollstonecraft blended realism with gothic theatricality to suspend disbelief and introduce readers to the reality of women's lives under systemic oppression from laws and gender codes. More importantly, in the characters of Maria Venables and Jemima, Wollstonecraft presents the possibility of a female relationship, albeit one struggling from the weight of personal trauma inflicted upon them by abusive husbands and masters, in which two women so unlike one another may suggest the possibility of a future without fathers, husbands, and men, a future where women may be masculine, feminine, self-sustaining, kind.

Chapter 3

Trappings of Gender in *The Victim of Prejudice*

Contemporary critics in 1799 struggled to embrace Mary Hays's second novel, *The Victim of Prejudice*. Not only did the novel "want of that philosophical harmony of design… and of that dramatic propriety of character and incident," but those like *The Critical Review* saw writers of Hays's ilk "employed in a manner highly dangerous to the peace and welfare of society" ("Appendix" 249-50). What is so dangerous about Hays's second novel to warrant such criticism and censure? According to the same journal, Hays's novel attempts to "[distort] decorum into prejudice and custom into tyranny, tends to excite and to nourish the contagious and consuming fervor of perverted sensibility" (251). *The Analytical Review* also found defects in Hays's work, such as the characterization of Sir Peter Osbourne, the principal antagonist. To them, Osbourne's character appeared inconsistent with its portrayal as being unable to fully substantiate his "vile" and "odious" behaviors, as he is seen to supposedly show willingness and responsibility towards Mary Raymond, including her rape by him (248).

Over two hundred years later, with the advent of the #MeToo movement, immediate and urgent conversations pertaining appropriate sexual behavior between men and women inform every aspect of social life, from social media to Supreme Court nominations. Because the "decorum" and "custom" Hays sought to expose as systemic abuse towards women is akin to current gender issues, Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* remains an exemplar of "highly dangerous" feminist literature of the late 1790s. Hays's novel follows the account of Mary Raymond, who introduces herself at a critical juncture

towards the end of her life, thus inviting the reader to experience the life she remembers and tells throughout the rest of the novel. At first, Mary is presented as having an obscure birth but by good fortune she is brought up and taught by an unmarried, learned gentleman, Mr. Raymond. When she steals grapes from Sir Peter Osbourne's estate in order to impress her childhood crush, William Pelham, of her ardor, her life escalates into a lifelong cat-and-mouse chase by Osbourne. After experiencing a variety of abuses by Osbourne, from financial to physical and sexual, Mary Raymond concludes both her life and story in a prison cell where both she and the narrative share their beginning. Although Mary Raymond does not receive a happy ending, Hays's novel unflinchingly present and question the same customs and decorum that contributed to the mired successes of her life.

Unlike her fellow feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays's works have not received as much critical attention. However, in 2001, Sandra Sherman asserts a reading of *The Victim of Prejudice* as a piece of "feminist prehistory" because Hays recognized and attempted to express the subjugation of women as legal subjects but through a more personal, albeit fictionalized, lens (132). On the other hand, Mark J. Zunac declares Hays as "recogniz[ing] the dangers of revolution not for its hopeful effect on the status quo, but its adverse effect on the reform movements in the years prior to the French Revolution," thus marking her as one of the wiser Jacobin feminist sympathizers because of her radical attitudes towards reforms and revolution found in both *The Victim of Prejudice* and "Thoughts on Civil Liberty" (72-3). While several critics have assessed Hays's feminism and critical foresight and understanding of the French Revolution, I have not yet found

any readings of Hays's work connecting her radical feminism with more recent and contemporary developments in conversations pertaining to women and gender. Not only will I fill this gap in the conversation, but I also suggest Hays's novel, *The Victim of Prejudice*, is a queer feminist text because of the narrative world's symbolism, Mary Raymond's idealization of virtue, the consideration of history's effects upon women, and Hays's brutal examination of toxic masculinity in the form of Sir Peter Osbourne. Through intimate yet violent depictions of gender prejudice and disparity, Hays's "highly dangerous literature" bares its chest only the most radical feminist can.

A Symbolic Narrative World

Narratives rooted in symbol-heavy story-worlds are a relatively standard convention by the time Mary Hays penned *The Victim of Prejudice*, especially in the gothic tradition. Many early novels of the mid- to late-eighteenth century rely less on local and regional detail and more so upon the consequences of thought, words, and action between different bodies and beings acting in a symbol-driven world. Each two of novel's major settings – the garden and the metropolitan London – not only contributes to the development and progression of Mary Raymond's personal development as well as her social descent, but they emphasize the psychological and emotional states of the narrator. Both settings do less to establish the novel as any other narrative by emphasizing those features which makes it unusual, namely *The Victim of Prejudice*'s own gothic heroine.

The Garden

While the biblical parallels and allusions occurring within *The Victim of Prejudice* are starkly present, they also lend themselves towards a moral argument the author builds throughout the plot's progression. The earliest of these allusions – Sir Peter Osbourne's garden – not only is the most obvious, but it also crucially lays the foundation of Hays's moral case on behalf of women. Hays's rewriting of the biblical garden scene in *The Victim of Prejudice* suggests an alternative narrative on behalf of women's innocence in which situations between men and women are not only complex and complicated, but women, too, are complex and complicated not because they are women, but because they are human as well.

In a word, *The Victim of Prejudice*'s garden scene places an adolescent Mary Raymond in a bind as she struggles between her adoration for William Pelham and her obligation to her tutor, Mr. Raymond. What the novel remarkably does here is lay out, point by point, the narrator's internal debate in choosing who to honor; there is more to this decision than just a girlhood crush and obligation towards parental authority, for beneath the veneer the reader is made privy to a great, universal truth: life does not follow an instructional manual or a conduct book, and in life, women, too, must make decisions rooted in the heart, not in a stereotype.

The garden, in ways both subtle and overt, make Hays's allusions to the biblical story of Adam and Eve at once obvious yet unfamiliar. Most familiar with the tale usually credit Eve for humankind's "fall" and expulsion from the Garden of Eden into the harrowing world. And yet, in the character of Mary Raymond, Hays introduces not only a

rewriting of the expulsion story but also a reconsideration of women's sexual stereotypes. As Eleanor Ty observes in her introduction to *The Victim of Prejudice*, Sir Peter Osbourne's "appellation" of Mary by calling her a "true daughter of Eve" also "links the then virginal Mary with the temptress figure of Eve. … In Osbourne's limited understanding, all women are stereotyped as either the mother or the whore, the angel or the mistress" (Hays 14; Ty xix-xx). Broadly speaking, Sir Peter Osbourne is not the only character who views women as fulfilling one stereotype or another, for the garden scene encourages readers to also make these same assumptions by presenting an all-too-familiar scenario that readers cannot help but assign stereotypes to Mary Raymond as well. Because the narrator makes the reader privy to her conundrum, of her split allegiance to William Pelham and Mr. Raymond, she makes her consciousness available as a proxy for Eve most iterations of the Genesis story do not include. Here we have a woman with an ultimatum who demonstrates her path of reason for one way or the other, one who characterizes the situation as being rational in the eyes of Enlightenment thought: "To a young casuist these reasonings bore a specious appearance: assuming the respectable forms of generosity and tenderness, they dazzled, and finally prevailed" (Hays 13-14). In other words, as a child, Mary employed her faculties for reason as best as she could, given the limit of their growth, and even though the reasoning is not quite to standard as, say, an adult's capacity for forethought and reason, the young Mary is indeed much more rational than her childhood crush.

