“The Dear-Bought Lessons of Experience”: Mary Hays’s *The Victim of Prejudice* and the Empiricist Revision of Burke’s *Reflections*

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The opposition mistook the moral character of the revolution; the ministers mistook its force: and both parties, from pique, resentment, pride, habit, and obstinacy, persisted in acting on these mistakes after they were disabused by experience.

—Sir James Mackintosh

An early defender of the French Revolution’s “Rights of Man,” Mackintosh denotes the fundamental tension between things as they are and things as they should be, emblematizing the culture of disillusionment that permeated British radical circles in the 1790s.¹ Indeed, some stalwart British adherents to the principles of the French Revolution maintained their allegiance, finding in the Terror only the moral equivalent of “the *premeditated* cruelty [that] has been invariably practiced by the present enemies of the French Revolution” (James i).

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1Perhaps one of the more evocative examples of the despondency caused by the Revolution’s initial failures is Wordsworth’s redaction of his enthusiastic report published in *Descriptive Sketches* in 1793, ultimately replaced by a much more tempered and disconsolate version published in the final lifetime text of 1849. For comparison of the 1793 edition and that of 1836 with corresponding *apparatus criticus* of variants through the 1849 version, see Wordsworth (42-45, lines 53-56; 114-17, lines 774-91).
Yet in many ways such persistence simply secured the radicals’ reputation for political violence and fueled perceptions that the bloodshed in France was symptomatic of something more pathological than aberrant excesses of an otherwise just movement for change. For many erstwhile supporters, it seemed that the Revolution had replaced an absolute monarchy with an absolute state, one that arbitrarily could bestow—rather than one that would honor—natural rights (Hunt 17).

Nevertheless, scholars have often assumed, in some cases rightly, that the Enlightenment program, however distorted by the Revolution, remained for committed reformists the best chance for historical and cultural renewal and a retreat from the superstitions, institutions, and oppressions of the past. In fact, the Revolution’s current reputation as a forerunner to modern human rights movements has nourished the idea that competing factions of this time either persisted in their embrace of revolutionary ideals or uncritically rejected even the most innocuous of reform programs. It is less common to examine politically moderate novels of this time as apprehending as much the radical response to systemic injustices as any perceptibly nativist defense of them. This failure to engage the specter of what many erstwhile radicals perceived as a flawed philosophy exhibits what Glenn Burgess has called the “interpretative mood” (64), which serves to transpose current cultural and doctrinal logics onto the era under question. This tendency has hampered insight free from the rigid dichotomy that has historically separated political left and right in post-revolutionary Britain.²

It may thus be instructive to revisit the work of the feminist Mary Hays, whose novel *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799) demon-

²For recent attempts to reconcile this dichotomy within the context of British literature, see Miriam Wallace’s *Revolutionary Subjects in the English Jacobin Novel, 1790-1805* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2009) and A. A. Markley’s, *Conversion and Reform in the British Novel in the 1790s: A Revolution of Opinions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
strates the inadequacy of the right/left dichotomy and reflects the author’s attempt to fictionalize through metaphor the importance of enacting reform without resorting to the corrosive and ultimately self-defeating violence of revolution. Hays had earlier hinted of such a movement in her “Thoughts on Civil Liberty” (1793):

The feeble efforts of prejudice and interest must in the end give way to truth, however gradual may be their declining struggles. Most devoutly do I pray that a wise and peaceful reformation of the gross corruptions and abuses which deform the present system of government in this country, may preclude all dreadful extremities; If there be proper laws existing to prevent these shocking depravities, so destructive to the morals, to the population, to the well-being of a country—Say! why, are they not enforced? (14)

By confirming the place of law and constitutional right, Hays rhetorically reminds readers that such laws as they would claim for themselves were neither exclusionary nor discretionary. Hays seemed to recognize the danger of revolution, not for its hopeful effect on the status quo, but its adverse effect on reform movements begun in the years prior to the French Revolution.³

There is perhaps little dispute that the Terror forestalled reform efforts in England by the magnitude of its violence. Nevertheless, the response exemplified by Hays points to an elision of ideological poles and problematizes readings of the progressive reaction to the French Revolution. As I hope to demonstrate, Hays’s Victim is in many ways redolent of the counterrevolutionary philosophy of Edmund Burke, who, despite an occasional reputation as champion of a regressive anti-intellectualism (Smith 73), was in many ways a statesman committed to progressive reforms and the redress of abuses by English authority.⁴ Moreover, his support for the American

³For more on literature’s relationship to the “institutionalization of reform” in post-1688 Britain, see Anthony S. Jarrells’s Britain’s Bloodless Revolutions: 1688 and the Romantic Reform of Literature (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁴Although scholarship on Burke’s political career reflects the formidable breadth of his body of work, I have in mind here that which deals extensively with either
Revolution followed by such profound antipathy for the French version perhaps goes some way toward deciphering the strategic shift in philosophic reasoning employed by radicals wary of a violent overthrow of old regime institutions.

To provide a basis for his legislative and social appeals, Burke sought to formulate a coherent view of society as invariably tethered to an identifiable past. This historical empiricism is perhaps most demonstrably encapsulated by lines from his Reflections on the Revolution in France: “It is vain to talk to [the revolutionaries] of [. . .] the fixed form of a constitution, whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience, and an increasing public strength and national prosperity” (49). For detractors like Burke, Mackintosh, and others, the revolution’s failings lay not so much in its violence as in its fundamental inability to enact many of those changes promised by the ratification of a collective social contract. In this regard one can easily discern the affinity between the objections—both philosophical and practical—to revolution and a palpably disaffected Hays. To fulfill his vision of an historically countenanced, rights-based society, however, Burke relied on institutions that he felt had grown organically into a civil social order. This, in Burke’s mind, was an order ratified by the British constitution and reaffirmed by the Glorious Revolution, both the English precursor and antithesis of that which had recently occurred in France. Of course, for women writers like Hays, excluded from enfranchisement in many of those institutions cited by Burke, historical experience had taught a different lesson.

