

“O WRETCHED AND ILL-FATED MOTHER!”: MOTHERHOOD IN MARY HAYS’S *THE VICTIM OF PREJUDICE*

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By the end of the eighteenth century, motherhood had come to be seen as the ultimate source of female identity. The maternal body was invested with different meanings; it was simultaneously glorified and demonised, depending on whether it was submitted to patriarchal control or not. The cult of motherhood constructed women as naturally submissive and nurturing; any unconventional expressions of maternity were branded as monstrous. The re-assessment of the sanctity of motherhood is one of the key features of Mary Hays’s *The Victim of Prejudice*. The novel challenges prevailing ideas of domesticity as represented in the idealised mother figure. The lack of the cult(ivation) of motherhood, the re-assessment of the trope of the monstrous mother, and the creation of a heroine who defiantly refuses to become a wife and ends up mothering a disruptive text, make Hays one of the formidable rebellious Marys.

Keywords: maternity, cult of motherhood, daughters, social criticism, domesticity.

1 Introduction

Soon after the publication of Mary Hays’s novel, *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), the conservative *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* launched a vitriolic attack on the author. The novel was called filthy and disgusting; “a dagger [...] [in] the hand of an assassin” (“*The Victim*” 1799, 58). It features three rebellious Marys: besides the author of the novel Mary Hays, the heroine and her mother are also called Mary. No wonder the critic viciously exclaims, “we are sick of Mary” (“*The Victim*” 1799, 57). Through its three female figures, the novel contests a number of debilitating prejudices and ideological constructs, of which the scope of this paper will only tackle one: motherhood.

The re-assessment of the sanctity of motherhood is one of the key features of the novel. *The Victim of Prejudice* disrupted prevailing ideas of domesticity as represented in the idealised mother figure. Throughout the book, “mother” is modified with an epithet: “wretched” (seven times out of the fifteen appearances of the word “mother:” Hays [1799] 1998, 69, 72, 123, 128, 136, 168, 174), “unfortunate” (three times: Hays [1799] 1998, 96, 102, 140) or “ill-fated” (twice: Hays [1799] 1998, 69, 136).

The lack of the cult(ivation) of motherhood evidently provoked some early reviewers of the novel, whose criticism was levelled as much at the author as the novel itself. Mary Hays, unlike the other rebellious Marys, such as Mary Wollstonecraft or Mary Robinson, never had a child, nor did she ever marry. In a highly offensive, gendered language intimating failed motherhood, the reviewer in *The Critical Review, or Annals of Literature* called the novel “the offspring of the novelist’s imagination” and claimed that it appears to be “an abortion of improbabilities issuing from the frigid brain of a paradoxical sophist” (“Miss Hays” 1799, 452, 450, emphases added).¹

Although the reviewer claims that the novel is the offspring of the author’s distorted imagination, in her essay, “On Novel Writing” (published in *The Monthly Magazine*, two years before *The Victim of Prejudice*), Hays explicitly asserted her contention that novels must be rooted in reality and paint life “as it really exists, mingled with imperfection, and discoloured by passion [...] [rather] than in painting chimerical perfection and visionary excellence, which rarely, if ever, existed” (1797, 181). The “improbabilities” that the reviewer finds fault with are the Gothic elements of the novel, but the unreal, Gothic-like quality of *The Victim of Prejudice* is, in fact, a powerful tool Hays deliberately employs. Gothic is a means through which she challenges the ideals promoted by prominent men of letters,² who, in Hays’s mind, deceived readers with “illusive representations of life” and with creating “perfect models of virtues” (1797, 180). *The Victim of Prejudice*, on the other hand, presents complex female characters, whose lived experiences—stifled and circumscribed by social expectations and prejudices—could aptly be exposed through the Gothic.

One of the perplexities of the novel must have resulted from Hays’s radical refusal to reduce her female characters to stereotypes. All three women disrupt the saint-or-sinner / mother-or-whore dichotomy ingrained in the fiction and non-fiction of the late eighteenth century.³ Through Hays’s giving voice to the prostitute as well as the model woman of conduct books, the readers can see how they establish their individual life stories and subvert prevailing paradigms of maternity.⁴

¹ The reviewer may also allude to Wollstonecraft’s Preface to *The Wrongs of Woman* where she identifies the creative process as hard labour and expresses her hope that her efforts will not prove to be “the abortion of a distempered fancy” (Wollstonecraft 1994, 5).

² In her essay on novel writing, Hays particularly refers to Samuel Johnson’s highly influential article in *The Rambler* (31 March 1750), in which he proposes that, in works of fiction, “the best examples only should be exhibited” and the author’s task is to “cull from the mass of mankind, those individuals upon which the attention ought most to be employ’d; as a diamond, though it cannot be made, may be polished by art, and placed in such a situation, as to display that lustre which before was buried among common stones” (1750, 31).

³ Conduct books, moral tracts and pamphlets disseminated this ideology most prominently.

⁴ On the historical controversy surrounding the institution of motherhood, see Vickery 2003, 87–127.

