

Tim Whelan

introduces

Mary Hays

<http://www.maryhayslifewritingscorrespondence.com>

MY FULLY SEARCHABLE WEBSITE, 'Mary Hays: Life, Writings, and Correspondence', is now open to everyone. It can be reached easily through the home page of The Friends of Coleridge, and presents the most complete account to date of the life and career of Mary Hays (1759-1843), providing students and scholars with access to Hays's extensive correspondence of more than 300 letters by, to, and about her, newly transcribed and fully annotated, including new information from the letters of her close friend Eliza Fenwick (1766-1840) not previously known. The site also contains searchable texts of all her periodical writings and a complete genealogy of Hays, including the discovery of her youngest sister, Marianna Hays (1773-97), and her niece, the radical feminist writer Matilda Mary Hays (1820-97). Biographical notices of more than 100 individuals connected with Mary Hays can also be found on the site. Much of the new material on Hays has come from the diary, reminiscences, and correspondence of her long-time friend and relation through marriage, Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867).

Hays was the first woman novelist in England to live her entire life within Dissenting culture. She created fictional heroines in the 1790s who challenged the literary scene with bold declarations of their feelings and opinions, bent on determining their life choices (especially marriage partners) and demanding intellectual and educational equality far exceeding societal norms at that time. Her radical ideas on women's education, courtship decorum, marriage laws, and gender equality left her, like her friend Mary Wollstonecraft, with a damaged reputation for nearly a century and a half after her death. Today her opinions are anything but aberrant, but even with changes in attitudes toward women's equality and gender roles, Hays's life and career as a provocative yet prescient Dissenting feminist thinker and writer has yet to be fully examined.

Mary Hays spent her youth in Gainsford Steet, Southwark, where she attended the Particular Baptist Church (Blackfields), located at the end of her street, during the ministries of John Langford and Michael Brown. She left the Baptist chapel in 1792 and joined the Unitarian congregation at Salter's Hall, London. Hays's early love interest with John Eccles ended in 1780 with his death just after their official engagement. Her next (and only other known) involvement occurred between 1794 and 1808 in the person of William Friend, but his choice of another marriage partner proved devastating to Hays, and she never pursued marriage again, choosing to live as much as possible as an independent woman, supporting herself by her publications and small legacies. As her family connections (she had four sisters and two brothers and nearly forty nieces and nephews) and friendships reveal (Crabb Robinson being among the

most important), Mary Hays maintained an intimate connection with religious Dissent the entirety of her life.

Her first significant work, *Cursory Remarks on an Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public Worship* (1792), was a defense of Gilbert Wakefield's pamphlet on public worship—see p. 5 of Anthony Harding's article in this issue. This introduced her to an important circle of Unitarians, including several ministers as well as the publisher Joseph Johnson and his friends George Dyer, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and Eliza Fenwick. The next year Hays published *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793), followed by the novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in behalf of Women* (1798), *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), and her acclaimed *Female Biography, or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of All Ages and Countries* (6 vols, 1803). Her outspoken feminism and support of Godwin and Wollstonecraft made her a target of satire and abuse by several writers, some even who had once been her friends and acquaintances, such as Elizabeth Hamilton and Charles Lloyd. Despite her decline in social standing after 1799, Hays continued to write, producing a substantial body of historical writings for young readers, some appearing in the third volume of Charlotte Smith's *The History of England* (1806), and a substantial amount in Hays's three-volume series, *Historical Dialogues for Young Persons* (1806-07). Hays closed her publishing career with *Memoirs of Queens* (1821), her final contribution to the history of women. As an outgrowth of her teaching (one pupil was her niece, the future writer and feminist Matilda Mary Hays [1820-97]) and her interest in adolescent literature, Hays also published three didactic/moral novels between 1804 and 1817: *Harry Clinton. A Tale for Youth* (1804), *The Brothers; or, Consequences: A Story of What Happens Every Day; Addressed to that Most Useful Part of the Community, the Labouring Poor* (1815), and *Family Annals, or The Sisters* (1817).