Written five years prior to Mackintosh’s pronouncement, The Victim of Prejudice nevertheless contains echoes of Burke

and reveals its author’s revolutionary disaffection to be as much the product of genuine revolutionary apprehension as a gesture of appeasement towards an increasingly conservative reading public.\footnote{See, for example, Eleanor Ty, who, invoking an assertion made by Terence Hoagwood in an earlier edition of Hays’s novel, argues that “like many writers Hays was driven into ‘apparent compliance and conservatism in the early nineteenth century’ by ‘governmental and public pressures’” (Introduction xxxii). While government vigilance over the dissemination of potentially seditious writings was indeed heightened during this period, critics have begun to question the degree to which political fiction, especially by women, was influenced by it. See, for example, W. A. Speck’s \textit{Literature and Society in Eighteenth-Century England 1680-1820: Ideology, Politics and Culture} (New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc., 1998) 143-44.} One of the more revelatory lines, spoken by the disgraced mother of the heroine, seems to renounce political violence enacted under the auspices of universal right or progress as historical necessity. Writing from prison as a woman disgraced, she warns that “a sanguinary policy precludes reformation, defeating the dear-bought lessons of experience” (Hays, \textit{Victim} 68). The placement of this line alongside Burke’s constitutional defense reflects a synergy between things as they should be—that durable mantra of reformism—and the lessons of historical experience. The latter sentiment had hitherto characterized the counterrevolution led by Burke, unsettled as it was by fears of descent to violent anarchy that would undermine those long-established customs of a natural and divine social order. This analysis of the novel will conclude that Hays’s authorial “dear-bought lessons” come to embody the author’s adoption of Burke’s empiricist model and demonstrate that the natural law so revered by the counterrevolutionaries had in fact been usurped by law and custom. Consequently, Hays is able to contend that revolution was the inevitable by-product of the existing order of things—not its threat.

By using the language of the counterrevolution against itself, then, Hays is able to critique what had become a largely self-destructive retaliation against social injustices and reinforce the intrinsic empiricism of conservatives. Allied by a desire to
prevent a calamitous revolution, Hays is then able to depict an experience different perhaps than what Burke had envisioned, one that over time had betrayed a selective neglect of the guaranteed rights ostensibly prescribed by English law. For progressives like Hays, cherished custom had come to embody a system that “annihilates the being whom its negligence left destitute, and its institutions compelled to offend” (Victim 69). Thus, the model for Hays’s “sanguinary policy” may be ambiguous, but it is intentionally so. By evoking both Robespierre’s Terror and the counterrevolutionary climate in England, Hays is able to concede that genuine reform had been ill-conceived by disciples of revolution but also impeded by custom’s usurpation of law. For Hays, reform was at cross purposes with revolution, and conflation of the two had fostered resentment and hostility in both the newly formed French government and the long-established British hierarchy.

*The Victim of Prejudice* is the story of Mary Raymond, abandoned as an infant and raised by the benevolent Mr. Raymond and educated alongside his two aristocratic male charges, William and Edmund Pelham. While Mary’s intellect is cultivated by an equal education, allowing her to “outstrip both [her] companions” (24) in learning, she also develops an innocent, though romantic bond with William based on companionship and mutual esteem. Even before she can be apprised of the details of her disreputable birth out of wedlock, however, Mary is forbidden from further correspondence with William, both by Mr. Raymond out of deference to “certain prejudices, which the world has agreed to respect and to observe,” and by William’s father, seeking to “preserve [him] from humiliating connections” (32). Mary’s situation is made more perilous by a posthumous letter from her mother, also named Mary, conveyed by Raymond and marking the younger Mary as a “child of infamy and calamity” (69). It is this associational disgrace as much as the death of Mr. Raymond that serves as a vehicle
for her persecution throughout the novel. While Mary is able to jealously guard both the virtues and principles of independence on which she had been raised, she is ultimately forced to concede “to a destiny against which precautions and struggles have been alike fruitless” (41).

Over the course of the novel, Mary’s experiences belie Burkean notions of right, since an equal education—here a symbol of modest reform—is paradoxically subordinated to customary designations of hierarchy. For Mary, such education is futile, since it is “unfitted to my sex, my situation, and pretensions” (107). By the end of the novel, Mary, destitute and rheumatic, warns readers of the division between philosophical precepts and the examples set by those residing in stations of power. It is vital to the overall narrative arc that her sacrificial existence renders custom’s nurtured hypocrisy as incompatible with true reform as “the toil of the visionary projector” (175). This essay will examine alternately how popular conceptions of natural rights, the distortion of female sensibility and virtue, and the heroine’s righteous resignation to implacable prejudice all conspire in the novel to both repudiate violent revolution and critique the British loyalist response to it. These themes are elucidated by those Burkean principles dominating the revolutionary debate at this time. The novel ultimately achieves its aims while upholding Britain’s constitutional framework as that which could best ensure steady progress and meaningful reform.

Mary, having been raised according to Enlightenment principles, maintains as integral to her conceptions of self the belief that “Liberty is the truest and most invaluable good” (24). Burke shared such a sentiment, taking great care to use ideals of liberty to gauge the value and justice of a revolution. In his “Address to the British Colonists in North America,” Burke defended the colonists’ right to rebel, as they had suffered from an abuse of traditional authority and sought simply to correct the abuse, not obliterate the tradition. Burke writes, “those who have and
who hold to that foundation of common liberty, whether on this or on your side of the ocean, we consider as the true, and the only true, Englishmen. Those who depart from it, whether there or here [ . . . ] are the real rebels to the fair constitution and just supremacy of England” (543-44). Burke makes a very sharp distinction between the American Revolution and the French, the latter of which sought not to correct abuses but to topple the existing social order in favor of an entirely new system of government. For Burke, the utilitarian projection of equality, based on the will of the greatest number, could only naturally lead to a popular absolute tyranny. The inherent danger to Britain’s constitutionally organic society demanded a counterrevolution, if only to preserve freedoms popularly thought suppressed.