2 Depictions of Motherhood in the Late Eighteenth Century

By the end of the eighteenth century, motherhood had come to be seen as the ultimate source of female identity. The ideological pedestal on which mothers were put surpassed even that allotted to the virtuous wife, and the cult of motherhood constructed women as naturally submissive and nurturing. Maternal duty was an obligation towards the child and the husband, and by extension, it was also considered to be the basis for women's engagement in the moral care of the nation.⁵ In his conduct book, *Strictures on Female Education: Chiefly as It Relates to the Culture of the Heart* (1787) with his rhetorical question, "Why indeed had woman her existence but to dignify and ennoble it by such superior employments?", John Bennett configures motherhood as the sole purpose of a woman's existence (95). In the ensuing bizarre tableau, the mother is lactating and educating simultaneously, and is relegated to the children's rather than the adults' sphere: "When does she appear to so much advantage, as when, surrounded, in her nursery, by a train of prattlers, she is holding forth the moral page for the instruction of one, and pouring out the milk of health to invigorate the frame and constitution of another?" (1787, 95). Tender and nursing, mothers were eulogised as the locus of national identity and health: "*Unimpaired* constitutions would produce a race of hardy and of healthy children, who, in time, might become the defenders of their country, and the pillars of a declining state" (1787, 95, emphasis in the original). What Bennett's metonymical reference to women as "constitutions" implies is corroborated by medical historians: women were increasingly identified with their body, their reproductive, biological function in particular. Londa Schiebinger's compelling analysis of the first drawings of the female skeleton in the eighteenth century demonstrates that representations of the human body at the time were culturally laden. When looking for a "perfect" skeleton to serve as a model, anatomists had distinct biases: "I have always observed that the female body which is the most beautiful and womanly in all its parts, is one in which the pelvis is the largest in relation to the rest of the body" (Wenzel qtd. in Schiebinger 1986, 62). Anatomists were propelled by preconceived ideas of femininity: the emphasis on the large pelvises and the correspondingly wide hips in the drawings reveal that a vital reproductive role was attributed to women.⁶ Besides their aptitude for procreation, in these anatomical illustrations, women's bodies also conformed to certain norms of beauty; namely, "the harmony of her

⁵ See Mellor 2002.

⁶ The unusually small brain cavities, on the other hand, imply that women were supposed to have limited intellectual capacities (Schiebinger 1986, 42–82). See also Schiebinger 1989, and Laqueur 1990.

limbs, beauty, and elegance, of the kind that the ancients used to ascribe to Venus” (Soemmerring qtd. in Schiebinger 1986, 62).⁷ Indeed, anatomists followed the example of painters who “draw a handsome face, and if there happens to be any blemish in it, they mend it in the picture” (Albinus qtd. in Schiebinger 1986, 62). Anatomists of the eighteenth century “mended” nature and idealised the maternal female body to fit emerging ideals of femininity and motherhood.

Unsurprisingly, the aestheticisation of maternity appears in paintings as well. As Kate Retford’s fine study of the art of domestic portraiture has shown, whereas the mother was usually depicted among her siblings in the company of her husband and extended kin in early eighteenth-century portraits, she and her child had come to be isolated from the wider family unit and were placed close to the picture plane by the middle of the century. This enhanced the sense of intimacy and immediacy, and also intimated that the welfare of the children was increasingly seen as the mother’s responsibility.⁸ The rigidity of posture, self-consciousness of pose, and lack of communication that characterised earlier family portraits gave way to intimacy and interaction between mother and child (Retford 2006, 85). Mothers were depicted engrossed in cuddling their children and entirely unaware of the presence of the spectator. The physical and eye contacts, their intertwined forms showed their relationship as deep and instinctual. Most paintings captured the two figures “entirely absorbed in one another, united by a fundamental and natural bond, and seemingly unselfconscious” (Retford 2006, 87).⁹ As Amanda Vickery notes, the notion that maternal instinct is a *natural*, biological state slowly replaced the earlier, biblical rationalisation of maternity, which nonetheless lived on in the pictorial depictions (2003, 93). Portraits of mothers drew on the conventions of devotional pictures of the Madonna and the child, and deliberately imitated the Old Masters, such as Michaelangelo or Raphael. The mother was thus ennobled through a religious frame of reference, and maternal instinct was elevated to a spiritual plane and depicted as timeless (Retford 2006, 92–93).

⁷ The most controversial ones among these models are known as the “anatomical Venuses.” These life-size dissectible wax medical models were produced in Italy at the end of the eighteenth century. The use of wax to imitate the flesh resulted in eerily lifelike figures, many of which reclined on cushions and were adorned with flowing hair and jewellery. Their body was openable and was equipped with removable parts—often a foetus, to indicate their reproductive capacities. Also referred to as “The Dismountable Venus,” “The Slashed Beauty,” and “The Dissected Graces” (Ebenstein 2012, 346), these recumbent wax women were “presented as objects rather than as subjects, as in the throes of experience rather than as active, as both pregnant and erotic” (Jordanova 1989, 55).

