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Unconventional Calling: Godwin, Women and Visiting in the 1790s¹

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This is a paper about a quintessential mode of sociability in radical circles in the 1790s – visiting and calling on friends and acquaintance, primarily in each other’s homes. It centres on William Godwin (1756-1836), philosopher, novelist and literary figure, husband of the now more famous Mary Wollstonecraft and thereby father to the still more famous Mary Shelley. Godwin rose to public prominence in the opening years of the French Revolution with his magnum opus, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), but his career was a major casualty of the backlash against radicalism after 1798. Godwin made and received a lot of visits – hundreds each year. Although scholars have often referred to his carefully kept Diary their use of it has been relatively impressionistic. In this chapter I want to explore more systematically some of the complexities of domestic visiting, drawing on the digital edition of Godwin’s diary.²

Godwin attached considerable philosophical importance to visiting, its norms, and its possibilities. He was not an informal man: he came from a strict Calvinist background and was originally a dissenting minister. Yet, as his thinking developed – and somewhat under the influence of Rousseau’s critique of contemporary manners and politeness, coupled with his dissenting commitment to candour and sincerity – he came to see many of the conventions of society as restraints on the development of mind and the free communication of truth through discussion. Indeed, he predicted a future in which conventional restraints would disappear and benevolence and virtue would triumph under the direction of people’s rational capacities.

This radical vision, powerfully expressed in his *Enquiry* brought Godwin widespread fame. But the vision was accompanied by considerable caution. He feared that precipitate action would

¹ My thanks to Adam Obeng who worked on turning Godwin’s diary into harder quantitative data; and especially to Edward Pope, who has explored some aspects of these relationships of Godwin in ways that he has generously shared. For details of his work see <http://www.edpopehistory.co.uk/>. Thanks also to Gail Bederman, Sarah Lloyd, Rebecca Probert and my fellow contributors for their comments on earlier drafts.

² The Diary of William Godwin, (eds) Victoria Myers, David O’Shaughnessy, and Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford Digital Library, 2010), <http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk> (hereafter *Diary*).

produce chaos and delay the advance of humanity. As John Thelwall pointed out: Godwin's 'visionary peculiarities of mind,' which 'recommend the most extensive plan of freedom and innovation ever discussed by any writer in the English language...', were coupled with a conviction that it was necessary 'to reprobate every measure from which even the most moderate reform can rationally be expected.'³ Thelwall had a point. There was, however, one area in which Godwin's practice did seem to answer to his speculation: his relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft (almost certainly his first affair) was not conventional. They married when she was several months pregnant – and he did that with some philosophical embarrassment. When she died he wrote an extremely frank *Memoir* of his wife detailing her love affairs (including their own) that became a major target for the anti-jacobin and loyalist press – Southey said: 'he stripped his dead wife naked.' Godwin's relationship with Mary Jane Clairmont who became his second wife some four years after Wollstonecraft's death was similar – it too involved pre-marital pregnancy. This was unconventional behaviour; but it was linked to a set of alternative standards by which Godwin sought to regulate his conduct in the 1790s and that he applied in his intimate friendships and relationships. Yet, this was not just a matter of personal conduct in private domestic space; these spaces and the relationships formed in them were subject to powerful social norms and expectations that touched and influenced the behaviour of a wide range of people with whom Godwin interacted.

Although visiting was deeply imbedded in eighteenth century practices, it was also something on which the radical literary culture of the 1790s reflected critically, in their novels, letters, and practices. In his *Enquiry* Godwin inveighed against the practice of making servants tell visitors that the individual or family was 'not at home' when they did not wish to see the caller (a phrase that Godwin reduces to 'nah' and which crops up frequently in the diary). For Godwin, such conventions prompted dishonesty, violated duties to candour, truth and utility, and taught servants to be even more mendacious than their position ordinarily led them to be.⁴ They also represented an unwillingness to be candid about the distribution of our cordiality and esteem –and they preserved the rich and the powerful from the interpolations of the rising middling orders.

In some contexts Godwin was powerless over these conventions. When gentlemen, with whom he had animatedly conversed at Debrett's or elsewhere the evening before ignored him in the street the following day, he could not make them respond. And the Diary shows that, in his connections with men of quality, none violated the implicit norms for domestic visiting: he called on them; they did not call on him. If they wished to see him, they summoned him. Even the apparently 'radical' John Horne Tooke set his relationship with Godwin in traditional terms: from 1792 Godwin dined at Tooke's very regularly and was keen to have Tooke call, and to be the person to introduce

³ Thelwall, J., *Tribune*, 2: vii.

⁴ *Enquiry* 1793 IV, iv, appendix II, 'Of the Mode of Excluding Visitors'

him to Thomas Lawrence the painter, but Horne Tooke did not call on Godwin until 1799, (when he dined), and 1800, (when he called on him). But these are two out of the 122 contacts over fifteen years— so the norms were essentially maintained – yet Horne Tooke was not a conventional man.