Hays also had apprehended the Revolution’s effects on British society yet, prior to publication of *Victim*, deviated from Burke by challenging his assumptions of the infallibility of a natural right manifested by the British constitution. For Hays, the Revolution’s aftermath was consistent with its ruthless program of violence, and the effect on legitimate reform efforts in England would be profound. As she writes in “Thoughts on Civil Liberty,” “I almost shudder at the present general diffusion of political knowledge for, however I approve the principles, the desolations in a neighboring country make me tremble at the very idea of the dangers attending the practice” (17). Hays understood that the restraints on liberty in France had lesser analog in conditions inspiring popular dissent in Britain. Thus, any reliance on constitutional authority to stave off rebellion had to be reconciled with the sources of Britain’s arbitrary power structures.

This dynamic provided a clear picture of competing ideas for both order and equality under law, since the counterrevolution had been able to frame the discourse in terms of a just and natural hierarchy. Promulgated by Burke as the surest guarantor of order, this conception of natural law steadfastly maintained
the necessity of hereditary right in forming a government of prudence and equanimity. He writes in Reflections,

the power of perpetuating our property in our families is one of the most valuable and interesting circumstances belonging to it, and that which tends the most to the perpetuation of society itself. It makes our weakness subservient to our virtue; it grafts benevolence even upon avarice. (44)

Such an assertion betrays Burke’s otherwise deductively reasoned arguments on the nature of social order and the unimpeachable tradition of constitutional authority. While certain hierarchies presumably existed for the preservation and continued progress of social order, those in power were also enabled to usurp their contracted authority and create unjust and arbitrary power structures.

Accordingly, in Hays’s novel, Mary Raymond’s first encounter with the systematic abuse of Burkean “natural right” comes in the form of Sir Peter Osborne, a wealthy landowner on whose property Mr. Raymond is a tenant. The persecution of Mary by Sir Peter begins when she is an adolescent under the care of Mr. Raymond and presages the more sinister assaults she will endure by the same hands later in the text. Here Hays exposes what was presumably an oversight in Burke’s account of the French Revolution: that its roots simply did not exist on a similar level in England. Sir Peter becomes the embodiment of patriarchy and aristocracy, whose tyranny over Mary throughout the novel allows the author to identify the sources of revolution and caution against their continuance. Such subtle detachment enables an ingenuous interrogation of the system preventing less a revolution than a wider application of natural rights.

Writing a scene analogous to the biblical Fall, Hays evokes images resembling Oliver Goldsmith’s Deserted Village, in which land enclosures and large-scale privatization were lamented as having forced rural evacuations and enabled the enrichment of wealthy landowners through the extortion of remaining inhabitants. Trespassing on Sir Peter’s vineyard to disprove William’s assertion that she, “like the rest of your weak sex,
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[is] timid and spiritless” (11), Mary is forced to confront the disharmony between her conception of unimpeachable right and a distinctly gendered antagonism to it. The full weight of this burden is realized when Mary is accosted and detained by Sir Peter, who upon seizing her remarks, “Ah! my little lass, have we caught you in the fact? A true daughter of Eve!” (14). Mary, tempted by the “forbidden fruit” (11), has encroached on a modern-day prelapsarian Eden and, after having been offered her freedom for a kiss, completes her sacrifice by exonerating William to Mr. Raymond and accepting the blame for their offense. This scene, while foreshadowing Sir Peter’s later, more predatory assaults on Mary, affirms that the same prosperity seen by Burke as dangerous in other parts of Europe was amply manifested within the natural hierarchy that he so ardently defended. That it involves a somewhat untoward advance on a young girl also underscores a gradually diminished liberty by which certain citizens were not afforded those natural rights extolled by the counterrevolution.

Moreover, the brute strength exercised by Sir Peter stands in for traditional conceptions of gender as the linchpin of domestic tranquility and, by extension, civil order. The “weakness” ascribed to Mary’s sex, then, has significant implications for not only the threat she poses to that established order, but also for what the counterrevolution saw as an alliance between female sensibility and French lawlessness. This deliberate gendering of the Revolution offered images of an “effeminate” France as the embodiment of a populace ruled by sentiment (Colley 252). So readers here could rightly suspect that William’s and Sir Peter’s perception of Mary’s “weakness” had been presumably fostered by culturally embedded notions of innately “female” passions. For Hays these constructions degraded a valuable human sensibility necessary for mutual understanding and compassion. Yet as she demonstrates, these were also seen popularly as the very same forces that had catalyzed the convulsive Revolution. Thus for many Britons, female acts of defiance, or even stead-
fastness, threatened a destructive rebellion. Like her confidante Mary Wollstonecraft, Hays in her novel laments the condition of natural sensibility as it was cultivated in women only to foster submissiveness and sustain the myth that women are naturally prone to feeling and men to reason (Wollstonecraft 142-43). Depicting Mary’s struggle to align her “virtuous sensibility” (25) with what had become very real class and gender restrictions, Hays asserts that at this time an equal education could only function to make female pupils aware of the injustice bred by pervasive neglect.

The story of Mary’s mother, then, presented as a deathbed confessional, illustrates the social ramifications of a gendered education and is aimed at those who would maintain such a system to preserve order. It becomes important within the revolutionary debate to distinguish between what could properly be called an “English” sensibility—characterized by contemporaries as those rational and humanistic impulses such as altruism and self-discipline—and its more nefarious French counterpart, largely indistinguishable to the loyalist faction. In this context, the charge given to Mr. Raymond by the elder Mary is to inculcate in her daughter reason as a rival to wanton feeling, the latter of which had almost solely defined the product of women’s education. Confiding in the good will of her former suitor, Raymond, the elder Mary recounts her susceptibility to the allure of flattery, as well as her degeneration as a result of having “yielded to the mingled intoxication of [her] vanity and [her] senses” (63).

