

"Minerva's favourite Sholar":¹ Penelope Aubin Reconsidered

Little critical attention has been paid to the writings of what Richetti refers to as 'justly neglected spirits' such as Penelope Aubin. Those studies which do exist tend to concentrate on her 'strenuously pious efforts' which, according to Richetti and doubtless many others who do not even consider her in their work, 'provoke little more than bemused wonder at the taste of the age'.²

Richetti argues somewhat contemptuously, 'The hysterical romantic fustian of [the] lady novelists is clearly unreadable'(p.267). The term 'lady novelists' indicates something approaching the dismissive attitude towards women novelists current in the eighteenth century but which one would hope not to see in the twentieth.³ Comments such as: 'The incompetence at realistic narration of the sorry hacks and well-meaning ladies who produced this fiction is thus not really an issue', appear to indicate a paternalistic toleration for the perceived lesser skills of women writers while relegating them firmly to the level of 'sorry hacks'. He continues: 'the narratives they wrote were geared to well-known narrative [and moral] clichés'(p.264), as if they had failed to live up to literary standards of realism which, as he himself notes, had yet to be established.

This essay seeks to reassess Penelope Aubin's fiction in relation to contemporary cultural debates concerning gender and morality. Writers throughout the eighteenth century were concerned with the nature of virtue, the legal double standard and the disabilities forced on women by the laws regulating sexual conduct; in an eighteenth-century context, virtue is a legal as well as a moral issue. Mullan argues that Richardson, and male writers of all eras, 'isolates virginity as [the] essential representation' of femininity.⁴ Yet this attitude, while no doubt based partly on ideas of mythologised feminine purity, whose prurient angle is exposed in *Fanny Hill* (1749), is also derived from property laws. Lovelacian style lechery is fuelled partly by ideas of destroying another man's property. Equally, concern for a mother's or a wife's chastity is strongly related to a desire to protect patrilineal inheritance structures.

Mandeville argued in *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue* (1723) that honour, a word used almost synonymously with virtue, is 'a Chimera...an Invention of Moralists and Politicians', which 'signifies a certain Principle of Vertue not related to Religion'. While Mandeville is deliberately provocative and so not an entirely reliable mouthpiece for eighteenth-century thinking, he does highlight the disparity between twentieth-century assumptions about eighteenth-century virtue and those which actually framed eighteenth-century behaviour. He distinguishes humorously but pertinently between social and genuine virtue: 'Virtue bids us subdue, but good Breeding only requires we should hide our Appetites'.⁵

Eighteenth-century concepts of virtue are surprisingly pragmatic and are predicated not simply on religious ethics as we might expect but on issues of power and property, which were often related by way of inheritance law. Literary commentators tend to view issues such as rape purely as narrative strategies within a sentimental framework. Todd notes usefully that poverty is the test of the sentimental man, for example Fielding's David Simple and Goldsmith's Dr Primrose, but that sexual assault is the test of the sentimental woman.⁶ Yet sexual assault is also presented in a clear socio-legal context which eighteenth-century writers assume we recognise.

Eighteenth-century fiction is obsessed with the topic of virtue not simply because of moral feeling but because it is related to the debate concerning women's position before the law. The sexual trials Richetti rightly sees as motifs to demonstrate heroines' moral strength in Aubin's novels also stand as a running implicit commentary on women's vulnerability under patriarchal law.

Richetti argues pertinently that popular narrative is useful because 'by extracting [its] ideological strategies'(p.263), we obtain 'the most prominent guide to the uses of fiction for its readers...a profound self-portrait of the age'(p.264). I would argue that socio-legal critique is a fundamental part of the 'ideological strategy' of

¹ Penelope Aubin, *The Life and Adventures of The Lady Lucy*, 1726 (London: Garland, 1973), p.2.

² John J.Richetti, *Popular Fiction Before Richardson: Narrative Patterns, 1700-1739* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), p.262. Sarah Prescott discusses Aubin's self-constructed moral persona, both as writer and preacher, in 'Penelope Aubin and The Doctrine of Morality: A Reassessment of the Pious Woman Novelist', *Women's Writing*, 1, no 1 (1994), pp.99-112.