It was norms such as these that Godwin wanted to jettison among like minds and in the 1790s and early 1800s he found considerable openness and egalitarianism in many of his relationships – where this implied that the relationship was not a relationship of supplication and patronage but involved an equality of access and exchange between people sharing in the pursuit of truth. Godwin found this with his contemporaries – such as Joseph Fawcett, Thomas Holcroft, James Marshall, and William Nicholson – but he also sought it more especially in his relationships with younger pupils, acolytes and friends, such as Thomas Cooper, Willis Webb (both relatives) and then George Dyson, Joseph Gerrald, Basil Montagu, John Stoddart, Ralph Fell, John Arnot, Thomas Turner, Patrick Patrickson, Percy Shelley, and so on. The open character of these relationships emerges in the often very frank debates and arguments he had with so many. When he struck gold he said so: in January 1796, after he met John Stoddart a lawyer some 17 years his junior, he wrote:

I indulge with some impatience the hope that you will repeat your visit to me before you leave town. I do not recollect any instance of a total stranger having won so much of my esteem in a single interview, as you have done. I want to know whether in exhibiting so many excellencies you have put a deception on me; or whether, as I like to believe, I have found a treasure. This is an inquiry with which I am not often disposed to trouble a man upon so short an acquaintance.⁵

This was characteristic: Godwin sought to dispense with formality when he met those whom he considered to be talented and worthwhile men. He wanted to engage them in conversation and debate – he sought the clash of mind on mind. This was a central part of Godwin’s ‘Conversable World’, as Jon Mee has called it; a world in which mutual expectations about interpersonal conduct and civilities were actively reworked by participants in the 1790s.⁶

Nonetheless, these partly public/partly domestic spaces had their tensions, dangers and possibilities for transgression. There were many boundary problems for Godwin in relation to those whom he welcomed so wholly into his society. He wanted to challenge the norms of domestic sociability for philosophical purposes – but the practices of his acquaintances did not always meet his expectations. For example, consider the case of the writer Ralph Fell whom Godwin met in 1797

⁵ MS. Abinger c. 53, fol. 19r.

⁶ J. Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1662-1830*, (Oxford University Press, 2011).

and saw very frequently until 1804, when the relationship foundered because Godwin was unable to repay a debt.⁷ Fell was friendly with Godwin's only sister, Hannah, but his involvement with Godwin's domestic circle became troubled at the end of 1799. Hannah Godwin was a single woman and a Mantua maker in London. She visited Godwin regularly, calling occasionally in the company of girls apprenticed to her business. In August 1798 she introduced her apprentice, Sarah Carey/Karre to Godwin, and he met the two women with Ralph Fell in August and again in November 1799. In November 1799, Fell wrote to Godwin referring to his getting married (to Carey). Godwin was clearly angry about the relationship, suspecting that his sister was using his philosophical 'salon' as a means of securing husbands for her apprentices. His wrath is clear from the note he sent Hannah:

I am extremely mortified at your conduct in what has lately passed between Miss Carey and Mr Fell. You must have known, if you were capable of any accurate judgment, that it was the case of a young man of superlative talents and promise throwing himself away, from the most puerile, or rather the grossest motives, upon a creature comparatively worthy only of a dunghil. You ought, if you had any propriety, immediately to have consulted me on this subject. But I bear you no resentment. As I have said, I am only mortified, but not surprised by your conduct.⁸

His draft to Fell was equally unrestrained: 'But my judgment is clear: I will never see Miss Carey, as Miss Carey, so long as this business is in hand: if she should ever become Mrs Fell, I will treat your washerwoman with respect under that character, and will allow myself no retrospect to what is irremediable.'⁹ Fell married Sarah Carey/Karre on July 5 1800 at St Dionis Backchurch with James Marshall and Hannah Godwin as witnesses.¹⁰

Fell's marriage to Carey, followed by the marriage of another young friend and acolyte, Henry Dibbin to Louisa Jones (Godwin's housekeeper) in May 1801 (at which Hannah Godwin was again a witness), led to a serious cooling in Godwin's relationship with his sister. Their relationship may have been additionally complicated by Hannah's intimacy with Godwin's amanuensis James Marshall. In the 1790s she seems to have been very close to Marshall, and the evidence suggests

⁷ Fell wrote *A Tour through the Batavian Republic during the latter part of the year 1800: containing an account of the revolution and recent events in that country* (R. Phillips, London, 1801); and *Memoirs of the Public Life of the Late Right Honourable Charles James Fox* (London, 1808).

⁸ MS. Abinger c. 17, fol. 9r-v. See HG's spirited replies MS Abinger c.5, fols. 14-17, and Godwin's subsequent responses MS Abinger c. 22, fols. 127-130.

⁹ It seems likely he sent a toned down version – see Pamela Clemit, ed., *The Letters of William Godwin 1798-1805*, v. 2 (Oxford University Press, 2014), 111-12.

¹⁰ The certificate suggests that Godwin's references to Miss Carey involved a consistent misspelling of Sarah Karre.

that she fell out with him in 1800 partly over Fell. Prior to this, their relationship was such that Godwin's mother expressed concern about it in a letter to Godwin: 'your poor sister is I fear a bad accernomist her heart too generous for her comings in ..., many people think her carrector injured by Marshal a married man, who I suppose dines with her on Sundays, is it not so, do you commend her, tell me freely, or advise her against it yourself, she will hear you sooner than any body else...' ¹¹ To our knowledge Godwin did not advise against it – perhaps assuming that Marshall was philosophically above reproach. Yet it is clear that there were a number of secrets being kept from Godwin even in his most intimate visiting circles: Godwin believed that it was George Dyson who had married Louisa Jones (when in fact he was only a witness to the wedding), and he reported as much to his young friend the traveller John Arnot, who was himself in love with Jones. It is unclear when Godwin found out the complete truth, but his reaction to Jones's marriage was uncompromising: she was forbidden to see the children again.