While this passage illustrates the standard fallen woman trope, Mary’s self-description as a “wretched victim of sensuality” (61) clearly demarcates the boundary between the nationally edifying sensibility offered by Wollstonecraft and the “excessive sensibility” disparagingly associated with revolution and synonymous with unbridled passion, sexual license, and mental inani- tion. Mary, in fact, having been “rendered, by all the previous
habits of life and education, systematically weak and helpless” (65), validates preconceptions of femininity as being intrinsically tied to the vitality of the nation-state (Mellor 65). Hays uses this rather common trope not to recover or generate sympathy for the elder Mary, but to critique the conventions of an idealistic and frivolous femininity, by which women were granted the false choice between subservience and subversion.

Unlike her daughter would be, Mary had been taught to rely on the very thing that was suggested to have caused the tumult in France: fealty to an exquisite, feminized sensibility and wholesale reliance on instinctive emotion. Raised in close conformity to what custom and tradition had constructed, Mary had been “educated in the lap of indolence, enervated by pernicious indulgence, misled by specious, but false, expectations, softened into imbecility, pampered in luxury, and dazzled by frivolous ambition” (63). In this way, by creating the archetypal woman of sensibility, in whom docility and submissiveness were considered most valuable, society had created the contemptibly “unchaste” woman, invariably considered by that same society as a threat to the established domestic order. Persecution of such a woman was commonplace, since the only precondition of public virtue was sexual purity, or, increasingly, “the reputation for chastity” (Hays, Victim 1; emphasis original). Mr. Raymond, as philosopher-hero, is himself not exempt from reductivist conceptions of virtue, as “he can conceive of his former lover only in terms of the angel or the whore” (Ty, “Imprisoned” 139). Yet the emphasis here is not only on the conflicted lover and father-figure, as to make it so would be to risk subordinating the causes of the fallen woman’s condition to its consequences.

Consequently, the elder Mary is resolved that the sins of the mother will not be visited on the daughter, and while lamenting the divestment of the “sensibility of youth,” she entreats the philosopher-hero to “cultivate (Mary’s) reason” and “strengthen her faculties” (69). Such a directive reinforcing the intersection of sensibility and reason is strikingly similar to Burke’s
own distinction between illusory adherence to reason and as-
sent to an instinctive rightness. The letter from the elder Mary
can thus be read as both a validation of the rhetorical value of
that intersection and a repudiation of its practical misuse. As
Burke asserts in *Reflections*, “the true lawgiver ought to have a
heart full of sensibility. It may be allowed to his temperament
to catch his ultimate object with an intuitive glance; but his
movements towards it ought to be deliberate” (143). While
arguably ignoring this policy’s effect on “female” sensibility,
Burke nonetheless values that sensibility identified by some as
a “moral faculty,” unique only to Burke’s Enlightenment nem-
eses and rationalized as a pretense to revolution (White 61-62).
Yet Hays applies more liberally the concept of an “intuitive,”
though “deliberate,” public disposition and actually posits the
perversion of sensibility—and by association the threat of con-
vulsive revolution—as a direct consequence of those policies
thought to preclude it.

Thus the results of Raymond’s undertaking to instill in the
younger Mary these rather Burkean rational, humanitarian quali-
ties are perhaps seen most clearly when Mary, once again with
William, is touched by the sight of a rabbit wounded in a hunt
led by Sir Peter. It is important that Mary’s somewhat mawkish
exclamation depicting a heart “melt[ing] with compassion” and
her anthropomorphic rendering of “the panting victim” (21)
are placed subsequent to a recounting of her intellectual devel-
opment, fortified by a typically male education. In this context,
Mary’s sensibility is measured, and her response illustrates more
than isolated sympathy for an incapacitated hare, becoming
rather directed indignation at the source of the injury. This
rational, focused anger at a clear injustice is validated when Sir
Peter, aiming his whip at William for intruding on his sport,
finds Mary to have taken William’s place, boldly absorbing the
blow for her friend. Readers are provided with what will become
a recurring theme throughout the novel, that of intransigent
faithfulness to principles of right and immediate sacrifice for
an ultimately greater good. As Mary recalls, “indignation inspired me with a sullen fortitude; while, in the smart of blows acquired in the cause of humanity and friendship, I found only a source of triumph” (22). This theme of self-sacrifice, then, presents somewhat of a triumphalist rendition of the defeated heroine that is employed throughout the novel. Mary’s distress is redeemable by time, and as such denotes a progressive resignation in which the seeds of change are allowed to germinate and reveal themselves by degrees.

It is to her detriment, then, that Mary fails to heed Mr. Raymond’s admonition that “philosophers are not yet the legislators of mankind” (32), despite her somewhat dispirited acknowledgement that “while the practice of the world opposes the principles of the sage, education is a fallacious effort, morals an empty theory, and sentiment a delusive dream” (33). Practical reformers like Raymond understood that those who would advocate the absolute authority of constitutional liberties must concede their betrayal by custom and tradition, even if rejecting the more universalized “Rights of Man.” By critiquing the empirical value of this revolutionary philosophy, Hays is not merely lamenting its perhaps unjust dismissal, but more likely acceding to the growing urgency for a careful reconsideration of the general efficacy of radicalism, in Britain or anywhere else. The word “yet” as a qualifier in the above passage reaffirms the gradualist approach to reform and bestows authority on those who would reject false manifestations of “right” as antagonistic to national stability and strength.