Despite how her reason hashes out, Mary decides to act upon her feelings for William, thus placing herself in danger of Sir Peter Osbourne. After her discovery by

Osbourne, Mary is no longer a "pure virgin" in the sense that she is no longer a happy "nobody" with a peculiar education for her sex but, now cast before the eyes of the world, is subject to scrutiny and bearing all the social symbolism that is also borne upon the female sex.[4] To Osbourne and wider society, Mary is transformed into "a true daughter of Eve," "a little beauty," "a Hebe," and "a wood-nymph" – all mythological and symbolic entities of femininity that are significantly more symbolic than they are realistically human at all. Against the backdrop of the garden, Mary now becomes an entity without agency, a being to be sought and captured, and, by extension, one that exists and communicates on a level beyond men, for all these associations are exaggerations of ideal femininity. Caught red-handed by Osbourne, Mary's innocent and invisible existence collapses as she begins to anxiously understand the meaning of possessing a sexed body with an "unsex'd mind."

London, the Metropolis

At the novel's center lies the metropolis, London – the city Mary Raymond not only lost her romantic interest to but the site in which her social and mental condition takes a turn for the worst. According to Mr. Raymond, London is "the centre to which talents and accomplishments naturally resort: in London, connections may be acquired, employment sought, observation avoided, and liberty preserved" *but*, especially for the female narrator, "on *yourself* depends the worth and dignity of your character" (102, emphasis in original). Put simply, there is potential to be found in London; however,

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[4] In a footnote to her introduction, Eleanor Ty refers to Jacques Lacan's notion of "the law of the Father," in which a particular kind of symbolism is ascribed to reality when children turn away from the mother's "literal" reality and is forced to exist in a reality dictated by the male symbolic order. This shift, according to Ty, occurs exactly when Mary's theft is detected by Sir Peter Osbourne, one of the more prevalent father figures in the novel (xxxvi-xxxvii).

Mary must bear in mind her reputation and present the best of herself at the front of everything. What Mary does not realize is that London will not provide her the keys to her salvation; instead London is the center of society, where codified gender prejudice ensures a life-long damnation to any seeking subversion.

Overall, Mary Hays is not the only author who writes about London with animosity, for the enigmatic William Blake writes in "London," "In every cry of every Man. / In every Infants cry of fear. / In every voice; in every ban. / The mind-forg'd manacles I hear" (ln. 5-8). In just sixteen lines, Blake encapsulates a terrifying echo of metropolitan misery that continues to ring in William Wordsworth's magnum opus *The Prelude*, who characterizes the city as a carnivalesque site where rules and decorum are hardly observed, a site where chaos ensues, and distinctions of men and beast are blurred.[5] While Blake's "London" precedes Hays's novel by five years and Wordsworth's characterization follows another five years later, all three write do not hesitate to emphasize the chaos occurring in these city centers. For Hays and *The Victim of Prejudice*, the is more than a scant opportunity for employment for women: it is the gothic labyrinth of society promising gender violence.

Although Mr. Raymond's advice is, in the first place, theoretically sound, what history and especially *The Victim of Prejudice* has taught us thus far is that gender is the crucial, absent element upon which the wheel of fortune turns; for women especially, the thin line between success and failure is most especially blurred and much more likely to

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[5] Consider Book Seven of William Wordsworth's *1805 Prelude*, in which the city of London becomes characterized as "a hell / For eyes and ears, what anarchy and din / Barbarian and infernal – 'tis a dream / Monstrous in colour, motion, shape, sound" (VII ln 559-662).

be crossed. In London, Mary Raymond is intercepted and confined by Sir Peter Osbourne. During one of his grand dinner parties, the narrator attempts to flee his house but is entrapped in his chambers. There, Mary Raymond is raped by Sir Peter Osbourne. The circumstances under which Mary is exploited against her will and her body speaks to the level of entitlement men of fashion especially possess over the female body. Mary's detention in Sir Peter Osbourne's estate not only provides him a false hope of persuading Mary to commit to marriage with him but also snatches away Mary's own potential prospects of securing a stable appointment with the late Mr. Raymond's friend.

The narrator's experiences in London mirror many themes and tropes akin to the Gothic genre. As one of the most successful writers of her time, Ann Radcliffe commercial domination of the gothic turned the genre into a niche of women's writing. As discussed earlier, the Gothic genre is defined by tropes and conventions which include but are not limited to: foreign and sometimes exotic locations, oftentimes outside English borders and inside castles; family mysteries; a heroine, usually virginal; a villain who is sometimes related to the heroine but, nevertheless, pursues her sexually, sometimes to the point of physically assaulting her; and a hero who serves as the antithesis to the Gothic villain. In the case of *The Victim of Prejudice*, the unfamiliarity of the city, coupled with anonymous transportation, involuntary confinement in Sir Peter Osbourne's house, and visons of her mother's phantom spirit signal not just Gothic convention but also a collusion of mind and reality. In London, the narrator loses sense of who she is; the "brutal violation" of her body by Osbourne signifies not just a broken spirit but a sense of confidence of her singularity, of her self-control and ownership of her own destiny in a

world where her female gender and sex suggested otherwise to all around her. Thus, the metropolitan landscape no longer is the city of opportunity as Mr. Raymond once characterized it because opportunity is an object of which *men* may seize: Sir Peter Osbourne intercepts Mary's arrival into London, he confines her in his house, and then he seizes her body without clear, explicit consent. Thus, the metropolitan city is easily characterized as gothic, and Hays relocates British xenophobic anxieties from going abroad by turning them back upon their center.

In sum, the smooth transition from Mr. Raymond's idyllic cottage, to the limited social company of the Neville family, and finally to the overwhelming consumption and abuse of London society not only provides the perfect backdrop for Mary Raymond's drive towards social independence but, concurrently, all three of these environments contribute to her unraveling as well. Because Mr. Raymond raised Mary in near-solitude and provided an untraditional and unfeminine education, Mary not only was inadequately prepared to survive in greater British society, but her intellect and independent spirit could not surmount the growing pressure each social environment placed upon her gender performability. In the garden, she chose romantic attachment over obedience of her guardian. At the living, she sacrifices her future social and financial security in order to preserve the self-sufficiency of friends. Yet in London, where many women in her predicament might have chosen to take Sir Peter Osbourne's offer of marriage to cover the shame of his transgressions, Mary Raymond chose to fight against the best-case scenario and opt for hardship and martyrdom in result of his actions because only then could she still retain the virtue of her independence.

Empire of Virtue: The Case of Mary Raymond

Where *The Victim of Prejudice* lacks in exterior detail it makes up in the psychological depth of its narrator-protagonist, Mary Raymond. More specifically, Mary Raymond's central role in the novel's narration not only addresses social customs and codes that are detrimental to the survival and success of women, but in many instances, it completely rewrites the context from a female vantage point. Mary Raymond is a key example of the gothic heroine who faces adversity instead of running from it, who relies on her untraditional education to guide and direct her decision making. However, because *The Victim of Prejudice* concludes with the assumption of Mary Raymond's death, is it society that is the issue, or the education which she received?