This was clearly treacherous social terrain – protégés, acquaintances, friends and family, clearly failing, on Godwin's view, to act according to his expectations. The exact form of his expectations with respect to personal relationships is unclear, but they seem to have concerned the furthering of intellectual development and of capacities for contributing to the broader world; and they seemed to require affinities of mind between partners – promising a companionate, mutually educative, progressive and philosophical, not just a social or sexual partnership. Or at least, that was the case when he was (as he saw it) defending his friends against the attractions of Hannah Godwin's young apprentices.

It is worth emphasising how judgmental and intolerant Godwin could be, especially in very close relationships. Indeed, friendships break down because of his strictures (derived from strict philosophical principle). By 1805, he and Hannah had little contact – indeed, he included her in a list of 'amis perdus' drawn up (probably) in around 1812; a list that names many of his former and younger friends – Dyson, Montagu, Stoddart, Arnot, Dibbin, and Kearsley – and a number of other women – Inchbald, Gisbourne/Reveley and Amelia Opie/Alderson.¹² Many on the list are people who became alienated from Godwin in part because of the problems of policing the boundaries of these public and private spaces and connections. Dyson, Dibbin and Arnot were linked through Louisa Jones, Godwin's housekeeper; Godwin alienated Reveley by proposing to her so soon after the death of her husband in the summer of 1799 (despite their secret assignation of 1795)¹³; Inchbald froze Godwin out after his marriage to Wollstonecraft; and Amelia Alderson's earlier intimacy with Godwin cooled on her marriage to Opie. The list testifies to Godwin's misjudgements

¹¹ MS Abinger c.3, fol. 64v (3 May 1797).

¹² See my 'Preaching to the Unconverted' *Enlightenment and Dissent* 28 (2012), 73-88.

¹³ *Diary*, January 9 1795.

and mismanagement of the expectations of others, and his over-statement of his own claims with respect to them. But it also speaks eloquently to the complex character of personal relations in the radical culture of sociability, conversation and candour in London at the end of the eighteenth century, and to the difficulties in living in the light of one's private judgment in ways that are necessarily partly public, even if conducted in domestic space.

The dramatic misjudgement Godwin made in publishing his *Memoirs* of Mary Wollstonecraft suggests that Godwin was largely unaware of the very limited public tolerance for his unconventional behaviour (or that he was too distraught to be cautious). At the same time, his behaviour with respect to Fell looks stultifyingly conventional, and it is clear that there are other cases in which he found himself acting in ways that to the external observer look identical to the classic position of the outraged patriarch of eighteenth century fiction.¹⁴ There are then two contrasting sides – seemingly conventional opprobrium for some of his friends and their choices – and his own very unconventional relationships – not just with Wollstonecraft and Clairmont, but also, less intimate but not necessarily wholly intellectual, with a number of others including Elizabeth Inchbald, Maria Reveley, Amelia Alderson, but to whom we might add, Sarah Anne Parr,¹⁵ Nan Pinkerton, Mary Robinson, and Mary Hays. This list is rather impressionistic. Little exists to allow us firmly to determine Godwin's intentions, these women's expectations, or the precise character of their relationships, but there is a clear sense in many cases that those who called on him, and on whom he called, were looking for at least a kind of intense intellectual relationship with him that was far from conventional, and that the boundaries of their relationships with Godwin were not well-defined, and could generate difficulties and misunderstandings.

Godwin certainly invited a degree of unconventional behaviour. On September 26 1798, just over a year after Wollstonecraft died, and after Harriet Lee, the headmistress of a Bath school for girls, gave a decisive, final rejection to Godwin's proposal of marriage, he met a 'miss Kinsman' with John Philip Kemble, in Watford.¹⁶ Godwin had previously encountered her brother Henry on a visit to the Wedgwoods in 1794. The day after they met, Godwin wrote to her. He began:

As I did not say to you the things that I ought when I saw you I feel myself prompted to say them to you now on paper. You overstepped the dull rules of old fashioned etiquette and ceremony by the action that gave me the pleasure of conversing with you, I therefore make no apology for the liberty I take in addressing you....

¹⁴ In 1804 he was involved in proceedings to rescue his niece Harriet who had runs off with Thomas West, a married man; and his reaction in 1814 to his daughter Mary's love for Shelley and their subsequent elopement seems very conventional. National Archive KB 1/32/2f.107

¹⁵ See forthcoming work by Gail Bederman.

¹⁶ In fact, Miss Emily Kingsman –the spelling is corrected in the later entry.

Apologising for not having responded equally openly and unreservedly, Godwin went on:

I ought to have said to myself when a spirited conduct on your part so extraordinarily introduced you to me this morning, accident has thrown this lovely girl in my way, I ought to use the moment she affords me, in encouraging her virtue, in blowing the flame of her spirit, &endeavouring to render, as far as my powers may extend, the excellencies she now possesses as lasting as her life. This you had a right to expect from me, and I did nothing of this. Your accosting me as you did persuades me on reflection that you have a mind / capable of rising much above the vulgar of your sex. But you must treasure this gift, it is a talent that you may not neglect with impunity.¹⁷

Godwin addressed his letter to 'Miss Kinsman', not realising that Emily was the youngest of three daughters. The letter clearly caused consternation in the household and was answered, rather stiffly, by her brother. But the family had made an impact, and Godwin called on them at their home in King's Langley, Herts, in May 1799. E Kingsman also appears in Godwin's '1796 List' (which identifies the year in which he met people who have some special significance for him) for the year 1798, and D(orothea) Kingsman for the year 1799! If he was not spontaneous in practice, Godwin was clearly willing to respond to unconventional initiatives, given a little time, some ink, and some paper! We have to rely on our imaginations to tell us how the family responded to Emily!