Yet hardly representative of a compensatory or compliant program of reform, this episode is consistent with Hays’s causal approach to radicalism and revolution. It is important that Mary, and not her male companion, is the sole target of Sir Peter’s retributive actions, as it elucidates both her vulnerability to tyranny and her venerable spirit of resistance. After having related Sir Peter’s resolution that she “shall pay the full forfeit of all [her] trespasses,” Mary describes the resultant actions of her persecu-
tor: “Saying which, he seized me, and, clasping me in his arms, kissed me with an odious violence. I shrieked, struggled, and fought, with all my strength” (22). Greg Kucich’s exploration of various depictions of physical pain in female historiography during the eighteenth century can be applied here, as they serve “to mobilize ‘sympathizing tenderness’ for the historical plight of women in such a way as to critique sex/gender systems past and present” (4). As such, the violence exhibited by Sir Peter toward Mary signals a sustained reproach of the customs that sanctioned primogeniture and supplanted merit. At their core, these customs militated against notions of individual liberty and the constitutional rights of citizens, both of which undergirded the counterrevolutionary program.

Similarly, much as customarily feminized notions of sensibility unintentionally threatened order, establishment conceptions of virtue, also gendered, are presented as having corrupted well-reasoned principle and the purity of mind, body, and spirit. True to her purpose, Hays reinforces these qualities as vital to the strength of the nation, imperiled not by dissidents, but by the establishment itself. Custom, as it were, had “by a legal process, assum[ed] the arm of omnipotence, annihilat[ing] the being whom its negligence left destitute, and its institutions compelled to offend” (Victim 68-69). As such, Hays’s characters, resorting to expedients to navigate a deeply entrenched cultural stasis, represent a realism that transcends political boundaries and expresses the implications for rigidly—and unconstitutionally—imposed class and gender restrictions.

Once Mary’s subversive intellect becomes a threat to the existing order, the heroine is forced to embark on a series of solitary journeys in which she is subjected to various conditions of servitude, sexual degradation, and a constant state of dependence incommensurate with her talents. Her seamy origins and modest station will serve as leverage for both Mr. Pelham, concerned by his son William’s unbecoming fondness for a
woman beneath him, and Sir Peter, interested in Mary as a commodity to be consumed, unprotected as she is by considerations of class or family connections. Sir Peter and William’s father have ensured that her reputation will precede Mary wherever she goes, and it is clear through these trials that the author is seeking to recover an authentic virtue from the hypocritical politics of politeness, expediently termed “chivalry.”6

The results of this humanistic realism are made clear upon Mary’s arrival in London, as Sir Peter has contrived to have Mary taken to a house in the disreputable St. James Street in which she is led to believe her new employers reside. Instead, she is accosted there by Sir Peter, and Mary is reminded of the irremediable dependence with which the misfortunes of birth and circumstances have burdened her. Recognizing her immediate danger, Mary forcefully reminds Sir Peter that “you have no authority to constrain me” (113), but readers and Sir Peter are privy to knowledge that the situation is indeed otherwise. Mary’s mere presence in the house of someone like Sir Peter is enough to ruin her in the eyes of polite society, and her powerlessness over her own destiny becomes the vehicle for Sir Peter’s criminality. She is reminded of this when Sir Peter asks, “whither would you go? Recollect the time of night, your ignorance of the town. In avoiding fancied evils, the fiction of a romantic imagination, would you rush on certain destruction?” (113). In order for public virtue to triumph, Mary would have to consent to marriage as a financial expedient, since “I dare encounter indigence; but I dare not prostitute my sincerity and my faith” (99). And while she had been able to preserve a certain virtuous integrity by rebuffing Sir Peter’s avowedly “honourable views” (96) and declining a sincere offer from a neighboring farmer, she is nevertheless now left vulnerable to repeated and officious advances on her person.

6For more on this concept, see Jenny Davidson’s Hypocrisy and the Politics of Politeness: Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).
Sir Peter is the first to self-assuredly remind her of new obligations and the consequences of refusing an indecent proposal for continued financial security. His own account of his imperious nature and subsequent rationalization of Mary’s kidnapping exemplifies Hays’s critique of a corrupt system that naturally breeds avarice and authoritarianism. Sir Peter admits to as much by reminding Mary of the obligations she is under that so many of her counterparts had fulfilled: “When, with lavish fondness, I would have elevated you to a station by which the vanity and ambition of half your sex would have been dazzled, you repaid my liberality with coldness and disdain, and retorted the bitter complaints of disappointed passion with haughty defiance” (113). Sir Peter can only conceive of Mary’s actions as “defiance” rather than female virtue, believing his extortion of sexual favors for money to be evidence of his “liberality.”

Hays’s account of Mary’s principled resistance to Sir Peter is shortly followed by his “brutal violation” (117) of her, an act that here underscores a system of laws and customs gone awry. Like other contemporaries, Hays rewrites the *Clarissa* plot to demonstrate the very real consequences of a woman left without recourse to the laws and protections of her social superiors. It is significant that the rape occurs in London, here a symbol of centralized and embedded power structures. That city’s juxtaposition with the “wild and licentious pleasures of Paris” (98), where we are told William has become a “man of the world” (99), serves to both indicate and condemn the radicalization and unintended consequences of customary policy as well as the ill-conceived sources of social order.

Depictions of the two city-centers, even if referential, further complicate the dichotomy constructed by critics who use such depictions as an imputation of anti-Jacobin sentiment. Nancy Johnson writes that “the formidable menace of social upheaval is embodied in Anti-Jacobin novels in the figure of a rogue who is either French or has traveled to the Continent and there been initiated by French principles” (187). A fair
enough observation, though made somewhat precarious by a subsequent assertion that could arguably apply to this novel written by Hays, whom Johnson unqualifiedly refers to elsewhere as a Jacobin writer. Johnson writes, “the cunning rake functions as both a metaphorical image for the insidious danger and beguiling power of the ‘new philosophy’ and as a literal enemy to domestic order and economy” (187). Yet the rake who enacts this function in *The Victim of Prejudice* is the only one of three principal male characters whom readers are not told has traveled to the nerve center of the continental Enlightenment. Even the venerable Raymond admits having engaged in a “series of dissipation” (59) on the continent, thereby necessitating his redemption upon “return to my native land” (59) as enlightened tutor to the young Mary. William also, while vindicated by his author, embodies the cosmopolitan vision, characterized not by a highbrow “‘Eurocentrism’ in a xenophobic Britain” (Craciun 6), but rather by base indiscretion and prodigality (Hays, *Victim* 125-26). In this way, non-English cultural centers signify perhaps the Janus-faced revolution, and the author may be distancing herself from such disagreeable manifestations. Even so, while England serves for Raymond and William as a sanctuary from the destabilizing forces of the European social and political landscape, its capital, the seat of aristocratic power, is integral to the violation of domestic virtue personified by the heroine.

