

GODWIN REVISES HIS PHILOSOPHY: THE INSERTION OF THE LAURA EPISODE IN *CALEB WILLIAMS*

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There were five editions of *Caleb Williams* published in Godwin's lifetime: after the 1794 one, two followed in 1796 and 1797. There was one more in 1816, and the final one revised for the *Standard Novels in English* series in 1831.¹ Throughout this persistent editing, there are no outstanding variations in terms of the story-line. Changes introduced by revisions do not alter the plot greatly except, precisely, for the so-called Laura episode. This scene comes in Chapter 13, volume III, and was inserted in the third, 1797 edition, and subsequently.

Let us have a brief look at Godwin's activity after originally completing his novel. The first edition of *Caleb Williams* was published in May 1794, then in December that year Godwin started revising *Political Justice*. The day after he finished his correction of the treatise, he went back to the novel. As a consequence, the treatise's second edition was published in November 1796, when the novel's second had come out and the third was on its way.² We also find in Godwin's diaries that at the end of 1794 and throughout 1795, Godwin discusses with his friends over God and Christian morality, gratitude and self-love, family affection and the passions, among others (Dep e. 201-2, Abinger MS, Bodleian Library).

Altogether we see that prior to the third edition of *Caleb Williams*, published in 1797, Godwin had been revising his stance on the sentiments of man for man, and of man for his family; and that his reassessments had inspired him to express his updated views in an amended edition of his *Political Justice*. The result was that the second edition of *Political Justice* intends to correct the three errors that, Godwin admitted, his original version contained. He now allows that morality rests on pleasure and pain, and that 'feeling, not judgement, is the cause of human action'. Lastly he repents from his former 'unqualified condemnation of the domestic affections'.³ (CNM 1,53) This paper shows how Godwin

¹ All editions London. 1st ed. B. Crosby, 1794; 2nd ed. G. G. & J. Robinson, 1796; 3rd ed. G.G. & J. Robinson, 1797; 4th ed. W. Simpkin & R. Marshall, 1816; 5th ed. published as *Caleb Williams*, H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1831. References in this paper are incorporated in the text and refer to Mark Philp and Pamela Clemit eds. 1992: *Caleb Williams*. The Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin. Vol. 3. London: William Pickering.

² William Godwin 1796: *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*. London: G. G. & J. Robinson.

³ From 'Principal Revolutions of Opinion; note written 1796-97.

inserts ideas of *Political Justice* into the novel, and also that the Laura episode comes in precisely to extol the importance of family relations⁴.

As a radical fiction writer, Godwin was one of the few who innovated by portraying sensibility tempered by reason.⁵ A clear example of such temperance is that provided by Laura in *Caleb Williams*. But most relevant of all shifts was Godwin's personal and literary relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft. The influence was reciprocal, as she taught her lover and later husband to live not so much according to philosophy, and he taught her to polish her fiction while achieving a radical aim.⁶ Godwin therefore carried out the revision towards the third edition of *Caleb Williams*, which includes the Laura scene, completely under the influence of his liaison with Mary.

Laura is not, as has been suggested, a sentimental projection of Mary's influence on Godwin. She is, on the contrary, a stern advocate of impartial justice - of Godwin's *Political Justice*. But it is true that through her insertion, Godwin makes Caleb aware of the need of philanthropic bonds to man's fellow beings. This point had been made in previous episodes, but the novelty in Laura is precisely that she is a woman, and one who inflicts serious harm on Caleb, by denying him the enjoyment of the family affections he craves. It is under her roof that he thinks of marrying, and that he evokes for the first time the pleasures, unknown to him, of motherly and brotherly love. By contrast, Godwin had expatiated on the instances where Caleb reflects himself against a *father* figure - Mr Falkland, Mr Collins, Brightwell the soldier at Newgate prison, Raymond the gang-leader, and Mr Spurrel the watchmaker.

As the novel reads without the accomplished Laura,⁷ the chapter is merely one of transition, although its very location at the end of Caleb's story contributes to narrative intensity. After being taken to court on a mock hearing and set free, Caleb decides to settle in the pastoral calm of a small Welsh market town.⁸ But the slanderous pamphlet "The Wonderful and Surprising History of Caleb Williams" mysteriously arrives at the village and destroys all communication between the townspeople and Caleb. The young man leaves the place swearing that he will eventually disclose his knowledge of Falkland's guilt.

⁴ Among the influence from the British Moralists, Godwin's reading of Hume was paramount. His doctrines are embedded in the tradition of British empiricism with which Godwin was already familiar.