The man responsible for Mary Raymond's education, of course, is Mr. Raymond. At once benevolent and patronal, Mr. Raymond serves as one of three principal male characters in *The Victim of Prejudice* whom the narrator turns to as an exemplar of civilized male behavior. As her "benefactor," Mary praises him for the rather progressive upbringing and education she received; with Rousseauian flair she is "instructed … in the rudiments of the French, Italian, and Latin, languages; in the elements of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic" alongside a robust desire for outdoor activities. More importantly, however, Mr. Raymond raised Mary to be "unacquainted with fear, and comprehended neither the nature of, nor the temptations to, falsehood" (6). In fact, it is Mary Raymond's sense of fearlessness and bravery that both fuels her desire to survive as well as render her blind to the social dangers surrounding her.

Mary Raymond's bravery, oftentimes seen as obstinance by Sir Peter Osbourne, is also fueled by her sense of virtue. Yet, what exactly is this sense of virtue? On the eve of her departure for the Neville family farm, Mary Raymond indulges the reader in a monologue detailing in the emotional fluctuation between her love and adoration for William Pelham and the sense of agency her foster father strove to imbue her with. By banishing "these weak and womanish regrets" from her heart, Mary basks in "a generous heroism … a spirit congenial to artless youth, by whom the veil of society, behind which corruption and contradiction lurk, has not been rent" (41). Such bravery, heroism, and self-confidence understood here as "virtue," is but the same desire "maintain[ing] her empire in [Mary's] bosom: *it is virtue only that I love better than William Pelham*" (127).

Mary Raymond's confidence imbues the entire narrative with a radical sense of justice akin to the author's. Such confidence at once implores the reader to admiration as well as to consider the implications of these "fetters of sex," ones which not just her mother had appealed to Mr. Raymond to cast away, but fetters which also appear in many texts by the conclusion of the eighteenth century. For example, Mary Hays writes of "bolts and bars [that] may confine for a time the feeble body, but can never enchain the noble, the free-born mind" in her *Letters and Essays, Morals and Miscellaneous* (23). Her mentor, Mary Wollstonecraft, also writes in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* regarding the effects of gender based on social prejudice, for Wollstonecraft "earnestly wish[ed] to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behavior" (72). Our narrator of *The Victim of Prejudice*, then, is not only an experiment of a woman who, in her own mind, views no detrimental difference between

the genders, but, because we are exposed to such ideas as a reading audience, we are encouraged to reconsider our own positions of what it means to be a woman and the definition of the female gender in the late-eighteenth century.

The drive for independence and to live life however she desires effectively "queers" Mary Raymond because these qualities are what makes her different from other women. Not only does she seek to mediate her romantic desire for William Pelham as well as honor the education and growth she received from her tutor, but such virtue is also found desirable by the other male characters in the novel. Virtue then is the torch by which Mary Raymond lights her path through the gothic maze that has become her life. With or without virtue, however, Mary Raymond's obscure past serves to undermine what little chance she had to survive, suggesting family history, too, is a contributing factor to the social bondage of women.

Like Mother, Like Daughter

Although Mary Raymond's sense of self-sufficiency and independence is both inspiring and frustrating for many characters in *The Victim of Prejudice*. However, personal history adds a particularly significant dimension on women's oppression, and Mary Raymond especially is not exempt from its effects.

The narrator's personal history is revealed through a packet of letters exchanged between Mr. Raymond and the narrator's mother. Most striking, however, is the level of consideration and care Mary's mother exudes as she implores Mr. Raymond to raise her daughter with a liberal education:

> If, amidst the corruption of vaunted civilization, thy heart can yet throb responsive to the voice of nature, and yield to the claims of humanity, snatch from destruction the child of an illicit commerce, shelter her infant purity from contagion, guard her helpless youth from a pitiless word, 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 contemn the tyranny that would impose fetters of sex upon her mind. (69)

Mary Raymond, by this moment of reading her own mother's final words, is indeed the very child her mother hoped for. From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator stresses the importance of Mr. Raymond's presence and instruction in her life: "To the wisdom and kindness of my benefactor, who, with a contempt of vulgar prejudices, cherished notions somewhat singular respecting female accomplishments, I was indebted for a robust constitution, a cultivated understanding, and a vigorous intellect" (5). Her intelligence and sturdiness are qualities upon which she draws her innate strength and the confidence to endure conflict. For example, when the narrator places herself between William, a rabbit, and Sir Peter Osbourne, she "received several smart strokes, designed for William," that her "neck and arms bore marks of the rough discipline [she] had received, yet [she] neither uttered a complaint nor shed a tear: indignation inspired [her] with a sullen fortitude; while, in the smart of blows acquired in the cause of humanity and friendship, [she] found only a source of triumph" (21-11). In all these oppressive

situations, Mary Raymond exudes the same qualities and confidence that her mother begged Mr. Raymond to imbue her with since birth.

Despite the good intentions of a criminal mother, personal history repeatedly contributes to Mary Raymond's suffering in a cyclical fashion akin to a hereditary fate. many of the misfortunes she endures reverberate in her mother's letter and in her tutor's recollection. The echoing and repetition of fate shared between mothers and daughters in *The Victim of Prejudice* emphasize the lack of change in the improvement of women's lives and that women, despite an improvement in education, still find themselves in these similar situations because male social behaviors and the systemic treatment of women have not changed. Going further, the cycle occurring between mother and daughter is not only intergenerational, but it is also occurring in a descending spiral. Thus, these women begin lives with relative felicity and, as they come of age and into snares that are especially disadvantageous for their sex, they also increasingly descend into a (self) destruction as a result of consequences over which they have little to no control.

Works like Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman* and Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* not only serve to highlight how society subverts the female sex but also the relationships between women, especially mothers and daughters, and women writers with their implied female readers. In her advertisement to the reader, Hays's emphasizes her intent behind a work like *Victim of Prejudice*:

> Lest dullness or malignity should again wrest my purpose, it may be necessary to premise, that, in delineating, in the following pages, the mischiefs which have ensued 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. *Man* has hitherto been solicitous at once to indulge his own voluptuousness and to counteract its baneful tendencies: not less tragical than absurd have been the consequences! They may be traced in the corruption of our youth; in the dissoluteness which, like a flood, has overspread the land; in the sacrifice of hecatombs of victims. Let *man* revert to the source 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)

Based on this advertisement, the novel appeals more directly to women as its implied audience, yet it does not shrink away from conveying its morals for any potential male reader. However, the emphasis on men by using italics draws the reader's attention much more closely to messages being conveyed; men ought not to expect from women what they are unable to do themselves: be chaste.

Possessing chastity– the ability to retain one's purity for a significant other until marriage – has been the subject of debate in English circles before and since the 1790s. From Samuel Richardson's mid-century novel *Clarissa* (1748) to Jane Austen's posthumous publication of *Persuasion* (1817), chastity, its cousin constancy, and its associations with the feminine are repeatedly the subjects of fiction and debate. Mary Hays makes no effort to dilute the truth and double standards of chastity and constancy in *The Victim of Prejudice*. Her narrator-protagonist, above all, favors her education and her intellect more than her sexuality and her prowess. When she is reunited with William

Pelham in the novel's second volume, she declares confidently: "abandoned to infamy and covered with shame, virtue maintains her empire in my bosom: *it is by virtue only that I love better than William Pelham*; and virtue warns me, in seeking my own gratification, to beware how I plant a thorn in the bosom of another" (127). Sex, as well as physical affection towards another human being does not register for Mary Raymond; even though social rules and prejudices still surmount her, ideas regarding personal integrity, here named as "virtue," steer her clear of implicating a fate too like her mother's.