Mary Raymond, whose experience to this point has suggested the futility of the principles promulgated by her father-figure, becomes the voice of radical disillusionment. Indeed, Raymond’s axiomatic and sober words of caution issued upon Mary’s forced separation from William are given greater weight in proportion to their implied causes. Eager to enact those principals with which her mind had been endued, Mary recalls Raymond’s admonition that “[society’s] mandates, often irrational, are, nevertheless, always despotic: contemn them,—the hazard is certain, and the penalty may be tremendous” (31). Yet Raymond
is then reduced to invoking an historical authority, instructing Mary that “human life has not unaptly been compared to a warfare: whether rendered so by nature or by civil institution, it is for future experiments to determine” (37). This realist interpretation of Mary’s principles does not accord with their foundations of “reason,” but customs, while potentially unjust, are decrees nonetheless. Raymond, in recognizing the necessary confluence of reason and material consequence, reflects Hays’s own progression away from the strictly philosophical underpinnings of Rational Dissent and towards reconciliation between reason and her material experience.

Following Mary’s rape, Hays uses her narrative authority to offer a fatal blow to the doctrine of customary right and its abrogation of constitutional recourse to injustice. Realizing fully the implications of Sir Peter’s violation, Mary exhibits a naïve confidence in the traditions and laws enacted to prevent tyranny, exclaiming that “No one has a right to control me” (117). The people had a right to correct abuses, but while the French Revolution mimicked much of what it sought to correct⁷—something on which Hays and Burke could agree—many of the same abuses that facilitated that event had been enmeshed within British constitutional law. As Sandra Sherman rightly notes, “the patriarchal concomitants of a loss of caste—exposure to sexual predation, a drift into prostitution, loss of ‘character’ and employment—were rendered as private experience, distinct from social phenomena mediated by the law” (132). While Mary had been warned that indeed, “Law completes the triumph of injustice” (68), her education rendered her unwilling to accept the class and gender considerations that had made her, like Raymond, “responsible to another tribunal than that of reason

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and my own heart" (31). And while laws concerning rape had
the effect of implicitly invalidating a victim’s testimony (Clark
47), Mary’s claim to her country’s tribunal cannot be reduced
to a singular condemnation of one’s inability to successfully
prosecute sexual assault.

Instead, Mary’s guilt, compounded by Sir Peter’s immu-
nity, confirms that the natural, Providential law revered by
the counterrevolution had not been reserved for her. Readers
are forced to acknowledge as much upon her obviously futile
pronouncement to Sir Peter that “I will appeal to the tribunal
of my country; I will boldly claim the protection of its laws, to
which thou art already amenable” (117). The specificity with
which Mary exhorts protection is significant in that it utilizes
and clearly reaffirms what Seamus Deane calls the “well-known
English virtues,” such as “reverence for religion, respect for
tradition, affection for one’s locality, and sexual fidelity” (12).
As Mary’s situation makes clear, these traditional virtues had
become a mere pretense for the maintenance of arbitrary power
structures. Nevertheless, while custom had indeed corrupted
foundational principles of liberty, it became increasingly clear
to radicals that a symbiosis of historical rights and constitutional
norms was a precondition for the reform sought by the more
detached and abstract epistemology favored by the Revolution.
For Hays, Providence—the source of natural law philosophy—
did not sanction the oppression exerted on her heroine, and
she uses her account to highlight the inconsistencies fostered
by its misappropriation. By calling on the protection of her
own country’s laws, Mary is at once distancing herself from
the French-inspired cosmopolitan vision and proclaiming the
principled yet still embryonic form of natural right embodied
by that British constitution.

To perhaps validate her modification of the Providentialist
tradition and assuage skepticism of her perceived radicalism,
Mary Raymond articulates the unnatural and inherently dissats-
ingifying mandates of rigidly rational thought. Upon contemplat-
ing the impossible dichotomy between reason and emotion, Mary asks, “What tyranny is this? When reason, virtue, nature, sanctify its emotions, why should the heart be controlled? who will dare to control it?” (35). Mary Raymond, much like her author, acknowledges that reason and emotion work in concert and that mitigated sensibility must be recognized to maintain social equilibrium and the potential for honest political debate. Such an approach seemingly echoes Burke’s critique of the philosopher’s “metaphysic revisionary” (Letter 284) as essentially dehumanizing and in violation of immutable laws. Indeed, abstract reason could be as destructive as uncontrolled passions. Accordingly, Hays approaches her subject as a first-hand authority on the ultimate failure of reason as prime mover, yet she relies on her unique experience to reconstruct her radicalism. For unlike Burke, Mary Raymond is beholden to knowledge she does not immediately understand and compelled to defer to an experience not wholly her own.

Hence the trope of the fallen woman is deployed and rich with irony, as Mary’s pursuit of an independent living is both caused and precluded by a socially induced sexual impurity. Since the lessons Mary has received have paradoxically led to her ruin, she is now a woman endowed with almost none of the “virtues” expected of and fostered in women of the eighteenth century. Yet she is ultimately empowered by her determination to repel those who would lead her to willingly compromise her honor, even if such action would deliver her from indigence. In other words, maintenance of that honor, though virtually ignored by those around her, is for the time being sufficient recompense for her subjection to social codes of injustice. After enduring the insults of a woman to whom she has gone for employment, Mary recalls, “an indignant flush of a moment crossed my cheek; but I remembered, that to conform ourselves to our situation, when inevitable, is true wisdom, and the emotion was transient” (134). The particular scene subsequently concludes with an even more explicit avowal of unconventional
yet true virtue, one that also confirms the entrenchment of the author’s deliberate program of progressive resignation. Mary “became familiarized to suffering: I submitted to undeserved injury with sullen resignation, while my spirit, conscious of its purity, rose with dignity superior to its woes” (137). Such a declaration denotes more than trivial consolation or puerile acceptance of things as they are, thereby symbolizing custom’s fraught intersection with law, both moral and natural. Mary, had she conformed to those expectations placed on her, would be upholding a certain social structure but compromising her self-determined agency and independence.