³ M.Bowden considers the problems facing women novelists in 'Mary Davys: Self-Presentation and the Woman Writer's Reputation in the Early Eighteenth Century', *Women's Writing*, 3, no 1(1996), pp.17-33.

⁴ John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1988), p.67.

⁵ Bernard Mandeville, *Remarks added to The Fable of the Bees* (1714) in 1723, edited by P.Harth (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp.212,106.

⁶ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), p.97.

popular narrative.⁷ Spender acknowledges that 'By the second half of the eighteenth century most of the women writers of serious fiction were concerned with ethical questions'.⁸ Yet the same is clearly true of earlier writers such as Aubin and Haywood. The novel facilitated discussion and analysis of social, religious and legal issues; women were particularly empowered by the genre because they could raise issues which they could not raise elsewhere.

It is worth remembering that despite a rise in middle class female literacy during the eighteenth century, the majority of the reading population was male. Few women could afford to buy or subscribe to novels and the circulating libraries did not emerge until the 1740s. However, women formed a growing and increasingly influential reading public, which turned to novels for pleasure but also for discussion of issues which interested them and which reflected their daily concerns; hence the rise of the feminocentric novel.⁹

In women's novels, women were presented with hitherto unknown access not only to ideas which may have been new to them, but with an informed feminine perspective on issues which they would have been taught to regard as beyond their sphere, for example law and finance.¹⁰ Women would have had a general awareness of law because trials, for example those held at the local Quarter Sessions, were discussed in a variety of arenas, from pamphlets to taverns and people's homes. Yet women were not educated about the law in the way most men of any social consequence were. Men from the upper classes were brought up with the knowledge that they would play an active part in law, probably serving as Justices. Women, on the other hand, were taught that law was both decided and executed by men and thus they could have no executive rôle. In discussing seriously aspects of the law, women's novels reject this gendering of the legislature.

Munzo Rogers argues that Aubin's romances do not show 'insight into woman's nature or position'. Yet novels such as *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil* (1721) clearly consider issues of gender and morality, together with women's legal position, particularly in relation to sexual assault. The Count of Longueville tells his wife Ardelisa, 'remember both your Duty to yourself and me. Permit not a vile Infidel to dishonour you, resist to death'.¹¹ Female virtue was determined in relation to men, rather than being seen as an innate moral quality. His comment reflects the belief that women's chastity constituted part of their husband's honour. Rogers notes that chastity was 'a virtue enforced by patriarchy and usually [implied] men's property right in women'. Yet she does not address the legal context and seems not to recognise the consequences of this legal position, showing surprise at the way in which Aubin's heroes view their wives, as 'property that would be disastrously damaged by rape'.¹²

Rogers does not allow for the possibility that Aubin is challenging this view of women by presenting it in all its objectionable absurdity. The scene owes much to romantic convention: heroines were expected to protect their virtue with their lives, partly in order to present themselves unsullied to the hero, thus reflecting legal concerns regarding inheritance. Rather than accepting the convention, it seems probable that Aubin is using it to question women's legal position; hence she presents relatively strong women and nondescript men. The romantic ideal of chastity may be an instance of feminine strength rather than indicating passive acceptance of androcentric laws. Ardelisa seems to remonstrate with him for not recognising her strength, 'Fear not my Virtue, I'm resolv'd never to yield whilst Life shall last'(p.28).

The ugliness of the Count's language underlines the real physical threat and ensures that sympathies are directed towards Ardelisa. The Count is not a cruel man and clearly does not regard Ardelisa as an object but, in accordance with the law, he sees her chastity in terms of his honour and ultimately presumably in terms of legitimacy of potential heirs. His language must have seemed rather excessive even in the 1720s: it is too egotistical and fails to begin to see that rape would be a deeply personal injury to his wife: 'let me not be so compleatly curs'd, to hear you live, and are debauch'd'(pp.27-8). As a woman, Aubin is perhaps more sympathetic to the personal nature of rape. She is aware that legally and publicly it is seen primarily as a property issue but that it is in reality a private threat, an emotional and religious issue in that her heroines genuinely believe in chastity for religious reasons.