Although this is just one incident, there are a lot of visits to and from women in the diary, and the Diary Project allows us to look more systematically at the pattern of visits that Godwin paid, or was paid, enabling us to deduce something about the norms that operated in his circles. I want to focus my remarks on the occasions on which Godwin saw women alone either at his home, or in theirs – something that he did to some degree, although much less commonly than was the case for his contacts with men.

I take the significance of them being 'alone' to be as follows. The reputation of women (in relation to men) was socially policed in this period. There were norms of conduct. Of course, people bent and broke them, but in doing so they risked their reputation, and that could lead to them being cut, ostracised from various circles, and could diminish their respectability and, for some, their consequent (marital) prospects. The costs to men were substantially less – the point of having a past was, in part, to have something to put behind you! But for women these norms were powerful and responsible men would have had some concern for the reputational risks run by their female friends (although see Godwin's striking letter to Maria Reveley when he courts her (too) soon after the

¹⁷ MS. Abinger c. 17

death of her husband beginning 'How my whole soul disclaims and tramples upon these cowardly ceremonies. Is woman always to be a slave?')¹⁸

Most women sought to avoid providing food for gossip and speculation; many were also concerned not to be associated with women whose reputation might produce collateral damage; and many might be anxious, especially following Godwin's *Memoirs* of Wollstonecraft, not to be seen as intimate with him. Radical women (that is, women who had sympathies with the reform movement and sought to challenge the polite conventions by which they were constrained) might or might not bend or break these rules; they might also be less judgmental about those they associated with; but in neither case could they expect to do so wholly without cost. Wollstonecraft was certainly concerned about such issues. When she returned to London from Paris she presented herself as Mrs Imlay and was taken by many to be exactly that. Indeed, Godwin, prior to the commencement of their affair, despite referring to her throughout the Diary as Mrs Wollstonecraft, referred to her as Imlay in an unconscious reflex on the first occasion that he included her in a dinner party with his respectable friends (April 22-23, 1796).

Godwin was often unconventional – in whom he saw, how he saw them, and in his attitude to conventional norms. He married after the fact, not before; he exhorted Wollstonecraft the day after the diary entry 'chez moi toute' – 'Humble! for heaven's sake, be proud, be arrogant!'¹⁹; in his many relationships with women he talked to them as a philosopher, irrespective of convention or offence; and he was friendly with several women who were in various ways 'unrespectable' (such as Mary Robinson, formerly mistress to the Prince of Wales and subsequently to Col. Tarleton). But that meant that the women he met had to consider how to respond to such an unconventional man (especially after the *Memoirs*). Above all, they were probably wary of being seen to be intimate with him.

Nonetheless, between 1791 and 1801 (in the December of which Godwin married Mary Jane Clairmont) there were many occasions on which Godwin recorded visits to or meals with women where no one else was recorded as present. Some can be eliminated because they involved domestic help. Certainly some, but by no means all, were instances where Godwin (and his visitor/host) were not behaving strictly within the norms of propriety. For the historian the central issue is how these might be differentiated: not just by us, but also by his contemporaries. How might others have seen these calls as something other than evidence of scandal? One principle that is likely to have operated in Godwin's circles, is that people would have been concerned only where there was a *consistent* pattern of compromising behaviour. Also, married women might have had a

¹⁸ MS. Abinger c. 22 fols 117-18.

¹⁹ MS. Abinger c. 40, fol 30.

degree of licence that single women did not – especially eligible single women. Older, well established women may similarly have had this.

There were four main possibilities for Godwin seeing a woman on her own – the ‘place’ would either be his or her domestic space; and it might be a call, or might involve a meal. Some categories are harder to establish than others. Godwin lists ‘calls’ to him in a way that does not make clear whether people are calling together or separately. For example, on August 29 1800 he records ‘Curran, Taggart, A Walker, H^t & Phebe G call’. Whether this is one or four calls (or something in between) is just unclear (they were probably four separate calls – Phebe G is Godwin’s niece). Our coding treats these as single calls, but we emphasise that caution should be attached to that judgment and to this category.

We also do not know whether a ‘call’ or ‘dine’ where no one else is recorded really is a case of Godwin meeting the person alone. Godwin identifies housekeepers and servants in the diary only exceptionally, and on many occasions when it appears that Godwin was alone servants may have been in attendance. Servants could be a mixed blessing: they could hold one’s reputation in their hands, and they could conspire for or against their mistress or master, so that people may often have needed to maintain appearances in front of them as well.²⁰ Moreover, what matters reputationally is not whether two people were actually alone – but whether others assumed that they were.

If we set some of these concerns aside for a moment and look at the broader picture, we can recognise the following patterns. If we take the occasions on which Godwin records seeing women on their own and look at the busiest years, it is striking how far a single person accounts for around half of all such contacts. In 1793, 1794 and 1795 this was Elizabeth Inchbald; in 1796 and 1797 this was Wollstonecraft (the numbers hold up despite Godwin ceasing to list Wollstonecraft in the Diary after their marriage in March 1797); in 1798 this was Charlotte Smith; in 1799 and 1800 this was Sarah Elwes; and in 1801 this was Mrs Clairmont. In terms of total contacts across these years, there are 135 with Inchbald; 168 with Wollstonecraft; 28 with Smith; 116 with Elwes; and 56 with Clairmont. At this point, before leaping to conclusions, we might want more granularity.

