

BOOK REVIEW

## Mary Hays’s “Female Biography”: Collective Biography as Enlightenment Feminism

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This collection of essays on Mary Hays’s *Female Biography or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of All Ages and Countries* (London, 1803; American edition 1807) appeared originally in a special issue of *Women’s Writing* dedicated to Mary Hays, to celebrate publication of the Chawton House edition of her works. It is edited by the compilers of that special issue, Gina Luria Walker and Mary Spongberg. Most of the essays discuss aspects of Hays’s work as a biographer. But two of them are on more recent biographies of women (Marie Mulvey Roberts on Rosina Bulwer Lytton, and Hala Kama on the twentieth-century Egyptian feminists Malak Hifni Nassif [1886–1918], Aisha Taymur [1840–1902], and Warda al-Yaziji [1838–1924]). Although there is no connection between Hays and these later biographies and their subjects, they may nonetheless be said to be in the spirit of Mary Hays.

Hays has, until now, been rather in the shadows of feminism. She struggled in her own day to live her principles in the hostile climate of post-French-Revolution Britain, and her posthumous reputation has been clouded by prudish disapproval of her on the part of the guardians of her letters, exemplifying a species of what Walker justly describes as “female mysogyny.” Today Hays is more often than not viewed through the prism of her more famous contemporaries, Jane Austen and her friend and fellow feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft. But comparisons have not served her well. Although herself a novelist, and outspoken on the social and economic condition of women, Hays’s reputation as a writer has suffered for not being Jane Austen, and her feminist radicalism has been overshadowed by Mary Wollstonecraft’s reputation. In Hays’s own time, Elisabeth Hamilton mercilessly satirized her in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*. Despite its real publishing success and lasting influence, Hays’s *Female Biography* has too readily been denigrated as “derivative” or “hack work.” She was criticized for including women of dubious sexual morals (for example, Catherine the Great and Heloise), a fact that her Victorian readers found unsettling. Fortunately, in Walker, Hays has been blessed with a latter-day champion who has done sterling work to restore her to visibility and sympathetic understanding as a woman writer, intellectual, and early feminist of significance. By contextualizing particular biographies from *Female Biography* and her *Memoirs of Queens*, this set of essays

shows that despite claims that she abandoned her early radicalism, she in fact remained faithful to her principles, both as an independent woman and in her writing.

As the work of a single, self-taught author, *Female Biography* is a remarkable achievement, which testifies to Hays's intelligence, extensive knowledge of history, and determination to see her project through. The primary aim of the book was of a piece with Wollstonecraft's feminism: a "vindication" of women, but by different means. *Female Biography* is a vindication of women through the medium of biographical writing, because it gives women recognition for their achievements, countering their neglect by historical biographies. Every essay in this collection highlights some aspect of Hays's unrepentant and outspoken feminism. A theme that emerges is women's intellectual and creative excellence. The collection opens with Walker's account of her own personal journey of discovery to locate and retrieve Hays's surviving correspondence. Spongberg demonstrates how the radicalism of some of Hays's essays can be brought out by a knowledge of the historical context. Spongberg's essay highlights Hays's courage in coming to the defense of the hapless Queen Caroline, pilloried and ridiculed by her royal husband in his attempts to divorce her. Several essays explore Hays's sources. Another essay on queenship, by Begoña Lasa Álvarez, discusses Hays's representation of Spanish queens—both queens consort and regnant queens—showing how Hays exploited available narratives in order to vindicate women's capacities to govern, as well as to sustain the virtues appropriate to their family obligations. Severine Genieys Kirk compares Hays's biographies of French women with her French and English sources, showing that by contrast with Anne Thicness, she "challenges the *status quo*" and recognizes the creativity of women. Sarah Peterson Pittock discusses Hays's research and creative use of her sources so as to present materials obtained as a "Feminist Remix," which counters eighteenth-century prejudices against women's capacity to excel in literature, science, and philosophy. Sally Livingston explains the surprising lack of emphasis on Heloise's intellectual capacities in Hays's biography of her through the limited sources available to her. By contrast, in an essay that traces the influence of Hays's life of Catherine Macaulay, Shane Greentree shows how Hays greatly developed previous biographies of Macaulay by emphasizing her intellectual development and providing a rounded character study absent from previous accounts.

Having all these essays together in one volume, rather than a journal special issue, makes it a critical text useful for teaching purposes, so it is a pity that the price puts it beyond the reach of student pockets. If I have one other complaint, it is that the uniformity of the running heads of the pages, which lack authors' names and essay titles, makes it difficult to navigate the collection and cross-reference between individual essays. But the important conclusion to draw is the positive one that, along with the two essays on post-Hays women, the essays in the collection testify to the power of biography not simply to record the condition of women in the past, but, when suitably contextualized, to raise and address feminist issues that are alive for the present. Mary Hays's achievement is to have blazed a trail for others to follow.

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