⁸ There was, as Ludmilla Jordanova notes, a significant shift “away from associating children ‘naturally’ with their fathers and toward associating them ‘naturally’ with their mothers” (qtd. in Greenfield 1999, 8).

⁹ Desmond Shawe-Taylor suggests that the intertwined form of mother and child resembles Renaissance sculptures of the Holy Family carved from one stone (1990, 192).

The changes that took place in the ideology of motherhood were unequivocally reflected in *The Lady's Magazine*. With a readership of 16,000 at its peak, it was one of the most influential publications in its day and the contributors commented on and evaluated all the changes that occurred at the time, whether about taste or configuration of gender.¹⁰ In the 1770s, when the magazine was launched, there were hardly any stories about mothers; the main focus was on love and marriage, especially on how women could make themselves pleasing to men. By the 1790s, women's roles expanded to include giving birth to and nurturing their own children as well as the families of the less fortunate. All other roles—as wives and women—became peripheral (Fowkes Tobin 1990, 209–13). As the contributors and readers of the *Lady's Magazine* were mostly (though certainly not exclusively) females, the fact that it was instrumental in forging the ideology of tender, nursing and self-sacrificial motherhood made Beth Fowkes Tobin conclude that it “provided women with a sense of self-worth and the confidence to value themselves and their ‘feminine’ traits of tenderness, sensitivity, and compassion,” and gave them “the opportunity to perform a task that was of equal or greater value than their husband's worldly and compensated work” (1990, 217). While it may have given women a sense of self-worth, the cult of motherhood was particularly restrictive. The new cultural dispensation defined mothers as self-sacrificing, docile, and deprived of control; any departure from this script was deemed heinous. To quote Bennett again, neglecting the maternal duty “is not only an unnatural indecency, but even the highest criminality” (1787, 95). Similarly, in Hugh Downman's immensely popular poem, *Infancy; or, The Management of Children, a Didactic Poem in Six Books*, which came out in at least seven editions between 1774 and 1809, the woman who refuses to comply with her maternal duties is “all deceit”: she is a “fair Barbarian” who has the *form* of a woman but not the *heart* (1774, 1:9, 12). Any unconventional expression of the maternal self, let alone the refusal to become a mother, was branded as monstrous and unnatural: indeed, a threat to the social order.¹¹ As Ruth Perry so aptly notes, “[w]omen had never before been imagined with more personal significance and less social power” (2004, 340). The motherhood that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century was “a colonial form—the domestic, familial counterpart to land enclosure at home and imperialism abroad” (Perry 1991, 206). Unsurprisingly, women writers in the 1790s used maternity as a ground from which they launched an attack on patriarchy and domesticity.

¹⁰ For more on this, see Batchelor and Powell, 2018. See also, in this issue, Álvarez Faedo 2023.

¹¹ For a discussion of monstrous motherhood, see especially Nussbaum 1995, Chapter 5 of Cody 2005, Burke 2007, and Francus 2013.

3 Mary Hays, *The Victim of Prejudice*

The prevalence of miscarriages and (symbolic) infanticides in the novels of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, Mary Hays, and Mary Shelley signals how the rebellious Marys withdrew from, and, thus, rebelled against the domestic economy (Rajan 2002, 212).¹² Mothers are notably absent from the narratives—they are dead, imprisoned, or otherwise missing and marginalised while their stories are mediated through letters, memoirs,¹³ or recollections by other characters. At a time when the ideology of self-sacrificing and nurturing motherhood was becoming a cultural obsession, mothers were mainly present by their absence in fiction.¹⁴ One practical reason why normative mothers are missing from (and in) novels may be that they do not have a narrative potential: self-effacing and pliant, the domestic mother is unable to sustain narrative attention. But more importantly, as Susan C. Greenfield points out, “the novel’s attention to the mother’s absence captures the fallacy of contemporary maternal ideals—that successful motherhood does not exist in women’s novels because it does not exist in real life, and that the authors are self-consciously rejecting the proliferating images that suggest otherwise” (2003, 18).

Hays’s *The Victim of Prejudice* defies “the false and pernicious principles” and “the exaggerated eulogiums of enthusiasts” (Hays 1797, 180) which characterised the newly emerged ideals of maternity. Through the tragic lives of three women, the novel showcases three types of failed motherhood and by presenting three different kinds of trajectories, Hays refused to depict motherhood as a “monolith” (Bowers 1996, 30). To accentuate the non-homogeneity of her mother figures, Hays chose three different modes to relate their stories: the Gothic for the protagonist, Mary; the melodramatic for her mother; and the sentimental for Mary’s maternal friend. These modes overlap at points, just as the lives of the female characters, who—irrespective of whether they are virtuous or fallen—eventually become victims of the same stifling ideology.