Whether preserved by virtue or consumed by social injustice, Mary Raymond ultimately does not escape the legacy she inherited. The novel's cyclical pattern formulates episodes of mirth marked soon after by strife, often attributed to the heroine (albeit unfairly). The episodic nature of the plot's progression, coupled with Mary Raymond's increasing declension into unfavorable conditions and circumstances, illustrate Hays's point regarding the virtue of chastity within women; although Mary Raymond's virtue drives her to persevere through circumstances oftentimes well beyond her control, the novel ends on a grim note. Mary Raymond's expiration fulfills Hays's original intent for the work, "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" (174). In other words, *The Victim of Prejudice,* like the title of Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman*, alludes to a pessimistic plot with a very somber and grave conclusion. We, as readers, are never meant to see Mary Raymond succeed because a successful victim does not fulfill the aims of Hay's project. If her true audience is the privileged male reader, a successful

albeit victimized heroine will lead him closer to the conclusion that if she triumphs over adversity, it is precisely because she conformed and exceeded the expectations pertaining to her female sex. Instead, by depicting the narrator-protagonist as struggling, persevering, and still becoming consumed by the forced decisions and actions of others, the focus becomes less about what women can do better and more about why they expire despite exceeding the expectations of a virtuous sex.

"Brutal Violation:" The Odiousness of Sir Peter Osbourne

Let's talk about rape. In the wake of Harvey Weinstein and the #MeToo movement, many are now reconsidering relationships between power, prestige, class and consent. As Monica Lewinsky recently wrote in *Vanity Fair*, the recent events revolving around the #MeToo movement has led us to reconsider the past with the lens of the present. She refers to Jack Saul's notion of "collective trauma," in which a community body, such as a nation, experiences

> shared injuries to a population's social ecology due to a major catastrophe or chronic oppression, poverty and disease. … some of the features we often associate with collective traumas: social rupturing or a profound sense of distress, the challenge of long-held assumptions about the world and national identity, a constricted public narrative, and process of scapegoating and dehumanization.

In order to understand the textual effect Hays's worked towards in her second novel, there are social factors and influences that must also be considered alongside the novel. Given this, I mention Lewinsky at this juncture because she is a woman who occupies a space very familiar for women in the 1790s: easily exploitable, systemically ostracized,

nearly dismissible, and social, if not national, scapegoat for fallen morality. In the context of collective trauma as outlined above, women of the 1790s (like Monica Lewinsky two hundred years after) were subject to being scapegoated because of England's natural crisis and trauma.

Upon this note, I turn to the character of Sir Peter Osbourne. According to *The Analytical Review* in their critique of *The Victim of Prejudice*, Sir Peter Osbourne's character is described as an "imperfect persecutor. … We saw little other reason for supposing him *vile* and *odious* than the circumstance of her calling him so." Elaborating further, they state:

> If unable to control his passions, he at least shows every willingness to repair the injurious consequences of their indulgence; his attachment to her appears certainly to arise from something more than the mere impulse of sensual lust; and contemplating him, either in a moral or a dramatic point of view in comparison with his rival [William Pelham], we see no strong ground of preference between the character of the one, whose unsuccessful love has, in a phrenzy [sic] of impatience and the heat of intoxication, recourse to violence for a momentary gratification, and that of the other, whose love, though fostered by success, and encouraged by assurance of return, had yet so weak a foundation, as to be superseded by the first charms of dissipation, and to be finally sacrificed at the shrine of pecuniary convenience. ("Appendix" 248)

Even though *The Analytical Review* writes is both enlightening and problematic despite being one of the more forgiving reviews of Hays's novel, namely because of this

elaborated defense of a character who brutally terrorizes and tortures Mary Raymond nearly to the grave. Therefore, a re-examination of Sir Peter Osbourne's character is necessary in order to not only justify Hays's characterization of Osbourne as "vile" and "odious," but to dig deeper into the gender conversation by understanding the toxic masculinity Hays's sought to illuminate in the first place.

From the start of the novel, there is no clear impression to be had regarding this so-called "persecutor." We are first introduced to Sir Peter Osbourne as "the lord of the manor who resided not far from our cottage, [who] was particularly curious in his shrubs and fruit trees, and we were strictly prohibited from trespassing on any pretence or occasion on his premises" (Hays 11-12). In introducing the event that is to come, the narrator, Mary, describes William's particularly "impetuous" disposition, which is "'liable to sudden gusts of passion" (11). Mary's long history with Sir Peter Osbourne emerges from "an incident which occurred at this period, though itself trifling, is too characteristic to be avoided." Put another way, Osbourne's relationship with the narrator emerges from an episode in which William's carelessness and passionate fits result in a continued and chronically worsening relationship with an authority figure, one who did not exist on Mary's radar until this "characteristic" even if "trifling" incident.

In the spirit of fairness, we recognize Sir Peter Osbourne's anger toward the narrator's trespassing in his greenhouse. However wrong Mary's crime, Sir Peter Osbourne's response certainly cannot be justified against the offense. After seizing Mary, Osbourne cries, "'By God! A little beauty! A Hebe! A wood-nymph! I must and will have a kiss; and d--n me! You shall be welcome to all the grapes in the green-house'"

(14). A critical shift in circumstance occurs here that also affects the discourse occurring not simply just between the narrator and other characters, but between the implied author and her reader. Up until the moment Mary seizes the grapes, her motivation for acting thusly is William Pelham. To win not just his affection but also his friendship (which he uses as leverage to persuade her to acting in ways deemed disagreeable to her inner truth), Mary pursues the grapes. Aside from the overt biblical imagery occurring in this scene, the narrator evokes the allusion to draw on a notion of Woman's innocence in the expulsion from Eden. For the narrator, this instance reveals that the male perversion of society has led women like Mary to ruin, and not necessarily by her will alone. True, Mary stole the grapes. True, Mary had a choice in the matter. But, for women and others like Monica Lewinsky and Mary, who, yes, had some form of choice, instances like this become incredibly complicated when they are compounded by forces like power, class, gender norms, and stereotypes, and other systemic disadvantages against marginalized folks. These very same forces also affect women like Mary in *The Victim of Prejudice*, and these forces are what Hays strives to articulate in the novel's discourse.

The "vile" odiousness of Sir Peter Osbourne persists long after the narrator's childhood is over. Between the theft of the grapes and the rape, this "imperfect persecutor" whips Mary for saving a rabbit from Osbourne and his hunting party, makes sexual overtures and advances after she is rescued from sea, and then displaces the Neville family from their curacy and cottage after they no longer tolerate Osbourne's visits and impositions. However, none of these acts hold a candle to the final acts Sir

Peter Osbourne perpetuates against Mary Raymond: his rape and the perpetuation of her sordid personal history.

When Sir Peter Osbourne collects intelligence of Mary Raymond's removal to London in attempt to secure work with a friend of the late Mr. Raymond, he intercepts and confines her to his house until late into the night when she cannot leave without risking herself to danger in the unfamiliar streets of London. Mary's stress and unwillingness to be in the same room with Osbourne, let alone to be present in his own house, is consistently clear: she responds to him with "indignation and astonishment," "speaking…vehemently," and verbally mentions suspicion of betrayal and a refusal to "be thus constrained; you [Osbourne] have no authority to constrain me" (112-113). The narrator, once again, is *clear about how uncomfortable she* is around Sir Peter Osbourne, and yet, *he persists*. Osbourne's refusal to fully comprehend the narrator's words and feelings on the matter, let alone for at least the *sixth time*, reflect a social attitude towards women that Sir Peter Osbourne perpetuates. After calling a maid-servant, he sends Mary off to be locked inside a chamber: "Catharine, on quitting the chamber, locked the door on the outside, taking with her the key. … the windows appeared to have been recently fastened down. The moon … discovered to me a large paved yard, surrounded by out-houses and stabling. All hope of escape being thus cut off" (114). Mary's confinement in Osbourne's house reveals not only physical restraint on his part to keep her there, but her forced incarceration with him also reveals a discrepancy in communication between the sexes, especially from men to women.