⁷ See Beth Swan, *Fictions of Law: An Investigation of the Law in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1997).

⁸ Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: 100 good women writers before Jane Austen* (London: Pandora, 1986), p.2.

⁹ See in particular discussions in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Woman, Literature and Theory*, edited by E.Showalter (London: Virago, 1986); J.Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); D.Spender, *Mothers of the Novel*.

¹⁰ Janet Pearson's discussion of the figure of the female reader in the 1770s and 1780s also holds true for the earlier fiction of the 1720s: 'the reader constructed by such articles might equally well be alert, well-informed about current cultural debates, broad in sympathies, and resistant to prefabricated ideological packages'. Pearson, "'Books, my greatest joy': Constructing the Female Reader in *The Lady's Magazine*", *Women's Writing*, 3, no 1 (1996), pp.3-15 (p.6).

¹¹ Penelope Aubin, *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil* (1721) (London: Garland, 1973), p.27.

¹² Katherine Munzo Rogers, *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp.116-7,125,117.

Aubin presents her heroines' virtue as a form of nobility and spiritual strength: 'Belinda had a soul too noble to submit to gratify a Villain's lust'. In order to avoid potential rape, Belinda goes out literally and figuratively into the wilderness, where she 'wander'd three Days and three Nights'. Lest the biblical significance of the number three escape the inattentive reader, Aubin stresses the moral register of her text: 'Thus the Almighty try'd her Faith and Patience, but design'd not she, who fled from Sin, should perish'. What follows is likely to prove disconcerting for the reader: Belinda, who has gone into the wilderness with no food, trusting in Providence, faints on the third day but when she regains consciousness, she sees 'a She-Goat, with a little Kid [standing] by her...the Kid she laid hold of...and with a Knife she had in her Pocket, she stabb'd it. They lick'd up the warm Blood, and eat the raw Flesh'.¹³

The regenerating power of blood is significant from Old Testament times. This rather Gothic passage may be a reworking of the story of Abraham, prepared to sacrifice Isaac but spared the pain of doing so by God providing an alternative sacrifice in the form of a ram.¹⁴ The detail of the description would indicate that we are meant to view it as a significant act; the context invites us to interpret it as a kind of ritual sacrifice to redeem the women from destruction, a feminocentric moral parable of faith in the midst of extreme hardship rewarded.

There is some tension between the religious symbolism of Aubin's texts, which at times read like sermons, her wish to challenge socio-legal tradition and her desire to be accepted by the reader: she both challenges her society's rather reductive notions of virtuous femininity, and goes some way to appeasing them. Her heroines are depicted as resourceful and strong, even to the point of physically fighting and killing, and yet delicate, as befits virtuous eighteenth-century ladies: we learn that Belinda's 'Constitution' was 'more delicate than the French Women's'(p.121) and she believes that her experience in the wilderness will kill her. She is rescued from her potentially unseemly adventures¹⁵ but not before she has contemplated, Clarissa-like, death and the hereafter, dispensing spiritual advice to those around her: 'we are all born to part, and die...how necessary is it for us then, to improve those few Hours Providence gives us, to prepare for Eternity'(pp.121-2).

Ardelisa in *Count de Vinevil* is similarly pious: '[Ardelisa] and her Maid...pass'd the time in Prayer and Discourse, wherein they convers'd so piously, and express'd themselves so excellently, that it is pity the World is not favour'd with a Recital of all they said'(pp.53-4). When captured by Osmin she appeals first to God, 'Just God! what wilt thou do with us? Direct me now, and help me in this great Distress'. She decides to kill Osmin, or die in the attempt, rather than be raped, 'Sure it can be no Sin to save my Virtue with his blood'(p.66), seemingly accepting her husband's injunction, 'my dear Lord commanded me to suffer Death, rather than yield to lustful Infidels', believing it to be supported by scripture 'Christianity enjoins it'.¹⁶