The two real mothers’ stories are subsumed in the autobiography of the protagonist, Mary Raymond. Mary, despite having all the qualities of a model mother, remains single and will not have a biological offspring: instead, she mothers a *text* addressed to the future readers. Making Mary the narrator and focal character in the novel shows Hays’s contention that there are alternative modes of reproduction, and

¹² More about this in Péter Ágnes’s recent monograph, *A függetlenség ára* (2022).

¹³ See, for instance, Maria Parrino’s article on Mary Robinson’s *Vancenza* (2023) and Eva Antal’s study of Mary Wollstonecraft’s novels (2023) in this issue.

¹⁴ Scholars who discuss maternal absence in late eighteenth-century novels include Ruth Bienstock Anolik (2003), Ruth Perry (2004), Jane Spencer (2005), Susan Greenfield (2003), Meghan Lorraine Burke (2007), and Marilyn Francus (2013).

mothering a text is just as valuable as birthing a child. This notion is already there in Hays's first novel, *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) and although Emma has a daughter, the plot kills off her child almost unnoticeably, leaving Emma in the liminal position of mother and non-mother. Her memoirs are dedicated to her adopted child, Augustus (the child of a man she was in love with but could not marry). In both novels then, biological reproduction is replaced by an alternative type of maternal transmission: literary and ideological progeny. This is more radical in *The Victim of Prejudice*, where the childless protagonist is entirely taken out of the system of natural reproduction.

Characteristically, the first mention of the word, "mother,"—appearing in the memoirs of Mary's mother—is in the third conditional: "I might have enjoyed the endearing relations, and fulfilled the respectable duties, of mistress, wife, and mother" (Hays [1799] 1998, 63), and one of the major points of the novel is to interrogate the reasons of this third conditional. *The Victim of Prejudice* locates the faultlines of maternal ideology in social prejudice and sexual double standards, and radically refuses to show women dissenting from this ideology as guilty, or those abiding by it as happy. By refusing to essentialise these women to singular roles (Mary's mother is both a mother and a prostitute, and Mary is a nurturing and caring woman, although she is not a mother), Hays provides a more nuanced depiction of female lives than what emerged from conduct books, treatises, and paintings of the age.

4 Mothers (and Daughters) in *The Victim of Prejudice*

Mary's story begins with images of confinement. As we learn from the first sentence, she is writing her autobiography "cut off from human sympathy, immured in the gloomy walls of a prison" ([1799] 1998, 3). Clearly indebted to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman*, Hays's novel too literalises female experience of oppression as imprisonment. But whereas in the former novel, the physical aspects of motherhood are an overarching concern—the maternal body is metonymically represented through images of frustrated breastfeeding, "burning bosom—a bosom bursting with nutriment" (Wollstonecraft, 1994, 7)—, in Hays, the focus shifts from corporeal to political deprivation: "injustice", "despotism" and "oppression" (Hays [1799] 1998, 3). Both authors use the trope of maternity to formulate social and ideological critique, but while in *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* biological maternity is mediated through Maria's memoirs being addressed to her own force-weaned daughter, *The Victim of Prejudice* begins with images of *cultural* (re) production: Mary writes her autobiography to all future readers. By calling them

“successor[s]” ([1799] 1998, 3), Hays clearly establishes the kinship between Mary and the readers. Mary’s (narrative) maternity is textually substantiated and her address to the readers, “thou [...] tenant of a dungeon, and successor to its present devoted inhabitant, should these sheets fall into thy possession” ([1799] 1998, 3) echoes her mother’s letter: “my unfortunate offspring, into whose hands these sheets may hereafter fall” ([1799] 1998, 66).

Letters with advice and guidance from absent mothers to their daughters provide a staple element of conduct literature in the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁵ These texts uniformly advocated chastity, obedience and piety as virtues that would guarantee a daughter’s happiness. A good example of this is Arabella Davies’s *Letters from a Parent to Her Children* from 1788, a sequence of letters—published posthumously—addressed by the mother to her children who are away from home to study or work.

Ever study an obliging behaviour, because it not only makes yourself happy, but compels every body [*sic*] else to love you. [...] Let us not imagine we are born to live the life of butterflies: they may sport and play and die, and no injury done; but we are called to a more important task. [...] Let us survey the character of a holy man,¹⁶ who thus aims to glorify his God: how lovely is his moral character! he sweetly finds religion influential in all his actions, and therefore he is cheerful as well as grave; he is industrious as well as given to prayer: he is frugal that he may be generous to the poor; he not only is happy but endeavours to make every body [*sic*] around him happy. My dear love, while you read and hear of such lovely characters, pray earnestly for the same grace to animate you, and endeavour to imitate them in those attracting virtues, that so much distinguish them. (1788, 16–17; 19–21)

What this and similar maternal legacy narratives postulate is that through proper behaviour, decent education, hard work, charity, and piety, one can be a useful and beloved member of society. By creating a heroine who is a paragon of all these virtues yet ends up raped, ostracised, and incarcerated in debtor’s prison, Hays turns the genre upside down and exposes the fallacies of these narratives. Unlike Arabella Davies, who urges her child to survey and imitate the attractive virtues of a moral character, Mary Raymond’s legacy is to show that conduct-book perfection matters nothing in a society that judges the daughters by their mother’s deed, and which identifies women primarily with their body.