The cycle of victimization is intensified by what her antagonists see as abject desperation, citing Mary’s protestations of subjectivity as “theatrical coyness” (140), the result of her having “willingly” offered herself to both Sir Peter and the married William. The abuse Mary suffers following her entrance into the world is made all the more iniquitous since she has repudiated all the characteristics purportedly endemic to her sex but used as a pretext for her subjugation. Mary finds she is exempt even from a society that rewards industry and innovation, discovering in the process that merit is secondary to class and gender pretensions. Consequently, she is reduced to a common harlot, subject to “the ribaldry and cruel comments of the young men [. . .] I was compelled to pass” (140). Her true innocence in this case again emphasizes the absurdity of a public, single-minded “virtue” and extracts the underlying assertion that as a woman of impeccable virtue and formidable intellect, “surely, I had a right to exist!” (141). Yet she does not, at least not according to her own terms. After being denied employment for her unsavory past and despite her intellectual credentials, Mary is left to confront her marginalization and await her fate “with the calm resignation of despair” (146). Such language as it is employed here would have resonated with readers for its Providentialist shades, since it reflects a
fundamentally Christian philosophy whose adherents struggled to reconcile free will and fate.

The “calm resignation” expressed by Mary in fact echoes the Christian model formulated by a number of Bluestocking women, who made great gains in advancing the legitimacy of female intellectuals in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Elizabeth Carter’s description of Catharine Talbot’s admirable coping method ably demonstrates the presence at this time amongst reformers of what can only be called a “righteous” resignation: “With the weakest health and the quickest sensibility of her loss, she discovers the noblest fortitude and the most unrepining resignation, of which gives the best and the most difficult proof, by constantly endeavouring to set every remaining blessing in the most comfortable and cheerful point of view” (qtd. in Staves 90). Mary Raymond’s condition late in the novel echoes Talbot’s, as she quickly finds herself in debtor’s prison, taking care to remark to her jailor that “I resign myself to my destiny” (147). While a statement such as this or a description of irremediable loss as seen in the Carter excerpt could be interpreted as a regression to pre-Enlightenment ideas of divinely preordained fate, Hays again instead seeks a middle ground between hitherto irreconcilable polarities. Moreover, the deferral to a Christian ethics is illustrative of the dissonance between modern scholarship and the idea that many progressive movements were not always instigated by anti-establishment forces, but rather by erstwhile social conservatives. Hays ingenuously draws on the prevalence of both ideological elements, thereby denying a too-easy classification that is at times liable to be more self-referential than accurate.

Mary’s journey over the course of the novel represents an assertion of autonomy amidst social forces that would dictate

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8This idea is promulgated by Hudson within the context of the abolition movement. It is instructive for its interrogation of critical paradigms emanating from the study of a time when political affiliation was not as rigidly defined as it is today (559).
the movement of those not born to privilege. If there was indeed a divine order, its earthly manifestation had been usurped and misappropriated in England. Thus, for reform to again take root, Mary’s status as heroine is vital to the reformation movement. Her actions and Hays’s tactful relation of them successfully challenge the counterrevolution to recognize in their own society the seeds of rebellion in an unnatural devolution from principles they espoused. The unjustly persecuted—and prosecuted—would rebel, and, as seen in France, such resistance to absolutism had led only to greater and more absolute tyranny. Mary’s resignation, hardly a concession of defeat, again carries Burkean undertones as he too recognized that “a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation” (*Reflections* 19). Given perhaps both the difficulty and inevitability of social change, Mary’s “implicit resignation,” we are told, is not “exact[ed] [. . .] without important reasons” (37), and hence signals for Britain the change that had failed to materialize in France.

It is appropriate, then, that *The Victim of Prejudice* is written in 1799, as it ushers in a new era of social reform skeptical of the promises made by what was now pre-Napoleonic France. Hays’s fictionalized approach to this modified worldview is explained by Gina Walker thus: “In the end, her fate suggests that Mary Raymond has finally learned what Hays was then acknowledging: that the distance between the idea of self-determination and its fulfillment was still too great for any woman to travel with safety or success” (194). The destination was certainly not lost, and just as Mary had taken lessons in epistolary form from her mother, her letters also would serve subsequent generations who would possibly realize the fulfillment she would not experience in her own lifetime.

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*This point echoes Mansfield, who contends that, because *Ancien Régime* absolutism had not been eradicated, “Napoleon can be seen as the logical culmination of the French Revolution, not its traducer” (38).*
Her health failing, Mary is finally rescued by James, the loyal servant of her former guardian, whose presence allows Mary one final declaration of the virtue that had significantly been sustained throughout her travails. Upon her reunion with James, she assures him, “you indeed see me wretched, but not guilty; my innocence and my integrity still remain to me” (154). The separation between vitiated custom and the virtue to which it simply cannot align is for the final time made clear. Mary’s steady rejection of vice and illicit proposals that would have provided escape from destitution are here more worthy of the term “virtue” than the facile, delimiting equation of virtue with sexual purity animating British society at this time.

After James passes away and Sir Peter yet again appears to shatter the quiet living Mary and James had established, Sir Peter offers Mary the legitimacy of marriage, which she appropriately refuses. Whereas the antagonist’s somewhat Manichean version of a world divided sharply along lines of gender would justify power structures as “merited” by mandates of sex, Mary’s discerning mind and fair pursuit of autonomy prove otherwise. Reminding Sir Peter that her honor can never be restored to her by such a match, she relates to her persecutor what readers had been made aware of much earlier, that “wearied with calamity, my strength spent in fruitless struggles, I yield to my destiny” (165). Yet this “personal destiny” is meant to ensure the progress of civil society, the sacrifice to virtue and natural right being made for the good of those who would someday realize fulfillment of its promise.

