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Fatal Errors; or Poor Mary-Anne. A Tale of the Last Century

(Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2019)

Edited by Timothy Whelan and Felicity James

THE CHAWTON HOUSE LIBRARY SERIES has been invaluable to scholars of women's fiction from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Timothy Whelan's and Felicity James' new edition of a largely unknown novel, Elizabeth Hays Lanfear's *Fatal Errors; or Poor Mary-Anne. A Tale of the Last Century* (originally published, after a long delay, in 1819), is a fine example of how an edition of even a "lost" novel can illuminate much about the intersecting contexts from which it emerged. While *Fatal Errors* itself appears to have fallen dead from the press, its author actively participated in the Godwin circle, knew most of the major figures of contemporary Rational Dissent, and was connected to some of the leading feminist authors of the period. Even as a marginal player herself, Lanfear illumines the interlocking workings of these environments.

Fatal Errors is extremely short; the reader's attention is primarily caught by the authors' extensive reconstruction of Lanfear's familial, religious, social, and publishing connections. For most readers, Lanfear will be unfamiliar, but the "Hays" provides illumination: she is the sister of Mary Hays, the controversial author of novels such as *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) and *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), as well as the important collective biographies *Female Biography* (1803) and *Memoirs of Queens, Illustrious and Celebrated* (1821). Lanfear herself published only intermittently, including two stories for her sister's *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793) and a later advice book—both reprinted and/or excerpted here, along with excerpts from her correspondence. *Fatal Errors* was written in 1796 and, as the editors show, was received with no great enthusiasm in manuscript by either their mutual friend Mary Wollstonecraft or, later, the novelist Eliza Fenwick (xxix). It is not clear (aside from likely financial considerations some years after her husband Ambrose's suicide) why she eventually decided to publish it, although, as the editors point out, internal evidence suggests that she was tinkering with it off and on over the intervening decades; the correspondence of one of her friends, George Dyer, indicates that she was already thinking about "supplementing her family income through writing" by 1806 (xxii).

The very circulation of the manuscript is key to the real interest of the edition, which lies in the extensive notes reconstructing Lanfear's milieu. She and her sister converted from the Baptists to Unitarianism, and their intellectual and religious circle included some of Rational Dissent's most

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interesting figures, including Joseph Priestly, Henry Crabb Robinson (who appears to have regarded Lanfear with some ambivalence), William Godwin, Joseph Johnson, and Wollstonecraft. Lanfear herself does not appear to have counted S. T. Coleridge among her acquaintances, although the editors note that Coleridge was a friend-of-a-friend of such figures as Stephen Weaver Browne and Mary Hays' eventual nemesis, Charles Lloyd (xvi). The editors' introduction and footnotes offer biographical sketches of Lanfear's acquaintances, famous and otherwise; show how subscription lists reveal the range of Lanfear's milieu (as well as of some of her contemporaries, like her friend the poet Ann Batten Christall); and, in general, demonstrate the political energy of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Rational Dissent. Moreover, the novel's range of literary references indicates that Lanfear kept well abreast of contemporary fiction, drama, poetry, and aesthetic theory, ranging from Mary Robinson to William Wordsworth. Whelan's and James' approach thus invites readers to tie their work to recent scholarship on Romantic-era sociability, such as that by Jon Mee and Gillian Russell. At the same time, the self-conscious belatedness of Lanfear's novel—and its quick disappearance from the market—suggests the limits to how useful such networks could be when it came to securing purchase in the increasingly-profitable market for religious fiction and moral tales. Lanfear was hardly alone in turning to writing as one of the few acceptable options for women (she also spent some time as a teacher), but unlike similarly-motivated contemporaries such as Felicia Hemans or Charlotte Smith, she did not pursue it consistently as a career; in her case, both contacts and the subscription system could only do so much, especially for a novel whose contents and, indeed, form were going out of literary fashion.

That brings us to *Fatal Errors* (spoilers ahead!). *Fatal Errors* does not make striking use of its epistolary form, as Whelan and James have to concede (xxxiv), and the clumsy plotting makes it difficult for the critic to justify some of Lanfear's more puzzling decisions (like putting her description of the protagonist's appearance at the very end) by reference to politics. Because the original manuscript as viewed by Wollstonecraft and Fenwick does not survive, it is hard to locate it precisely in either its 1790s context, when it would have been identifiable as a "Jacobin novel," or in its 1819 context, when it actually resembles some of the more skeptical responses to Hannah More's hit *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1809). For Whelan and James, this vacillation manifests within the novel itself, as it veers between an "echo of the politicized Jacobin voice" and something more "regretful" in tone (xxxv). Lanfear herself warns readers not to expect a "didactic and admonitory" text (3), and the most striking thing about the novel is how it represents female erotic desire overthrowing the use-value of moral maxims. "I suffer my imagination to lead me astray," Mary-Anne admits, "while the dim lamp of reason glimmers but to show me that I am wandering in devious ways, without affording sufficient light to guide me on the road which I almost fear to tread" (24). Although Mary-Anne is quite capable of uttering opinions identifiable with Rational

Dissent, her periodic eruptions of feminism or faith remain inconsistently applied; her politics are in tension with the “thousand terrors” (43) facing her as a woman untrained for any kind of job. When she first encounters Mr. Howard, she is too transfixed to contest his anti-feminist opinions (12); afterwards, she is in a “delirium” (13) and admits that his company robs her of all “self-possession” (17). Principles fail to contain passion, to the extent that, in emulating earlier Jacobin novel protagonists who try to “govern their own seduction plots” (xxxvi), she unwisely becomes Mr. Howard’s housekeeper. Instead of marrying the virtuous Mr. Howard, however, she chooses the morally (and, as it turns out, financially) dubious Mr. Vernon. Mary-Anne’s ongoing desire for Howard and Vernon’s resulting fury causes their already shaky marriage to implode; worse still, Mary-Anne’s track record of miscalculations continues, leading her to leave for the Continent with Vernon’s friend Mr. Malvern, to whom, it transpires, Vernon has effectively sold her (59). Here, Whelan and James suggest, the novel undoes, or at least complicates, its critique of excessive erotic desire: “The real dangers in the novel stem not from sexual feeling but from corruption, greed, and the pressure of social convention in a patriarchal society” (xxxvi). The end result is bigamy and, after her return, death. The novel thus jointly represents Vernon and Malvern as deceptive predators, and Mary-Anne as an irrational collaborator in her own destruction; pedagogical schemes for developing rational female citizens, in the Wollstonecraftian mode, simply do not work here, but neither does the ability to memorize more conventional moral precepts.

But despite the novel’s quality, this edition will be of considerable use to anyone interested in Rational Dissent and Romantic-era gender politics. Whelan’s and James’ reconstruction of Lanfear’s network, moreover, is a substantial achievement—helpful to anyone working on her sister Mary Hays, as well—and should provoke further work on such associations for other women writers.