In the novel, references to the body (and bodily appearance) are sparse; the word ‘body’ appears three times, whereas ‘mind’ ninety, and ‘spirit’ forty-five times. Mary

¹⁵ As Jill Campbell notes, the trope of maternal transmission is: “an inheritance of experience from generation to generation, especially from mother to daughter—and especially as transmitted in the form of a text penned by a dead or missing mother—is a powerful and pervasive one in the late eighteenth-century” (2007, 163).

¹⁶ The “holy man” is the example virtuous women need to follow.

describes her own body only at the beginning of her story, and even there, the body is never disconnected from the mind: "Tall, blooming, animated, my features were regular, my complexion a rich glowing brunette, my eyes vivacious and sparkling; dark chestnut hair shaded my face, and floated over my shoulders in luxuriant profusion; my figure was light and airy, my step firm, my aspect intelligent, and my mind inquisitive" ([1799] 1998, 5). With a "robust constitution, a cultivated understanding, and a vigorous intellect" ([1799] 1998, 5), Mary overwrites ideas of gender and places herself beyond the feminine/female body. Significantly, Mary Raymond's figure seems to be modelled on Mary Wollstonecraft. The description of the protagonist of *The Victim of Prejudice* echoes Hays's necrology on Wollstonecraft in terms of the body,¹⁷ but more importantly, in terms of the mind: "More than feminine sensibility and tenderness, united with masculine strength and fortitude, a combination as admirable as rare, were the peculiar characteristics of her mind" (1800, 458). Indeed, Hays's unsigned obituary (published in the *Monthly Magazine* immediately after Wollstonecraft's death) is an early version of the quixotic fight and subsequent fate of Mary Raymond: "victim to the vices and prejudices of mankind, her ardent, ingenuous, unconquerable spirit, resisted their contagion[,] contemned their injustice, rose superior to injury, and rested firmly on its own resources and powers" (1797, 233).¹⁸ Ironically, although unconquerable in their spirits, both the real-life Mary Wollstonecraft and the fictional Mary Raymond eventually fall prey to their bodies. Wollstonecraft's destiny was her *maternal* body, Mary Raymond's is her attractive *feminine body* she inherited from her mother. Hays clearly establishes the link between the fate of the protagonist and her physical body: "the graces, with which nature had so liberally endowed me, proved a material link in the chain of events, that led to the subsequent incidents of my life; a life embittered by unrelenting persecution, and marked by undeserved calamities" ([1799] 1998, 6).

The opening images, which show Mary in prison, are not simply a familiar Gothic plot device. Mary's circumscription is manifold: she is immured *physically* within the literal walls of the debtor's prison, entrapped *biologically* in her once beautiful now violated body, confined *culturally* within debilitating assumptions about fallen femininity, constricted *socially* as an illegitimate daughter of a seduced woman, and also enmeshed *textually* in the narrative. Her story does not unfold linearly but in prolepses and analepses and it is further disrupted by her mother's

¹⁷ "Her person was above the middle height and well-proportioned; her form full; her hair and eyes brown; her features pleasing; her countenance changing and impressive; her voice soft" (Hays 1800, 459).

¹⁸ Some phrases of the obituary are literally repeated in *The Victim of Prejudice*. Mary is not only a victim of prejudice, but also explicitly referred to as "unconquerable spirit" rising "superior to [...] injury" ([1799] 1998, 3, 119).

inset plot. The complicated narrative technique enhances the feeling of being lost and shows how Mary's own narrative is finally subsumed by her mother's. Aptly, the opening images of the dungeon—dark, damp and connected with torpor and inactivity ([1799] 1998, 3, 167–68)—are reminiscent of the womb.¹⁹ As it turns out at a later point in the narrative, it is because of her mother (herself a victim of oppressive cultural scripts) that Mary is incarcerated and is dying, so the difference between womb, cell and tomb is blurred.

What makes the novel particularly chilling is the contrast between the suffocating claustrophobia of the “Introduction” (a short preface preceding Mary's autobiography) and the subsequent account of Mary's childhood. Raised and educated by a benevolent male guardian, Mr Raymond, the orphan Mary grows up unrestrained in a romantic village alongside two aristocratic boys in ignorance of the circumstances of her birth. Hays uses characteristic plot elements of a sentimental novel and, as Perry explains, such late eighteenth-century novels abound in

stories of orphans who turn out to be well-born after all and who, by the end of the novel, are miraculously reunited with their missing mothers, fathers, sisters, or brothers; stories of illegally diverted fortunes set right by indisputable documents long hidden in inherited caskets and then corroborated [...] and most dramatically in tearful tales of daughters long-separated from their fathers but recognized and lovingly claimed in the end. [...] Justice invariably prevails in these fictions, and in the end the outcast daughters inherit what is due them and marry the men they love as fully endowed equals. (2009, 40–41)

Defiantly, Hays inverts the literary formulas of female orphans' anguished quests for their identity and living happily ever after in wealth (re)united with their lost family and with their beloved. What remains of all these in *The Victim of Prejudice* is the displacement of the daughter and a desperate quest, which is ultimately for survival: “surely, *I had the right to exist!*” ([1799] 1998, 50, emphases in the original). It is exactly this right to exist that Hays interrogates in the novel, and like Wollstonecraft before her in *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, she reconsiders prevailing assumptions about fallen women and the mother-daughter relationship.