Visits by Godwin to women when no other person is recorded as present were paid most often in 1793, 1794 and 1795 to Inchbald; in 1796 and 1797 to Wollstonecraft; in 1798 there was a cluster of women (Smith, Hays, Christie, and Lee) each of whom was seen slightly fewer than ten times; in 1799 and 1800 it was Elwes; and in 1801 no one stood out.

Visits by women to Godwin when he was alone are far fewer. The only people who visited more than 10 times in a year on their own were Wollstonecraft and Elwes. In 1797 and 1798, in the

²⁰ See, for example, Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1805) for problems with servants.

aftermath of Wollstonecraft's death, Maria Reveley was also a frequent visitor, ostensibly to help care for the children, but her visits caused her husband sufficient disquiet that she stopped them. Reveley was a married woman; no single woman could have acted in this way without cost.

Meals that Godwin had at women's homes on his own are in similar numbers to solo calls on Godwin. But even fewer people account for a very substantial proportion of such calls: Wollstonecraft, Smith, Elwes and Clairmont received Godwin more than ten times – and they account for a substantial proportion of such events. Finally, meals taken alone with Godwin is the most exclusive group – only Elwes and Clairmont appear more than ten times. Moreover, of the 40 such occasions between 1798 and 1801, Elwes accounts for 20 and Clairmont for 14.

1797 and 1798 were slightly odd years because from March 1797 Godwin continued to see Wollstonecraft, but no longer recorded her: also, from March he had a family home changing the salience of several of the conventions; and from September 1797 he was desperate for help with his family in the aftermath of Wollstonecraft's death. 1798 clearly involves several people who were supporting Godwin, such as Eliza Fenwick and Mrs Christie.

Nonetheless, there is clearly a growing intimacy as we move through these categories – 'calling' probably had components that were not fully registered in the Diary, such as leaving a card, paying respects, etc., which conformed to social manners. Also, while young women in particular might not have done much receiving of young men without supervision, it was not necessarily inappropriate to do so (as Fanny Burney's novels suggest). Women may also have been able to control the situation, through family proximity, servants or maids, to minimize their exposure. 'Mrs Perfection', as Wollstonecraft called Inchbald, clearly maintained control of Godwin's intimacy with her by restricting it to calls on her – of her 135 solo contacts with Godwin, all but five were calls he made to her. Charlotte Smith also saw a lot of Godwin, especially in 1798, when she was in London a good deal but she was married with ten children and, again, the vast majority of contacts took place at her home, with Godwin calling on her or, more usually, taking tea with her.

Those most at risk of accusations of impropriety were those who frequently called on or dined alone with Godwin, or with whom he dined alone. There are three such people who stand out: Wollstonecraft, Elwes and Clairmont. We know a good deal about Wollstonecraft, and we have discovered a good deal recently about Mary Jane Clairmont.²¹ Sarah Elwes has, thus far, been largely unnoticed and unidentified, but she offers us an especially interesting perspective on the problems that attach to encounters in private spaces.

²¹ See, <http://www1.somerset.gov.uk/archives/>, catalogue reference DD\DP 17/11, Papers of Dodson and Pulman, Solicitors of Taunton, Lethbridge estate papers (correspondence concerning Mary Jane Vial); and the transcriptions at <https://sites.google.com/site/maryjanesdaughter/home>.

Sarah Elwes was married to John Elwes, who was the youngest of the two illegitimate sons of John Elwes senr, renowned as the meanest man in Britain on his death on November 26, 1789 (in Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* Mr Boffin reads Edward Topham's *Life of Elwes* (1790) to train up as a miser). Sarah and John Elwes married on December 23, 1789. John may have been re-marrying, he had a son by Margaret Olley Elwes in 1788 (but his will suggests that this son did not survive).²² It was Sarah's second marriage, her first husband (probably from 1785) was Captain Thomas Haynes, who died on December 26, 1788.²³

In October 1793 Sarah and John Elwes separated and in 1794 John Elwes brought an action in the Court of the King's Bench, against a Mr George Samuel Harvey for criminal conversation with his wife dating from 1791. Harvey was approximately twenty two years of age. Mrs Elwes was described as being between 30 and 35 years of age (John Elwes was 42). The case cited another young man, Jasper Egerton, a lawyer who had acted as Mrs Elwes' representative and lawyer in the months leading up to the criminal conversation case. The case against Harvey was based on the testimony of various servants employed by John Elwes, who filed reports of lewd and intimate behaviour occurring in the back sitting room of the house (which was the main reception room) on various occasions; of Mrs Elwes's maid letting in Harvey (or Egerton) without the other servants' knowledge; of her having taken the carriage with, or gone riding with one or other of the named gentlemen, to Kensington Gardens, 'and there quit her horses, and desired the same to be put up at some Inn or Public House in the Neighbourhood, and would remain in the said Gardens for several Hours together, and till after it was dark, and was almost constantly, at such Times, met either by Mr Harvey or Mr Egerton, and they used to retire into the most private and unfrequented Parts of the Garden, and remain there so long, that the Gate-Keepers have frequently taken Notice of it to the Servant waiting for her.'²⁴ Moreover, the claim was that 'Mrs Elwes used very frequently to call upon Mr Egerton at his Chambers in Gray's Inn and on Mr Harvey as his Chambers in the Temple, and at other times, in the Absence of her Husband, used to invite, sometimes the One, and sometimes the other of them home to her House, in Weymouth Street, and remained alone with them for a considerable Time.'²⁵ Reports of behaviour in the back sitting room came from the groom who could see into that room from the loft of the stables (and from other servants whom the groom encouraged to join him). Another detailed servant's report describes his mortification at

²² National Archive PROB 11/1591:129/110-12. Despite Scott's instruction at the Consistory Court that John Elwes should live chastely, he had at least one other child in 1804/5, John Meggot Elwes, *Derby Mercury* May 1 1817.