In situations akin to this, men like Osbourne confine women like Mary Raymond when their victims refuse to entertain their proposals, especially ones heard before as, indeed, is Mary's case. Close confinement such as this communicates a message to female victims that, unless they will entertain the *ideas and fancies of men*, they will be confined. Women, then, are completely powerless because men choose what they wish to hear. Mary's nine days of confinement confirm her steadfastness to not give in to Sir Peter Osbourne's offers as well as his stubbornness, on his part, to actively listen and respect the narrator's own wishes and feelings. When verbal communication between the sexes break down, there is a recourse to physical violence: Mary, when taking the opportunity to escape her confinement during the chaotic dinner party, is raped when an inebriated Sir Peter Osbourne discovers her lost and cornered in his own chambers.

In return to *The Analytical Review's* analysis of Sir Peter Osbourne, the critics write of Osbourne demonstrating "every willingness to repair the injurious consequences of [his passions'] indulgence" ("Appendix" 248). After raping her, the only thing the narrator can ask for is for freedom from his house, despite his apologies and offers of reparation. Mary Raymond's refusals for reparation and repeated requests for liberty, reveal a lack of understanding on the part of men (especially of the libertine sort like Sir Peter Osbourne) to fully understand the consequences of their actions, *especially upon female bodies*. Repeatedly, women writers akin to Mary Hays and Mary Wollstonecraft communicate the consequences of men's actions upon female bodies as effects of collateral damage. Put another way, men of the late eighteenth century *still* fail to comprehend the very real reality and consequences of their actions upon bodies who are

forced to endure social stereotypes and conditions that are not equal to their own. Radical women writers, then, demonstrate this unequal advantage of men over women in a myriad of ways within their novels of prejudice. In Mary Hays's second novel, Sir Peter Osbourne reflects contemporary men of her day, even if he is exaggerated towards a more Gothic stereotype, to demonstrate the continued inability of men to see the consequences of their actions. Because they are not ostracized for sex out of wedlock – *even with consent* – men deal with these consequences in the most impersonal way possible: offer money, security, and even matrimony.

The residual effects of Sir Peter Osbourne's tyranny upon Mary Raymond persists in a similar fashion to that of her personal history: rumor. Before releasing her from his house, Sir Peter Osbourne reveals to Mary Raymond the indiscretion of his own servants:

> your romantic lamentations for the consequences of an accident, which a prudent silence might have suppressed, have excited the attention of the house, and the prattling rascals, with the gossips of your own sex, have put their own construction on the chance that threw you into my arms, and have already made us the theme of the neighborhood. (Hays 118)

Never mind the fact that Sir Peter Osbourne also deflects the situation as being called rape upon Mary Raymond and the gossip of his household staff, what remains as the bottom line situation is, as an additional consequence to not just her confinement but also her violation by him, the world perceives the narrator as a fallen woman. For all the miscommunication that exists between men and women during this time, in this moment Sir Peter Osbourne understands the lack of brevity and respect Mary Raymond would

receive from anyone *because she is no longer a chaste woman*. True, Osbourne confined her against her will for weeks. True, Osbourne raped her while intoxicated. Here, however, Osbourne rouses in the narrator a revelation that, no matter if it was consensual or not, *because you are a woman with a sordid history independent of your own personal will, she will always be a victim without a voice.* Mary Raymond *is a victim of prejudice*. As the conclusion of the novel confirms, the perpetuation of prejudice throughout society is the true consequence of action upon the feminine body.

Thus, Sir Peter Osbourne, regardless of dramatic flair or writerly convention, is an uncanny portrait of men with money and stature with very little to lose *because he is a man*. He fits perfectly as Mary Raymond's opposite because she, too, is not rendered to be a woman that other women ought to aspire to be (such as Samuel Johnson's eponymous heroine in *Clarissa*) but is as women already are. Sir Peter Osbourne's character, no matter how exaggerated his character may be drawn, still demonstrates several qualities of male entitlement and prestige which insulates them from the consequences of their actions.

Conclusion

Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice*, more perhaps than her fellow proto-feminist writers, pens the novel to define what the "novel of prejudice" ought to mean for her moment in British history and literature. By ways both didactic and fable-like, the illustrated struggle of Mary Raymond as a child and young adult untarnished by gender prejudice by way of an equal education from her protector, Mr. Raymond, reveals a complex social moment where violence against women cannot be so easily pinpointed to

the female sex. Mary's untraditional upbringing and education marks her as a gender deviant because she acts in ways baffling to others who expect women to conduct themselves in a very specific fashion, but her gender deviance is not the prime cause of her persecution. Rather, Mary's persecution results from men who perpetuate a practice of masculinity with little regard to women's preferences and opinions, especially if they do not coincide with the men's prime objective. What, then, of *The Critical Review*'s charge of *The Victim of Prejudice* as an example of "highly dangerous literature?" Do readers and critics of *The Critical Review* find themselves aligned closely to those like Sir Peter Osbourne, as men who do not feel themselves accountable for the fall of a woman abused by their hands? Is *The Victim of Prejudice* dangerous because it depicts a female heroine outside the cemented confines of acceptable femininity? Or is Mary Hays's second and most political novel "highly dangerous" for the extreme situations within which women like Hays's protagonist are certainly likely to find themselves in? Whatever the reason, whatever the danger Hays's novel and her radical ideas may have presented in the late years of the eighteenth century, such dangers grew stagnant by the time the British "gender panic" of the final decades passed into rigid social structures and decorum by the following century.

Chapter 4

Disembodied Gender Politics in *Secresy*

As her only adult novel known to survive, Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy, or The Ruin or the Rock* is by far the most chimerical. Spanning three volumes, this epistolary novel follows the confinement and escape of Sibella Valmont from the tyranny of her uncle, who intended her to marry his ward, Clement Montgomery, in order to preserve a waning British nobility. With specters, ghost-like fawns, and foiled kidnapping plots, Fenwick's *Secresy* entertains as much as it does investigate several social issues, including motherhood, imperialism, and gender.

Although prominent critic Terry Castle hailed Fenwick's *Secresy* as "sublimely bad," many other critics observe and even praise Fenwick's novel for its dexterity between genres. Isobel Grundy demarcated *Secresy* as a "novel of ideas," especially because the text encourages so many different angles and approaches (25). For example, Mercy Cannon finds within Fenwick's novel a sustained discussion regarding the role of motherhood as a personal and political subject, for "when women fail to preserve their families … they also fail in their duty as national subjects" (536). Another recent example, published *Romanticism and Affect Studies*, is Jonas Cope's suggestion of *Secresy* as a text "tailor-made" for the application of affect theory, for the novel "positions its characters as semi-autonomous bodies that catch, enfold, and circulate affective intensities in shared social spaces … repeatedly described in terms of contagion" (para. 8). However, for Miranda Snow, Caroline Ashburn's upbringing in India reveals "habits of empire and domination," and the novel "concerns itself more

generally with exploitation and oppression, and with the moral discernment required to detect such inhumanity" (160). Thus, even if *Secresy* is as "sublimely bad" as Castle posits, the Grundy's suggestion of *Secresy* as a "novel of ideas" is certainly substantiated by the growing breadth of critical readings.