Although Mary's guardian withholds information about her parents and raises Mary to be impeccably educated and virtuous, when she falls in love with one of the aristocratic boys she is growing up with, Mr Raymond reveals to her the disgraceful circumstances of her birth. Her mother, though born to a middle-class family, succumbed to a seducer who soon abandoned her; pregnant and forlorn, she was

¹⁹ Claire Kahane and Suzan Wolstenholme argue that the dark spaces are emblematic of the maternal body, so the Gothic heroine's striving to escape this space implies her attempt to separate from the mother (qtd.in Anolik 2003, 30). Mary makes no such attempt in *The Victim of Prejudice*.

reduced to fend for herself as a prostitute, and finally ended up as an accomplice in a murder. Because of “barbarous prejudice” (Hays [1799] 1998, 174), Mary is trapped in an inherited social identity which, as Hays’s novel exposes, completely disregards her personal merit. An illegitimate child of a criminal mother, Mary herself is automatically considered blemished. Virtuous and chaste as she is, she cannot marry the man she loves because she would disgrace him and jeopardise the purity of his family. As Lorraine M. Burke explains, “illegitimate children were often treated as inherently tainted beings whose very existence functioned to threaten the proper patrilineal transmission of power, and therefore were made outcasts of social communities before they even had the chance to enter one” (2007, 48–9). Worse still, Mary’s fate is not just socially but also biologically predetermined. Mothers who did not conform to the cultural scripts of idealised maternity were seen to be “channeling potentially subversive maternal energies. [...] [T]heir bodies were represented as potentially pathological, conduits of infectious diseases or unwholesome character traits” (Kipp 2003, 25). Children of fallen women were deemed polluted not only through breastfeeding, but also through their genetic inheritance. The mother’s milk transmitting infectious diseases was a metonymy for the moral blemish and deviant character that the child was supposed to have inevitably contracted in the mother’s womb. Exactly because of this biological determinism, in sentimental novels suspicion of illegitimacy had to be cleared up at the end, “since a lapse in chastity on her mother’s part would, by hereditary influence, have blemished the flawless purity required in the heroine” (Rogers 1977, 67). Hays refuses to depict Mary as flawed, or even her mother as immoral. Mary falls not because of a fatal maternal transmission but because of cultural scripts which construct her and her mother’s fall as inevitable.

Mary learns about her mother’s tragic life from a letter her mother wrote in prison while awaiting her death sentence. Tellingly, her memoirs are framed by the narration of Mr Raymond, to whom the letter was originally addressed. As Burke insightfully notes, “[t]his structure, in which a woman’s defining personal moments are encased in the observations of masculine eyes, is a fitting metaphor for most women’s experiences in eighteenth-century England” (2007, 57). Circumscribed as it is, by allowing the mother to tell her own story, Hays gives voice to subjective female experience. With the first-person narration she reclaims to the mother herself the right to interpret the maternal body and feelings, and hurls back the blame for failed motherhood to society. Seduced and repentant, Mary’s mother would like to return to virtue and is desperately imploring for help but neither the father of her child, nor her own parents listen to her pleas. “[B]randed with infamy, and a wretched outcast from social life” (Hays [1799] 1998, 63), she is completely abandoned. In her most desperate moment, motherhood gives her temporary relief, “I forgot for awhile its barbarous father, the world’s scorn, and my blasted prospects: the sensations of the injured woman, of the

insulted wife, were absorbed for a time in the stronger sympathies of the delighted mother” ([1799] 1998, 65). But as she is unable to find decent work because of her tainted reputation, she is compelled to resort to prostitution and place her infant daughter with a hireling. As “the mother becomes stifled in [her] heart” (Hays [1799] 1998, 66), she grows more and more deprived. Deviating from the ideal of self-sacrificing, nurturing and tender maternity, Mary’s mother is the epitome of what was considered monstrous motherhood. However, Hays makes it very explicit that it is the ruthlessness of society and not her sexual conduct that makes the degradation of Mary’s mother inexorable. Although after giving up on her child she sees herself a “fiend” and a “monster” (Hays [1799] 1998, 66, 67), she eventually realises that she is “the victim of the injustice, of the prejudice, of society, which, by opposing to [her] return to virtue almost insuperable barriers, had plunged [her] into irremediable ruin” ([1799] 1998, 66). Wollstonecraft’s famous maxim, “[i]t is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world!” (1993, 143), is further radicalised by Hays: there is no justice and no charity either. Nobody is helping Mary’s mother in her struggle for survival.