²³ Although it is difficult to be certain, it seems likely that Sarah's maiden name was Allen, and that she married Thomas Haynes in June 1785.

²⁴ See Sarah Lloyd, 'Amour in the Shrubbery Reading the detail of English Adultery Trial Publications of the 1780s' *Eighteenth Century Studies* 39, 4 (2006) 421-42.

²⁵ High Court of Delegates Judgment National Archive Del 7/1, p. 2

accompanying Mrs Elwes in public when she and her sister-in-law were in the carriage, drawing attention to themselves by boisterous behaviour.²⁶

The court found for the plaintiff and awarded 100 guineas damages against Mr Harvey (taking into account his age and lack of resources). John Elwes followed up this case with a suit against his wife for an Ecclesiastical divorce or ‘separation from Bed and Board and mutual cohabitation by reason of adultery,’ heard in the Consistory Court at Doctor’s Common, in which both Harvey and Egerton were named.²⁷ The Court found against her on July 13 1796.²⁸ She immediately appealed against the judgment and the case was assigned to Sir William Wynne, Bishop of London, in the Arches Court of Canterbury.²⁹

Her appeal denied the items of the libel entered against her, pleading that the two visits of Mr Harvey were in fact made not to her, but to her sister-in-law Amelia/Emily Elwes, who used the house in Weymouth Street to entertain friends when her husband was absent, and that Harvey’s visits were on matters of business. She claimed she consulted Egerton as a lawyer because of her husband’s behaviour; that ‘for a considerable time previous to the institution of the present suit, and from the beginning of 1791 [John Elwes] declared to several Persons he was tired of his wife, and was determined to get rid of her at all Events, and should be obliged to any Man to enable him to get rid of her’; and that John Elwes had used an intermediary, William Hayward, to offer to John Gray, a former servant of Elwes, a considerable sum of money if he could persuade Mrs Elwes to lie with him, or ‘if he would at least put himself into, or under the Bed of his Mistress, in order that he might be detected in that Situation.’ She also alleged that witnesses subpoenaed in the cause of Mr Harvey, and ready to rebut and falsify the claims of the chief witnesses used by Mr Elwes, had not been called in his defence in the original court hearing, to the injury of Mrs Elwes and expressly contrary to assurances to her by Mr Harvey, and that the costs and damages awarded to Mr Elwes by the court had not been paid by Mr Harvey, or if they had been paid, that had been returned (suggesting they had conspired against her).

The Arches Court of Canterbury declared in favour of John Elwes on November 6, 1797. Notwithstanding, Sarah launched a further appeal, heard by the High Court of Delegates, which pronounced sentence on 26 June 1798, affirming the judgments of the lower courts.³⁰ There was no higher court of appeal. Either John Elwes feared he had insufficient evidence to go to the House of Lords and move from an Ecclesiastical divorce to a civil divorce, or he may have had enough of the

²⁶ London Metropolitan Archive DL/6/662/179/3; DL/C/0562/177-179.

²⁷ Lambeth Palace Archives D675 and D 676, case number 3111; National Archive DEL 670 v. 2.

²⁸ *Morning Chronicle* July 14 1796 Law Intelligence.

²⁹ DL/C/562/177/2. National Archive DEL 1/670 v. 1; Lambeth Palace Archives G 155/18; G 155/79; G 153/89; E45/100; G155/79; MS Film 104, 105; Process books D 675, D 676.

³⁰ DEL 1/670 v.i , ii; The formal, printed declaration of High Court of Delegates verdict is at Del 7/1. See also Del 5/35; and Del 6/52.

institution of marriage. Sarah Elwes continued in her status as a wife, separated for matters of bed, board, and accommodation, but still using the name and title of Mrs Sarah Elwes. In 1800 – while Godwin was on a trip to Ireland - in a case prosecuting Elizabeth Scoltock for stealing clothing from her, she testified ‘I am the wife of John Elwes.’³¹

This is not a paper about scandal but about Godwin’s unconventional relationships and the spaces in which they took place. Sarah Elwes is especially interesting because Godwin’s early friendship with her runs parallel in the early months to his friendship with Fell and the tensions introduced by his relationship with Miss Carey. Sarah Elwes’s history is also important because of how she was represented by others, and because, when she began to see Godwin, a number of features of their behaviour, on the basis of the details in the Diary, replicated the conduct of which her husband accused her. A fortnight after Godwin first recorded calling on her for tea (3 May 1799); having already seen her twice more, the entry reads: ‘Ride with mrs Elwes, Highgate, Hornsey & Hampstead: mrs Elwes calls.’³² He dined with her, apparently alone;³³ she called on him; they went to the theatre together early in June; four days later they walked together. On a handful of occasions he met her with Jasper Egerton, but for the vast majority of their meetings they were alone. There was a break in their relationship briefly when Godwin turned to Maria Reveley after the sudden death of her husband, but by October they were seeing each again frequently. On November 26 Godwin’s entry was: ‘Post, w. S E; dine at Salt Hill; sleep.’ (Salt Hill is near Slough). Godwin called on Fox and Mrs Armistead (at St Anne’s Hill, nr Chertsey) the next day, but returned that night to Salt Hill to dine and sleep. No further mention is made of Sarah Elwes on this trip and there is no other similarly cryptic entry.³⁴ These last events are within days of Godwin’s dramatic expostulations with Fell.