As a "sublimely bad" "novel of ideas," Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock* shares company with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* and Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* because the novel also shares a sustained implementation of gothic elements in its story-world structure, includes an intimate look at female friendship, and glimpses into the problem of late-eighteenth century conceptions of gender. More specifically, however, Fenwick's novel is a queer feminist text because of its starkly unconventional approach to narrative style and genre, it's tongue-in-cheek approach to implementing and deconstructing gothic tropes before Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, and, more importantly, the novel provides a new representation of femininity as embodied by Sibella and Caroline yet to be found in late-eighteenth century literature.

A "Novel of Ideas," Among Other Things

As many recent critics argue, *Secresy*'s lack of genre uniformity – its inability to succinctly adhere to a genre – jeopardizes not only its structural integrity but uniformity of plot as well. In "The (Inoperative) Epistolary Community Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy*," Christopher Bundock postulates the so-called "lack" of structure in the novel does not need to be reconciled because the novel's form is an experimental statement about community. He suggests looking at secrets as a form of communication through

which communities are also built and not just destroyed as they often are perceived by the secret's flip-side purpose: to be betrayed. In other words, Bundock suggests Fenwick's epistolary novel as an exploration on what such communities would look like being built (almost exclusively) on secrets (710). Indeed, the role secrets play within the novel cannot be understated, as the title of the novel itself already alludes to the central position secrecy plays in both the progression of the plot and the narrative world's structure.

Like other novels, *Secresy*'s plot unfolds itself as the story continues its linear course from beginning to end. However, Fenwick's work lends itself beyond the confines of a simple novel with a simple, linear path. Many critics observe the novel's "inability" to fall into a specific genre; gothic novel, a "novel of ideas," novel of reform, these are just a few of the many genres of which scholars have compared and scrutinized while assessing *Secresy*'s fit within a set of conventions. While some critics struggle to shelve Fenwick's novel within a certain genre or lament its lack of uniformity, I view the novel's diversity in convention and genre as one of its greatest strengths that, moreover, allows the novel to unfold in layers and parallels as opposed to a strict, more linear fashion usually found in other novels.

Out of all genre possibilities, Isobel Grundy asserts *Secresy* is foremost a "novel of ideas" as well as a "novel of reform" (25, 28). Like a philosopher, Fenwick uses the novel to conduct thought experiments which realistically pit character (complete with the ideas and philosophies they come to embody) against character. A prime example of this illustrated clash of ideas are the letters between Caroline Ashburn and

Mr. Valmont, especially over a woman's ability to reason as well as the direction of Sibella's education under her uncle's direction. In her first letter to Mr. Valmont, Caroline writes

> If Mr. Valmont's education, treatment, and utter seclusion were most valuable for her, why should she, yet so young, and removed from the common misfortunes of life, why should she be unhappy? You, Sir, may not have perceived this effect of your system for, although shut within the same boundary and resident under one roof, you seldom see her, and when you do see, you do not study her. I believe I know more of her mental temperament in our seven days intercourse than you have learned in seven years, and I affirm that she is unhappy. (40)

True to Mr. Valmont's character, his sly comeback is interwoven in Sibella's response – "Miss Ashburn, I believe, has been little used to disappointment. I pity her, perhaps a miserable old age is in store for her. … Tell Miss Ashburn from me, Sibella, that, like all other females, she had decided with more haste than judgement" – and, although indirectly spoken, his words remain sharp, misogynistic, and characteristically Valmont. Because of its epistolary form, the novel exists mainly in thought and in the written word. True, letters may describe action or scenes, but these actions and scenes are recounted by the characters through remembrance. Put another way, the chapters are letters, and letters are written from an interior space, complete with memory and emotion imbued within the text. Instead of a narrator following and relaying action word for word, the characters themselves relay the progression of the novel thought by thought. In this way, the epistolary structure also reinforces Grundy's view of *Secresy* as a novel of ideas.

The novel's "interior" existence – as being marked by a series of letters physically recording thoughts and emotions which, in turn, provoke thoughts, emotions, and action in others – also lends itself easily towards the gothic genre. Eliza Fenwick es not reinvent the wheel when she employs many of the popular conventions within her own adult novel. The castle setting, the evil uncle, the haunted armories – these and other elements do well to starkly contrast the previous generation with the new. In this way, the gothic genre serves to highlight and expose one of the social fractures emerging in England by the end of the eighteenth century: one between England's distant feudal past and the emerging future signified by young radicals, the French Revolution's early promises, and the ultimate turn into the nineteenth century. The gothic, however, does more than just assist in the shaping of the novel's plot as it also contributes to the shaping of the narrative world within which *Secresy*'s plots and schemes occupy

An Uncanny Narrative World

Following conventions already set by her early and mid-eighteenth-century predecessors, Fenwick's novel is structured as a collection of letters sent in-between many of the main characters who feature within the novel's central plots. As the story unfolds, however, the novel itself becomes less and less of an epistolary drama like Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* as it infuses itself with gothic convention coupled with feminist vigor. Unlike her contemporaries, Fenwick successfully imbues her feminist tendencies within characters such as Sibella and Caroline while also drawing gently exaggerated character types and tropes stylized from stereotypes evident in English prose by the late-eighteenth century.

Evidently, *Secresy*'s narrative world reflects much of our own; the story occurs in England, refers to the revolution in France, and, for all intents and purpose, its characters and locations participate and emulate social behaviors and customs similar, if not exactly, like Fenwick's own world. The fringes between the narrative world and the real word rest in the sublime and uncanny conventions resulting form the gothic tropes employed throughout the novel. In "Defiant Damsels: Gothic Space and Female Agency in *Emmeline*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and *Secresy*," Ellen Malenas Ledoux correctly revisits both the popular Radcliffe novel as well as female gothic texts before and after *Udolpho*'s publication – *Emmeline* and *Secresy* – in order to specify and insist upon critical dexterity when assessing novels without automatically falling into conventional assumptions, as some authors may have suggested in their own critical studies (Kate Ferguson Ellis's *The Contested Castle* and Diane Long Hoeveler's *Gothic Feminism* come to mind). By comparing the use of tropes and heroines' reactions to coping with their "supernatural encounters" within each novel, Ledoux concludes, "our critical response should mirror early readers' ideological flexibility when analyzing a genre that has played a seminal role in feminist criticism and the formation of a female canon" (344). Upon taking a closer look, Fenwick's employment of the gothic may be considered a much more "realistic" use than, say, Radcliffe's own gothic novels. For example, Fenwick's gothic situates itself in the late-eighteenth century present in England, whereas many other gothic novels situate themselves sin the past and within exotic locations. Any real opportunity for a trope to be employed is instead turned into a moody atmosphere, such as the forest Sibella often spends her time within. We may also consider the

hermitage, or the "ruin on the rock" hidden in the novel's subtitle, where Arthur Murden not only secludes and secrets himself but also contains a special passage carrying visitors to and from the castle without Mr. Valmont's knowledge. The most notable instance of the gothic, however, occurs when Lord Filmar attempts to kidnap Sibella from Valmont Castle.