Hays’s criticism is particularly aimed at patriarchy and their cult of maternity. The novel exposes paternal inadequacy; both her child’s and her own father abandon Mary’s mother. The callousness and indifference of the fathers make them complicit in monstrous motherhood. Through the relentless father figures Hays contests two tropes which were widely used in eighteenth-century novels: the all-forgiving father, whose unconditional love saves and redeems his fallen daughter, as in Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) or in Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771); and the trope of the father doting over his breastfeeding spouse. Besides Samuel Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) and Clara Reeves’s *The Two Mentors* (1783), Hugh Downman’s earlier quoted poem, *Infancy* (1774) is a representative example:

To see thee in the loveliest Task employ’d
Of female Duty, where thy Husband hangs
Enamoured o’er thy fostering Breast; the Night
Which gave thee to his Arms, gave not a Joy
To this superior, piercing to the Soul,
Sincere, and home-felt. (1774, 16)

In all these works, the sight of the nursing breast enraptures the husband and deepens his love for the mother. Downman’s poem has an explicitly erotic overtone: the joy felt at the sight of the “fostering *Breast*” is as intense as the joy of the wedding night. Hays exposes these images of domestic bliss as fallacious:

The despotism of man rendered me weak, his vices betrayed me into shame, a barbarous policy stifled returning dignity, prejudice robbed me of the means of independence. [...] A sanguinary

policy precludes reformation, defeating the dear-bought lessons of experience, and, by a legal process, assuming the arm of omnipotence, annihilates the being whom its negligence left destitute[.] ([1799] 1998, 68–69)

Extending her case beyond her own immediate plight, Mary's mother condemns patriarchy and traces her misery back to all men and the hypocritical double standards they had created: rather than being loving and cherishing, they "stifle," "rob," "defeat" and "annihilate" women. The overtly politicised language and the courtroom terminology ("betray," "rob," "reformation," and "legal process") connect the passage to Wollstoncraft's *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman*, since both novels indict patriarchy and find it guilty.

Poignantly, Mary's mother's last thoughts revolve around her daughter. At the end of her memoirs, she asks Mr Raymond to take the infant into his care:

If, amidst the corruption of vaunted civilization, thy heart can yet thro' responsive to the voice of nature, and yield to the claims of humanity [...] shelter her infant purity from contagion, guard her helpless youth from a pitiless world, cultivate her reason, make her feel her nature's worth, strengthen her faculties, inure her to suffer hardship, rouse her to independence, inspire her with fortitude, with energy, with self-respect, and teach her to condemn the tyranny that would impose fetters of sex upon mind. ([1799] 1998, 69)

Her maternal legacy is to liberate her daughter from subordination to men (to reach "independence"), from the body ("fetters of sex"), and to elevate her mind to "feel her nature's worth." What the mother means by the daughter's nature's worth is her individual, moral worth; but as the novel so poignantly shows, Mary's worth is equated with what was seen as her maternal legacy: a social stigma and her assumedly tainted body. Even though after reading the mother's letter, Mary's description of herself shows how she increasingly disembodies and unsexes herself—the descriptions focus on loss and lack (cf. pale, cold, suffocated, unconscious, forlorn, wan and haggard, unsettled and frenzied, torpor, joyless, agony, wasted strength, sapped power)—she is still seen by society as a *body* made for male gratification. Identifying her with her mother's past, Mary is considered free prey for male sexual appetite. She is raped and harassed, and even in the jail she is molested and called "pretty a lass," "pretty maid" and "artful little b---ch" ([1799] 1998, 147, 148). She is simultaneously seen as an attractive sexualised body and as a contagion to be shunned "as one infected by pestilence" ([1799] 1998, 162).

Determined that she is more than just her mother's daughter, Mary refuses to identify herself with her body or her mother's deeds and keeps her faith in her mental integrity. An "unconquerable spirit, bowed but not broken," "[w]ounded, but not despairing," she defiantly claims that "wretched, but not guilty; my innocence and my integrity still remain to me" ([1799] 1998, 3, 138, 154).

What Hays's novel dissects is not only the idea of social and medical determinism according to which the mother's sins will necessarily be revisited on the daughter, but equally radically, the prejudice that the loss of virginity, through seduction or rape, inexorably brings about a moral decline.²⁰ Mary refuses to see herself as fallen:

Reflections on the past are fruitless as painful: let us rather look forward; my mind, unviolated, exults in its purity; my spirit, uncorrupted, experiences, in conscious rectitude, a sweet compensation for its unmerited sufferings. The noble mind, superior to *accident*, is serene amidst the wreck of fortune and of fame. [...] I will not desert myself, though I perish in the toils that entangle my steps! ([1799] 1998, 156, emphasis added)

Rape is conceived of as an accident, temporary and transcendable, and as such, it should not inevitably lead to ruin. The novel challenges conventional identification of chastity with the hymen since though defiled, Mary remains steadfastly virtuous and continues to think of herself as chaste. As Marilyn Brooks compellingly argues, “[by] changing the terms of chastity, Hays transformed it into something which is liberating through its new, self-determined nature. Rather than just a precept or a habit learned, it became a matter of personal choice” (2008, 21).