Godwin was clearly attracted to Sarah Elwes. Newspapers reported that Erskine (who acted for the prosecution in the Criminal Conversation case, and again for her husband at the High Court of Delegates, alongside William Garrow) said that she was an extremely beautiful woman, and Godwin clearly enjoyed her company.³⁵ Indeed, although his relationship with Elwes collapsed after he began seeing Mary Jane Clairmont, he made several efforts to bring her back into his society and she became a family friend and regular visitor from 1812 until her death five years later (and she

³¹ *Old Bailey Online*, Case 489, July 9 1800.

³² May 18 1799.

³³ In the first hearing, under the 8th Article of her evidence, Elwes was concerned to insist that she had not dined alone with Harvey on August 18 1793 and that they ‘never did dine alone together.’ National Archive DEL 1/670, v. 1

³⁴ Elwes may have been starting a longer journey: after this entry Godwin writes to her on December 6 but she calls on him only on the 14th.

³⁵ *Morning Post and Fashionable World* July 18, 1794

bequeathed both of them items and some money in her will).³⁶ There is little to suggest Elwes pursued Godwin (and much to suggest that she stood back from the relationship at points when he turned to Reveley and later to Clairmont). They were clearly at an impasse. She could not marry, and had she set up house with him, or flagrantly cohabited, she would have lost her financial settlement.³⁷ Although Elwes had been concerned to limit his wife's claims on him the settlement was significant. Correspondence in 1794 indicates that when she was dismissed from the house by her husband he agreed to allow her £40 per month for her maintenance and support (the naval pension she lost on marriage to him was worth about £45 p.a.), which he then suspended in July 1794 on her application for alimony, on the grounds that he had been paying the sum on the understanding that she would not do so.³⁸ The outcome of the disagreement in July 1794 is unclear, but on the commencement of the case in the Consistorial Court, Judge Scott allotted £550 annually to Mrs Elwes, for the duration of the suit.³⁹ Whether this changed subsequent to the finding of the High Court of Delegates is unclear. However, when Sarah Elwes died in 1817 her moveable property was valued at some £400, and she bequeathed two thousand three hundred pounds in three per cent consolidated annuities and six hundred in the five percent, which suggests the alimony was maintained.⁴⁰

Godwin too was stuck. He wanted a wife, both for companionship and as a mother for Mary and Fanny. And he probably sought to avoid the further controversy (following the furore over the *Memoirs*) that cohabiting would produce. For her part, Sarah Elwes had much to lose financially, and she probably did not want to gain responsibilities for two young children in a household of uncertain income.

Was Godwin a hypocrite in denouncing Fell's object of choice and himself consorting with Elwes? My sense is that he was not. His and Elwes's relationship does seem to have been in part about intellectual companionship – of the sort he had experienced with Wollstonecraft. It was in the wake of his relationship with Wollstonecraft that he wrote his idealised portrait of companionate love, both in his *Memoirs* and subsequently, in his second major novel, *St Leon*, half of which was written during his friendship with Elwes. If he was not being hypocritical it is because he saw himself and Sarah Elwes as having something like this sort of relationship. This may be why

³⁶ Only one letter to her survives (identified by Pamela Clemit: July 31 1810, MS Abinger c. 21 fols. 24-5) – although several were clearly written. This strongly suggests the elimination of papers by Mary Jane and/or Mary Shelley.

³⁷ Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833* (Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1990); Joanne Bailey, *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England, 1660-1800* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Rebecca Probert, Julie Shaffer, and Joanne Bailey, *A Noble Affair* (Brandram, Kenilworth, 2013).

³⁸ DL/C/0562/178.

³⁹ Lambeth Palace, Process Books D 675, fol 38.

⁴⁰ National Archive Prob 11/1600 113r-4v.

he was so attentive in his attempts to draw her back into his life later on – because he saw her as a woman of abilities and talents who had been exploited by and had fallen foul of the masculine world. Part of that later ‘courting’ may have been motivated by the difficulty such women had in gaining acceptance in any form of society – and, as in the 1790s, Godwin would not let a woman’s reputation trump his own judgment of her worth. But other women behaved differently: it is striking that Godwin does not record meeting any single woman on any occasion on which he saw Elwes between 1799 and 1802 (and only two married women are mentioned, both of whom Godwin meets through her).

Godwin’s later despair over the behaviour of his daughter Mary and step-daughter Jane with Shelley and Byron points to his anxiety that they were exposing themselves to abandonment and rejection by society. His apparent inconsistency was generated by his concern about the costs of questioning convention, and his intellectual commitment to doing so because it allowed people to realize goods, values and activity of mind that the conventions of their patriarchal society precluded.