⁵ See Kelly 1976, p. 240.

⁶ See 'Mary Wollstonecraft and *Political Justice*' in Philp's *Godwin's Political Justice*, pp. 175-92.

⁷ Laura could of course be seen as a successor in a long line of idealised female figures springing from Petrarch's Laura de Noves. See <http://petrarch.petersadlon.com/others.html>.

⁸ The numerous court scenes in *Caleb Williams*, as well as in the later *St Leon* (1799) are modelled on Godwin's own experience at the infamous *Treason Trials* of 1794. Several radicals, among whom were Godwin's friends John Horne Tooke and Thomas Holcroft, were arrested on a charge of High Treason. See Marylin Butler 1984, pp. 169-78 for Godwin's published reaction to these trials.

The chapter, as it reads in the 1797 edition, incorporates the idealised figure of Laura. Her presentation by Godwin is similar to other cases where he resorts to secondary figures. Far-fetched links with the main characters are devised and explained with some narrative expediency that detracts from the story's realism. This however indicates the extent to which Godwin indulged in his choice of a character with Laura's attributes.

Patterns recur, as Laura's orphan childhood echoes that of Caleb and Emily. Laura is left alone in the world after her father's death, and taken on by her future father in law. Again, as often happens in the Godwinian novel, a lonely female marries the man with whom she had been brought up, almost in terms of brother and sister.⁹ She marries her foster-brother, of whom Godwin tells us was 'a shrewd, sensible, rational man' (Variants 326).¹⁰ With these three words, Godwin provides Laura with a spouse who complies with the requisites for the Godwinian enlightened man, while securing the communion of sensibility and reason. But the husband nevertheless slips into oblivion for the remainder of the episode.

Caleb, new at the Welsh town, becomes a welcome visitor at Laura's home and develops a filial attachment. He is the preceptor of the son and special friend of the daughter, whom he hopes to marry in the future. Again an incest pattern is restated, as Caleb 'respects and considers the respectable Laura as a mother' (Variants 327).

Caleb's dreams of a life of tranquillity far from Falkland's oppression are challenged again. And it is here that Godwin inserts one of his *deus ex machina* coincidences: Laura is the daughter of a Neapolitan, who had come to die in this obscure Welsh town.¹¹ His Italian origin serves a purpose, as it connects him with one count Malvesi, who had come into a dispute with Falkland while he was on his Continental Tour. The Neapolitan dutifully leaves a pack of letters full of praise for Falkland. Like most written evidence in this novel, the letters come into the possession of a partial arbiter of justice, Laura in this case, and Falkland's ambivalent honour is yet again safeguarded. Thus Laura's father's letters prove one more vehicle for the preservation of the status quo that Caleb is inefficiently braving.

Overawed by the hatred inspired by the inflammatory pamphlet, Caleb's mental universe collapses. It appears evident in Godwin's use of such surrender to the powers of fear and horror that a discord opens between *Political Justice*

⁹ Godwin's semi-incestuous couples include Emily and Tyrrel in a subtle way, Fleetwood and Mary McNeil, and Mandeville and Henrietta. The pattern would find echoes in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and even more relevantly, in her *Matilda* (1819).

¹⁰ See note 1. Page numbers are inserted in the text. The word "Variants" appears when the quotation comes from an edition other than the first.

¹¹ The similarity between this Neapolitan and Prospero is indeed mentioned by Godwin. Moreover, Laura resembles Miranda in that both women have been secluded from worldly intercourse.

and *Caleb Williams*. Caleb's inability to use his rational powers is justified through the theory of the sublimity of horror and its effects on human reason. Godwin here draws from Burke's *Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)¹²: 'Mr Falkland had always been to my imagination an object of wonder, and that which excites our wonder we scarcely ever suppose ourselves competent to analyse'. (CW 257) This is also manifest in Laura's judgement of Falkland, whom she had only known through her father's letters. Idealisation works through persistent distancing from the object of wonder. On the grounds of such idealisation, Laura accuses Caleb of treason: 'I am astonished you have the effrontery to pronounce his name. That name has been a denomination... for the most exalted of mortals, the wisest and most generous of men'. (Variants 331)

Things do not evolve in the chaotic world of *Things as They Are* as they would in *Political Justice*. When Caleb resorts to 'the accomplished Laura' for sympathy, the action acquires an unexpected turn. Pledging his authenticity, Caleb hopes to find ultimate justice in Laura, justice of the type that Godwin himself would have advocated: 'she will not cast me off unheard, nor without strictly examining a question on all sides, in which every thing that is valuable to a person she once esteemed, may be involved'. (Variants 329)

But to his chagrin, Laura rejects to admit Caleb in her sight. The boy then sneaks into her presence, as he 'preferred taking her unprepared, and not warmed against me by any previous contention'. (Variants, 329) Caleb forces their meeting and his explanation because he is an artful master in the use of words, as his exercise in the fields of poetry and etymology had shown:¹³ 'In my incidental reading, I noted the manner in which words were used, and applied these remarks to the illustration of my general enquiry'. (Variants, 328) Enquiry seems to be the constant in Caleb's growth, a personality trait favoured by his access to Falkland's library from the beginning of the story.