Mary chooses to remain chaste throughout the novel and she learns from her mother not to submit herself to men: “It is not necessary that I should marry; I can exert my talents *for my support*, or procure a sustenance by the labour of my hands” ([1799] 1998, 99, emphasis added). Mary's sentiment is in conversation with Wollstonecraft's memorable passage in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, where marrying “for a support,” Wollstonecraft claims, is “legal prostitution” (1993, 229). Mary refuses to prostitute herself— “I cannot, I ought not, to bestow on any man a reluctant hand with an alienated heart” ([1799] 1998, 99) —and she is determined to earn her own subsistence. What she needs to learn soon is that reputable employment is not available for women, let alone for women of her reputation.²¹ Yet, even though she is starving and destitute, Mary refuses to get married (she rejects three proposals) or to become a mistress (a role offered by two wealthy men). By making her choose the debtor's prison over patriarchal confinement, Hays's novel rejects the literary and social convention of marriage for a resolution. Mary “withdraws from all forms of paternal economy, all symbolic compromise. Through her chastity, at once a choice and a traumatic protection, she abjects herself from the system of reproduction” (Rajan 2002, 224).

²⁰ On Mary's indebtedness to St. Augustine's interpretation of rape, see Janczer Csikós 2022, 81.

²¹ For a discussion of women looking for employment in fiction, see Gates 2015, Perry 2004, Chapter 1, and Copeland 1995.

As a contrast to Mary and her mother, the novel presents a third female figure, Mrs. Neville, the epitome of the domestic woman. The first glimpse we have of her is quite telling—she is described in the passive voice, deferentially sitting in the shadow:

Mrs. Neville, the *wife* of the curate, *was seated* near a casement, *shaded* [...]. *Two children*, blooming as cherubs, played at her feet. [...] [T]he predominant passion of her soul, testified in every action, every expression, every glance, was, an *enthusiastic love for her husband*, a love at once *ineffably tender, chaste, and dignified*: her children were little less the *objects of her tender solicitude*. ([1799] 1998, 42, 44, emphases added)

Mrs. Neville is like a generalised maternal portrait. A scarcely individuated domestic woman, “a grammar really” (Armstrong 1987, 60), she is hardly any more than the reflection of her husband and children. Unsurprisingly, Mrs. Neville does not have her own narrative; as it was suggested above, normative mothers are unable to keep up narrative tension. Mrs. Neville’s story is embedded in Mary’s, it is just a short interlude to strike a contrast between her blissful domesticity and Mary’s traumatised disinheritedness. Mrs. Neville is a maternal friend on whose bosom Mary can cry when she reads her mother’s memoirs. As Perry, discussing the trope of the missing mother in late eighteenth-century novels has pointed out, “the yearning created by maternal absence in these fictions is sometimes supplied in the text by an older woman who is not the heroine’s mother, but who guides and advises her, and stands in the place of a mother to her.” And she adds, “[t]hese older women—these symbolic ‘aunts’—have no narrative purpose except to give their support and appreciation to the poor, motherless heroine” (2004, 348). While applying the literary convention of symbolic aunts, Hays turns the trope upside down. Whereas fictional aunts are strong, independent and powerful women who shield the motherless heroine from the patriarchal world, Mrs. Neville herself is the ideal created by patriarchy: self-effacing, docile and pliant. In a striking plot twist, however, Mrs. Neville has a revelation. On her deathbed she sums up her painfully empty life: “I had no individual existence; my very being was absorbed in that of my husband. All the worth, all the talent, all the powers of my mind, were the product of my affection. [...] I was the slave, and am at length become the victim, of my tenderness” ([1799] 1998, 173). Mrs. Neville’s character (or rather, the lack thereof) is a powerful reminder that the cult of femininity and maternity is predicated upon self-effacement and the loss of autonomy. Mrs. Neville is “the inverse, indeed the underside, of the masculine” (Irigaray qtd. in Ty 1993, 70). When her husband passes away, she dies within a few days, leaving her small children orphaned.

What connects the three female characters of the novel is that they are all *victims* of proper womanhood: whether going against social and cultural expectations

as Mary and her mother do, or conform to them like Mrs. Neville, they all die in misery. Unlike in the concluding fragment of Wollstonecraft's *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, where motherhood is redemptive and co-maternity replaces the traditional family, in *The Victim of Prejudice* biological motherhood fails; it only leaves orphaned children behind. Hays (perhaps traumatised by Wollstonecraft's untimely and agonising death in childbirth) proposes an alternative regeneration. Mary's final declamation is Hays's own appeal addressed to future generations: "I have lived in vain! unless 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" ([1799] 1998, 174). Hays's radical departure from orthodox domesticity is part of her life-long labour to mother texts on behalf of her "oppressed sex."

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