Godwin’s relationship with Sarah Elwes captures several aspects of his unconventional and conventional character, and something of the difficulties of the norms and conventions governing sociability in domestic space. Each of the three central women in his life had experienced the injustices of the patriarchal order in which they lived. All were abandoned by previous partners in ways that rendered them vulnerable to the respectable world (in Elwes case it is difficult to believe that her husband did not frame her to at least some extent). They were all attractive women.⁴¹ And Godwin seems to have recognised them as victims and actively disdained the ordinary conventions that relegated them firmly to the private world. In keeping with his judgment on Mrs Fell, he responded to people’s minds and their qualities, not to their reputations or superficial attractions. And, in the case of these women, he did partly re-establish them – bringing them into his circles (and joining theirs), challenging conventions, and doing so with a degree of confidence and pride. But in each case, these women indicate how powerful the established norms were. Most of Godwin’s female acquaintance (for all their attractions to radicalism and the new philosophy) did not do what these women did, they were much more careful about the proprieties, more conscious of their reputations, more aware (than Godwin) that they would pay costs for being seen as associating with him in particular ways (and places) or, indeed, for associating with his other women friends (the Diary suggests very low levels of interaction between these women and most of Godwin’s other female friends). Godwin wanted to challenge convention, he wanted meetings of mind with mind, he wanted candour and engagement – and he got these things from his male friends. But he also

⁴¹ See Mary Jane’s complaint in MS. Abinger c. 11, fol. 50r.

wanted something similar with the women he met – and therein lay the problem. Few were unconventional enough.

It is also true that those who appeared less conventional – such as Sarah Anne Parr, Maria Reveley, Nancy Pinkerton, Amelia Alderson, and Emily Kingsman - were able to discomfit him. We do not have his replies to Anne Parr's letters but they would discomfit most men: 'Oh thou unfeeling, cruel, insulting, barbarous man, or to sum up thy iniquities in one word, thou philosopher – art though not ashamed, of conduct so atrocious,? I am so angry that I wou'd marry thee in downright spite, if I did not hold sacred the oath I swore six years ago never to marry – a wise man – ' ⁴²It is also hard to believe that Mary Robinson was not teasing him a little when she started a letter to him the day after he had stayed with her (when she was in extremely poor health): 'I was extremely sorry, my dear philosopher, when I opened my eyes this morning, that you had kept your word and departed without your breakfast.'⁴³ And Mary Hays' awkwardness in explaining that when he called she was in the process of dressing and that she is not yet so Frenchified that she could admit him – seems similarly coy.⁴⁴

One central relationship for Godwin was that with Maria Reveley - but again, there was some misconnect – they seem to have been deeply attracted to the other, and utterly unsure of how to behave about it – as suggested by the sequence of entries in the Diary following an assignation at Greenwich with her (entered in the diary just as Greenwich): Jan 12, 1795 sup at Reveley's, courir dehors; January 19 sup at Reveley's l'eternal; January 24, tea Reveleys t.a.t., l'imposteur. In an extraordinary undated letter to Maria Reveley, after her husband's death (July 6, 1799) – Godwin rehearses their relationship in some detail, giving some idea of its complexity, and the difficulty involved in sustaining it given the prevailing norms, concluding, in frustration, that 'If you are all at once become so thoroughly the slave of miserable etiquette that you must not even risk seeing me alone, you may dine here with my sister...or order me to invite Mrs Fenwick; where the heart is willing, such trifles are easily adjusted.'⁴⁵

Godwin was philosophically committed to being unbounded by convention – yet he often was. Moreover, that commitment made it harder for him to read these more challenging women's behaviour. It seems clear that he was unsure how far to treat them unconventionally and he found negotiating an alternative standard of appropriateness difficult; and even when committed to following through his unconventional conduct, he could see that it was something that should be kept from his friends and acquaintances' inquiring surveillance. But an additional difficulty for

⁴² MS. Abinger c. 2, fol. 88v.

⁴³ MS. Abinger c. 6 fol. 41r.

⁴⁴ M. L. Brooks, ed., *The Correspondence of Mary Hays, British Novelist*, (Lampeter, Mellon Press, 2004), 444, March 10 1796.

⁴⁵ MS. Abinger c. 17, fol. 93r-v.

Godwin in being unconventional for principled reasons, was that he found it hard to judge how far those whose behaviour bent, played with or violated the conventions, were acting from similarly praiseworthy motives. So Godwin's apparent inconsistencies and oddities were partly of a function of his desire for non-conformity and of the difficulty he found in responding to it.

I have tried to suggest some of the complexities of innovation in an age when social conventions governing conduct were deeply rooted and powerful – perhaps less so in London's radical metropolitan culture than in country seats but, nonetheless, still an issue for members of Godwin's social and intellectual circles. Godwin was concerned to jettison convention as an irrational constraint – but that was easier said than done, for others but also for him, especially with respect to women. The result was a complex interaction around calling and dining, above all around being known to spend time alone in domestic space with others. The diary shows that, despite his and his friends' radicalism, these norms were widely shared and complied with by most people, and their transgression was clearly thought to be (and was) socially punished. There were margins for experiment, but these could not be breeched – unless you had nothing to lose, or were prepared to take the chance that the anonymity of the city (or an excursion outside it) would provide protection. There is more research to be done – especially over who would not associate with whom - but I hope to have shown that the Diary gives us access to Godwin's world of political and literary radicalism in the 1790s in a way that allows us to uncover some of the intricacies of the conventions that governed people's sociability, especially in domestic spaces, and that framed their friendships, intimacies and occasional unconventional transgressions.