While the readers – and Sir Walter by extension – are left in suspense for the third volume to open, Filmar fulfills our expectations not of succeeding in his schemes but by relaying how he's "defeated in the moment of success by my own agents, my tools, tools for whose conscience and courage I had bargained – such tools I say, to be frightened by a black-gowned, bearded, nobody knows what – oh tis too much" (235). Indeed, Filmar appears to see through the gothic that otherwise has confounded his associates even though he himself lacks any sort of explanation for who – or what – the specter is that accosted them. His companions – Griffiths and Griffiths's brother – both are consumed by the mysteriousness of the armory, a location ripe and prime for what may be considered as the usual gothic shenanigans. Griffiths "seizes" Filmar's arm and his brother does the same, for the lord figured the brother "envying [Griffiths] for the supposed protection, forced himself between us," resulting with Filmar squeezed between his agents as "they clung to [him] with infinite zeal" (236-237). Unfortunately for Filmar, the compounded circumstance of Murden a la Hermit coupled with the eeriness of the armory did well to faze and stupefy his agents enough to make the entire plan collapse. In short, Fenwick employs the gothic not only to exploit the already moody atmosphere

within the novel, but she also exploits the gothic in order to provide comedic relief from the drama occurring within the rest of the novel.

However, even the narrative world does not take itself or the gothic very seriously. As revealed in his letters to Lord Walter Boyer, Lord Filmar turns all points of seriousness in *Secresy* upon their heads by both perpetuating and blasting genre norms and conventions. The novel's success in both structure and didacticism lies not in the world in which the plot unfolds but in the characters' whose minds we occupy and whose fictional realities in turn occupy our imaginative landscapes Through the multitude of letters exchanged, the narrative world unfolds itself as the plots, connections, and conceits between characters are introduced, planned, executed, and – in the most inopportune times – exploited.

Dames of Reason and Desire – Sibella Valmont and Caroline Ashburn

Sibella Valmont and Caroline Ashburn form the central homosocial relationship upon which much of the novel's plot revolves. The novel begins with Caroline imploring to Mr. Valmont for Sibella to correspond with her while, previously, Mr. Valmont forbade any outside visitors and correspondences with Sibella. By the same token, the novel also ends with a letter from Caroline not to Mr. Valmont, but to Lord Filmar, who, by encountering these women while scheming to marry and obtain Sibella's secret fortune, is changed by them. In a sense, then, the friendship between Caroline and Sibella is as powerful as it is influential upon minor and major characters who participate in the "composition" of *Secresy*'s narrative world. Such influences, however, may be side

effects or aftershocks of the main, cataclysmic bond, for Sibella and Caroline also changed each other – for better or for worse.

Heiress of a very large estate, Sibella Valmont is raised without knowledge of the fortune she possesses, for her uncle, Mr. George Valmont, secretly plots to bring her estate into his own possession as part of his project to preserve the Valmont family honor without the taint of materiality and libertinism British society has come to possess. She fancies herself "in some instances still a mere child," yet she finds herself empowered not only by Caroline's correspondence with her, but also in her confidence to speak up – and sometimes against – Mr. Valmont. She is conscious of her mental capacity and capabilities, as is her uncle, for she firmly states in her first letter to Caroline: "I was born to think: - and I will think" (43).

Thought and imagination, for Sibella, are the powerful media by which she may exercise her consciousness, confidence, and reason. After her declaration, she exalts these powers:

> What was it but my power of thought, which gave birth to that affection which would impel me on with a rapidity that my pen cannot follow? It seems to me that my thought dictates volumes in an instant; and that, in an instant, I have said volumes. Yet I have only a few pages of paper under my eye and my hand. If Mr. Valmont tells me, I cannot cut the air with wings, I will answer – 'Tis true: but in imagination, I can encompass the vast globe in a second. Hail thought! Thought the soul of existence! – Not think! – why, do not all forms in which the pulse of life vibrates, possess the power of thought? (44)

From such an early place in the novel does Sibella not only recognize her capacity to think, but she also acknowledges those same powers by which the novel also exists as well. True, the novel exists in a written form – it is printed, bound, and, in some instances, also digitized and available through the internet. But, cognitively speaking, the novel also exists within the mind: we imagine its characters, its plot, its locations, what transpires between characters across time and space. Thought and imagination are also the modes by which the novel diverges and descends towards a bleak ending, for, until the very end of the novel, Sibella exists as if a phantom in every other character's imaginations. And the imagination, despite its great powers to transport and inspire, also has ways of twisting and deforming objects and people into a vision sometimes more impressive and mightier than the actual muse themselves.

Throughout the novel, many secondary characters – as well as the main narrators – work towards making assumptions based on little to no information (and sometimes even the wrong kind of information). For example, while attending her mother at an evening get-together, Caroline shares a letter from Sibella. While one character sees "a pretty hand," another disagrees, "Nay, it is not a female character" (91). Another example comes from a letter written by Lord Filmar, in which many servants in Valmont Castle, who are forbidden from engaging with Sibella, suppose her to be "deranged in intellect" (207). However, rumor is only a minor infraction compared to the habit many of the men in the novel are complicit in propagating: objectification. Lord Filmar, who perhaps is the greatest perpetrator, often imagines Sibella subdued and well-aligned with masculine ideas of femininity and women's submission towards men. One early instance illustrates

Sibella's submission vividly: "– Sibella, my dear, raise these cushions under my head – Psha, child, you are devilishly awkward – there –. Pooh! – throw that gauze shade of yours over me. – Sit down, and watch, lest Ponto or Rosetta should leap upon or disturb me" (216). In another letter, Filmar elevates Sibella as a sacred object when he is hidden in Valmont Castle and is anticipating her kidnapping: "Boyer – they shall neither of them touch her. – I will carry her myself. —— I could not bear to see their arms encircle the sweet girl. – I'll enter her chamber first. – Her face they must behold; but, with the same zeal that I would feast mine own senses upon her other charms, will I hide them from the profanation of vulgar eyes" (230). However, Sibella's dehumanization in Filmar's eyes reaches its climax after a change of fortune allows him a second chance to kidnap her from Murden's custody. He writes:

> Faith, Walter, I have secured a *rich prize*, indeed. Hear but its estimate.
>
> In the first place, *a very lovely and adorable woman*.
>
> In the second, *a fine estate*.
>
> In the third, —– an *heir (in embrio) to inherit it.* (339, emphasis mine)

Filmar's list reads very much like a list of groceries he just picked up at the store, for he neither cares for Sibella so much as he looks at her as means to an end – the end being the transfer of her inheritance to become his own property. Sibella's pregnancy, however, blasts his plans, transforming Sibella from an object ripe with value to one with no value at all. In short, men like Filmar see women less as who they are and more like opportunities through which they may gain or refill their wealth.

Another important note to consider is how Sibella also views herself. Throughout the novel, her uncle as well as the activities (and lack of communication) from her beloved, Clement, slowly whittle down her confidence to anxiety and brash decision-making. True, she does fancy herself as a mere child in some ways, but in other respects, such as her capacity to reason, Sibella appears more capable than even her uncle. However, from the start of the novel too does one powerful thought possess a seed lending itself to her destruction: her adoration of Clement Montgomery.