Furthermore, this declaration exhibits nothing if not constancy and repeats Mary’s rationalizations for rejecting William’s proposition to support her as a mistress: “abandoned to infamy and covered with shame, virtue still maintains her empire in my bosom; it is virtue only that I love better than William Pelham” (127). Given the opportunity to be absolved in the eyes of a world that had unduly condemned her, or at least made comfortable by the sacrifice of principle, Mary knowingly chooses hardship.
incommensurate with her proven charitable mind and steadfast adherence to original virtue. Furthermore, Mary evinces a newly invigorated conception of self-making, defiantly adding that “disgrace, indigence, contempt, while unmerited, I dare encounter, but not the censure of my own heart. Dishonour, death itself, is a calamity less insupportable than self-reproach” (128-29). The heroine here exhibits reverence for principles antithetical to the comforts afforded by custom but salvific in and of themselves.

Mary’s experience, while certainly detached from the sanguine principles of the Enlightenment, also demonstrates that the power exercised by Sir Peter is a mere perversion of his authority. Therein, the regression from natural hierarchy to abuse of its privileges is made clear. And while Burke’s empiricist vision of the natural social order insists on the evolution of rights through “customary obligation, traditional morality, and established institutions” (O’Gorman 116), Hays makes clear that a woman’s experience belies this specious notion of human progress. Yet Hays and Burke might not be as far apart ideologically as it would seem, as both came to understand the unintended consequences of the French Revolution and sought to avoid a similar occurrence in Britain. However, whereas Burke adopted a method of status quo preservation to stave off the pervasive threat of revolution, Hays perhaps more acutely sensed that it was exactly this program of conservation that would incite a similar response. As much is suggested by the language used in the novel’s advertisement to the reader, which outwardly serves as a riposte to criticism of her earlier novel *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. She remarks, “Man has hitherto been solicitous at once to indulge his own voluptuousness and to counteract its baneful consequences! Let man revert to the source of these evils; let him be chaste himself, nor seek to reconcile contradictions” (1-2). Hays’s experience as both a woman and a radical had compelled her to assert that merely suppressing the consequences of self-created policies
and arbitrary infringements of constitutional authority would no longer be sufficient to preserve order.

For Burke, natural right for Britons had been enshrined in the Glorious Revolution, for many conservatives a model antithetical to the very unnatural French Revolution. Yet as Michael Freeman makes clear, “although [Burke] did recognize the defects in the old regime, he underestimated the pressures for social and political change” (216). Hays was perhaps acutely aware of this crucial misstep and makes clear that revolution was an option she neither wished for nor advocated. If Burke was going to insist that natural law was solidified by the just revolution of 1688—a revolution he felt to be the last resort for the recovery of Britain’s ancient constitution—then Hays was going to ensure those highly valued constitutional rights would be upheld over one hundred years later. After all, readers would have been familiar with, even if only in name, the coupling of a hero and heroine named, respectively, William and Mary.

Indeed, for Hays, Britain by 1799 had retreated to a state of affairs mimicking the constitutional breach Edmund Burke felt had actuated the Glorious Revolution of 1688. However nebulous this constitution’s origins and indistinct its applications, for many Britons it guaranteed the natural rights of citizens and the sundry liberties they entailed. The definitions of those rights and how far they could be extended obviously varied greatly amongst political factions, but that point is immaterial here. What remains important is that Hays entertains notions of natural law and an “original contract” by adopting the language of the conservatives and employing it for those purposes of reform badly damaged by the French Revolution. Custom had obscured right, and reform, for Burke himself, was “justified as the only means left for the recovery of that ancient constitution, formed by the original contract of the British state” (Weston 223-24). If indeed 1688 was justified, and the power of natural law asserted, such must have been the case over one hundred years later. And Hays takes care to assure critics that
a French-style revolution was not only impracticable in Britain, but undesired by dissenters like herself.

Through the end, Mary Raymond is “intrepid in innocence” (158), able to maintain her true sense of virtue and rightness, despite now having to endure debtor’s prison and the unending assaults from Sir Peter. By the end of the novel, Mary is able to rely on what she feels to be the true Providentialist vision, sacrificing her own time on earth to ensure as a legacy those historical liberties that had with time been diluted or withdrawn. Finally reconciled to her fate, Mary writes, “I have still the consolation of remembering that I suffered not despair to plunge my soul in crime, that I braved the shocks of fortune, eluded the snares of vice, and struggled in the trammels of prejudice with dauntless intrepidity” (168). For Hays, it is experience that will vindicate the oppressed, and Mary’s narrative comes to epitomize the injustice that had gradually been allowed to masquerade as social order. If indeed this ancient constitution was to be relied upon for the realization of a justly ordered society, then its protections needed to be accorded equally. Even if the presence of a natural hierarchy is conceded, its current form was profaned and corrupted, and within it were embedded the seeds of its own demise. There is some irony in the fact that the social order that allows Peter Osborne to prosper has lead him to commit the brutal violation of that other entity seen as necessary for the maintenance of the social and familial hierarchy—female chastity.

Radical for its depiction of an intractable and corrupt class hierarchy, the innate imbalance of hereditary right and property ownership, and the socially sanctioned degradation of women, The Victim of Prejudice addresses many of the injustices that prompted the French Revolution. Yet it approaches them in a very distinctly English way, underscoring the preeminence of the counterrevolution and introducing the concept of righteous resignation with which radicals had been forced to content
themselves. Mary’s liberally equal education and subsequent intellectual triumph over her male peers signify the fundamental injustice of her dependent status and proclaim the inherent dissonance between the presumably predestined manifestation of natural right and its conspicuous absence in reality.

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