In accordance to his previous roguish schemes, Caleb leaps over the garden paling, and hides among the bushes. As he accosts Laura, a conversation begins which is more a dialogue between abstractions. The philosophical relevance of the encounter is guaranteed, as both Laura and Caleb talk about reality, but stay out of it. According to *Political Justice*, whose jargon Caleb uses, a man has a right to be heard. But does Laura behave according to *Political Justice*? In its central set of dicta, which the third edition still incorporates, Godwin had maintained his blind belief in the invincibility of truth: 'Sound reasoning and truth, when adequately communicated must always be victorious over error: Sound reasoning and truth are capable of being so communicated: Truth is omnipotent:

¹² On the connections between the conservative politician and Godwin's radical work, see Marilyn Butler's seminal article, 'Godwin, Burke and *Caleb Williams*'. *Essays in Criticism* 32: 237-57.

¹³ Godwin had felt an attraction for the figure of Eugene Aram, a scholar who committed a crime but later led an exemplary life, until he was tried and executed.

...Man is perfectible, or in other words, susceptible of perpetual improvement'. (PPW 3,10)¹⁴.

It appears, then, that if Laura is in error, it is because nobody has communicated the truths relevant to the case to her. Caleb could do that, but again it seems that with her, sound reasoning cannot take place and truth cannot be adequately communicated. Caleb voices the rights of man as expressed in *Political Justice*, but in opposition to this, Laura behaves in a blind way that detracts from the faith in man's perfectibility that envelops the treatise. Laura is an obstinately unfair version of the Rousseauistic Noble Savage, not versed in the institutions of men. She prefers to preserve the integrity of her understanding, at the cost of cutting her bonding to society: 'Virtue, sir, consists in actions, and not in words. The good man and the bad, are characters precisely opposite, not characters distinguished from each other by imperceptible shades... I do not wish to have my understanding perverted'. (Variants 330)

Caleb shows Laura that truth must consist of more than just one side, but Laura adheres to the *Political Justice* belief that truth's very nature is 'single and uniform'. (PPW 3,104) It is therefore Laura that stands staunchly by the abstractions of philosophy. The very clash of interests between Caleb and Laura suggests that the ideology of *Political Justice* is logical to extremes, a philosophical conjecture, but fails if transferred to a community of men, albeit fictional. What Godwin learnt progressively, and then positively with the aid of Mary Wollstonecraft, is precisely, that not all intellects can be taught to appreciate the same truths, or indulge the same feelings and passions. Godwin would affirm in the third edition of *Political Justice* that 'passion is so far from being incompatible with reason, that it is inseparable from it'. (PPW 3,39)

Caleb retorts to Laura that she would think differently, had she lived among social commerce. The young man cannot believe that she should repose all her rationality on the premise that ignorance is the 'safest preservative of integrity'. (Variants, 331) This stands in direct contradiction to the assertions of *Political Justice*, a contradiction which finds an echo in Caleb's bitter words: 'The pride of philosophy has taught us to treat man as an individual. He is no such thing. He holds, necessarily, indispensably, to his species'. (Variants 332)

Laura's mistaken values add to the social picture of 'Thins As They Are', as the novel's subtitle goes. After all, Godwin had meant to offer 'a general review of the modes of domestic and unrecorded despotism by which man becomes the destroyer of man'. (Variants, 279) If at first Godwin had maintained that it is in the midst of society that man develops his truly social character, an essential part of his human nature, his matured views, which he expressed in the revisions to *Caleb Williams*, stressed the new interest in personal, private attachments. Laura therefore encompasses the importance of the familial cares for a

¹⁴ The edition used is Mark Philp and Pamela Clemit eds. 1993: *The Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*. 7 vols. London: William Pickering.

loner like Caleb, but also the dangers of misunderstanding the message of abstract truth that *Political Justice* carried. After a series of episodes in Godwin's own existence, he learned to amend his philosophy so it would fit his fiction in a more satisfactory, realistic and human way.

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