In the earliest letters exchanged with Caroline does Sibella confess and detail the love and affection she has towards Clement. From an early age, they have spent many years playing and learning side by side and knew no one other than Mr. Valmont, the castle's servants, and their tutors. When Valmont declares Clement to travel abroad on a grand tour, Sibella is left convinced "the idea of Sibella accompany" Clement on his travels. She fancies "our minds, our principles, our affections are the same; and, while I trace his never to be forgotten image within my breast, I know how fondly he cherishes the remembrance of mine" (59). More importantly, and although she did not realize the full implications at the time, Sibella also acknowledges the portrait of her by Clement's hand hanging in her room "as the work of Clement, it is rather his image than my own" (253). Ultimately, however, Sibella's self-perception climaxes in the moments before Murden's death beside her, for she declares, "Give me not a name… I own none! What am I? a shadow! A dream! Carry to him the name you used to me" (356). Put simply, in her final exchange with Murden, Sibella confesses to her lack of physicality – despite feeling warmth and cold – because throughout the novel Sibella certainly has been

conceived and perceived as a thought, a dream, as a shadow upon the mind. Any kind of agency she may have possessed has been taken from her by force of someone else's thought and not her own.

As the novel's plot unfolds letter by letter, other characters – both who participate in the letter-writing as well as those who are made subjects of letters – recognize Caroline and Sibella are not quite to par with social ideas of femininity and womanly behaviors. For example, when passionately speaking of Sibella while attending her mother and some guests, Caroline reverses Lady Mary Bowden's label of "queer creature" – used both to signify the strangeness of Sibella Valmont as well as alienate her from the rest of feminine society – as being one who "would rather think herself born to navigate ships and build edifices, than to come into a world for no other purpose, than to twist her hair into ringlets, learn to be feeble, and to find her feet too hallowed to tread on the ground beneath her" (93). Besides Arthur Murden, who finds his mind sparked by such illustrations, the other younger ladies in attendance are less impressed with Caroline's sketch and continue to quiz Caroline with questions regarding to female accomplishments. Unfazed, Caroline does not hesitate to continue her rather "unusual" description of Miss Valmont's hobbies and character:

> …the resources of her mind, *various* and *increasing*, to use her own description, further furnish better expedients. She wishes for communication, for intercourse, for society; but she is too proud to tempt the servants from their duty, all of whom, except two, are forbidden to approach her. … Miss Valmont finds her dress simple enough, and her limbs robust enough, to enable her to perform all the

> functions of her toilet. A true child of nature, bold in innocence, day or night, is equally propitious to her rambles; and always mentally alive, she has the glow of animation on her cheeks, the fire of vivacity in her eye, alone in a solitary wood at noon-day or at midnight. (94, emphasis in original)

Caroline's dedication and passion towards her dearest friend is clear: she wholeheartedly agrees and respects Sibella's want of socializing but also her innate innocence and intelligence. Respecting the habits and expectations of her wealthy audience, Caroline does not hesitate to disclose Sibella's complete independence; she is completely able and willing to take care of dressing and caring for herself without a female domestic in attendance.

Caroline's description does more than simply honor and praise Sibella, however. Between the lines, Caroline also delivers her own personal opinions regarding the wastefulness and the institutionalized weakness of mind and body women like Lady Mary Bowden are too ignorant to notice: making "ringlets" in their hair to look pretty and making themselves weak and "feeble" because they are always praised as delicate creatures too "hallowed" to touch the earth with their feet. Passages such as this reveal critical commentary on female habits and "accomplishments" usually honed and praised in late-eighteenth century society, and, given Fenwick's own personal history and relationship with radical ideas and thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, it is unsurprising that Caroline, too, would echo many of these proto-feminist ideas in *Secresy*.

Another interesting facet of Caroline's characterization is the level of introspection and self-improvement she undergoes to reform her own bad habits and terrible behaviors. In "Habits of Empire and Domination in Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy*," Miranda Snow's postcolonial reading of Caroline Ashburn serves a twofold purpose: first, Snow delivers emphasis to discussions of British colonialism hinted at within the novel as well as Fenwick's own personal experiences with traveling around British territories (such as Barbados); secondly, by connecting Caroline's position as "principal epistolary narrator" whose gaze looks upon Sibella's imprisonment and the behaviors of British colonialists abroad in India as horrific, Snow urges fellow critics and readers to connect these circumstances as evidence of "similarities between familial and imperial behavior" (160). Thus, Snow tacitly draws the suggestion of a deeper conversation at work within *Secresy*'s pages: Fenwick's "novel of ideas" also contains a much more serious and disturbing analysis of behavior between individuals as well as nations, one ruled by fear and subservience. Are we to understand the change of England's national character within such intimate dynamics as those which rule the family? Certainly, although such connections are not so much in the grand scale of things, there is something to be said about how nuance speaks to bigger, more concerning phenomenon at play. After all, how can families not be affected by the actions and goings-on by the nation within which they live in?

Despite Caroline's criticism, she is not spared from other characters from commenting on her own person and behavior. Mr. Valmont, for one, thought "Miss Ashburn…has been little used to disappointment. I pity her. Perhaps a miserable old age

is in store for her" (45). Arthur Murden, himself with a polarized personality and attractiveness, recognizes Miss Ashburn as one worthy to "give an ear, an eye, anything I have on earth, except the full confidence of my heart, to call her my sister, my friend. I admire, seek, venerate her" while Clement sees Caroline otherwise as someone dangerous for "know[ing] it all, and [he] hate[s] her most righteously…allow[ing] that she is a fine woman, but her beauty is spoiled by her discernment" (136, 200). Lord Filmar, who is one of the first characters to recognize Caroline's descent into secrecy, for "henceforward be plot and stratagem sanctified! for Miss Ashburn deigns to plot," by the novel's end also recognizes her "like an angel, for she not only told me I should amend but taught me how to amend" (329, 347).

Regardless of how other characters either respect or deprecate her honor, Caroline remains steady throughout most of the novel in being an unwavering, romantic correspondent for Sibella while she remains in Valmont Castle. From the very beginning of the novel, the pair hits it off tremendously well, for Sibella, as a more passive speaker of this relationship, implores Caroline to explain why "you pressed my hand as it held yours: but you never said, *I love you! – I love you, Sibella, with all my soul*" (41). Caroline, for her part, does confirm that she does love Sibella *with all of her soul*; but, because of her own personal history and struggle with entitlement (having been taught by her mother to feel inclined towards whatever she desires), from the very beginning only Caroline and Sibella are the two characters who can rightly claim devotion for another being without turning one another into an object, or for feeling any kind of obligation which money, honor, and/or status teaches them to feel otherwise. Thus, their relationship

– complete with Sibella's ignorance of social custom paired with Caroline's heightened sense of bad behaviors stemming from social hierarchy and British colonialism – remains as the most stable relationship between characters until the novel's very conclusion.

Conclusion

If Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* is perpetually positioned as "the novel that could be" whereas Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* may be considered a textbook example of a late-eighteenth century novel of prejudice, where does Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy, or the Ruin on the Rock* stand? Because *Secresy*'s elusive enough to avoid being pigeonholed by genre, Fenwick's only adult novel fluctuates between the dramatic flair of Wollstonecraft's "stage-effect" and Hays's more serious didacticism. And yet, with deft hand and keen sense of genre, Eliza Fenwick crafts *Secresy, or The Ruin on the Rock* as a narrative undominated by a single voice, told instead by a whole community through one of the most intimate forms of communication available. Through an array of voices, the novel touches on several themes and social issues while preying upon the reader's susceptibility for the supernatural. Even further still, from beginning to end, Fenwick's only adult novel is the queerest text between Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* and Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* because of its lacking allegiance to a single genre, to its serious interrogation of social concerns and ideas while simultaneously crafting satire out of them, and, in respect to gothic heroines, in providing a female friendship of two women who both saw an intellectual equal as well as a mutual desire for the other, fueling their quest for reuniting from the first letter to the last.

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