Violetta, raped by Osmin, feels that she has not lived up to this romantic ideal of chastity: 'I submitted to the fatal necessity of my Circumstances'. Ardelisa's 'heroick Conduct' in resisting rape 'has convinc'd' her that she 'did not what [she] ought: She never would have permitted a lustful *Turk* to possess her, but, by his Death would have preserv'd her Honour; or, resisting to Death, not have surviv'd it'(p.91). This romantic model may owe something to early Catholic teaching, for example Vives's *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1523). Vives, citing Quintilian, approves the model of Lucretia: 'she thrust a sword into her body... that the pure mind might be separated from the defiled body'. While he does not endorse suicide, he warns, 'she that hath once lost her honesty, should think there is nothing left'(p.107).

The idea of attempting to kill a rapist in self-defence is also related to contemporary legal debates concerning rape and its punishment. Interestingly, Violetta seems to be aware that, as Blackstone explains, 'English law...justifies a woman, killing one who attempts to ravish her'.¹⁷ Aubin presents just such a case in *Life and*

¹³ Penelope Aubin, *The Life of Mme de Beaumont*, 1721 (London: Garland, 1973), pp.118,119,120.

¹⁴ See Genesis chapter 22.

¹⁵ Charlotte Lennox's Countess warns Arabella: 'The Word Adventures carries in it so free and licentious a sound' that is cannot 'with Propriety be apply'd to those few and natural Incidents which compose the History of a Woman of Honour'. Charlotte Lennox, *The Female Quixote* (1752), edited by M.Dalziel (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.327.

¹⁶ The Bible of course enjoins no such thing, although some early Catholic moralists such as Juan Vives, appear to suggest that it is better to die than to 'allow' oneself to be raped; Vives recounts, with some enthusiasm, narratives of men killing daughters and sisters for the loss of chastity: 'In Spain by our father's days in Tarraco, two bretheren that thought their sister had been a maid...as soon as she was delivered of her child, they thrust swords into her belly and slew her, the midwife looking on...neither it is marvel that these [murders] be done of fathers and friends...this I wolde not that only maidens should think spoken unto them, but also married women'. Juan Vives, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1523), in *Daughters, Wives and Widows: Writings by Men about Women and Marriage in England, 1500-1640*, ed.J.Larsen Klein (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), pp.105-7 (p.106).

¹⁷ Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries On The Laws Of England* (1753), sixth edition, 4 vols (Dublin, 1775), IV,p.181. Blackstone provides a comprehensive account of eighteenth-century law and its origins and remains the most respected and widely used legal commentator of his age.

Adventures of the Lady Lucy, when a nobleman attempts to seduce Arminda, slipping into her bed while she is asleep.¹⁸ She does not realise until morning, a familiar convention but one which reflects contemporary beliefs that an adult woman could not be raped by one man, unless she were unconscious or her faculties were impaired by drugs. Richardson's Lovelace, a self-styled expert on the subject, argues: 'whatever rapes have been attempted, none ever were committed, one person to one person' without a woman's 'yielding reluctance'(p.719).

Arminda resists rape and so Constantine threatens to spread scandalous rumours, knowing that 'a Woman's Reputation always suffers by such Discourse, tho she be entirely virtuous'(p.108).¹⁹ Aubin's work testifies to the vulnerability of women under the contemporary legal system, which failed to protect them on almost every level. In spite of the social importance of female chastity and reputation, the law did not protect women from slander, a point which Constantine is able to exploit. Blackstone explains that a man was protected against 'malicious, scandalous, and slanderous words, tending to his damage and derogation', which might 'exclude him from society' or 'impair or hurt his trade or livelihood'. He did not have to prove damage resulting from slander but could sue 'upon the probability that it might happen'. Yet 'the purest maid, or the chastest matron' can be called 'the most meretricious and incontinent of women, with impunity'.²⁰

Arminda is somewhat unfortunate, to say the least: during a subsequent rape attempt, Constantine threatens that if she cries out and a servant comes, 'I'll kill him in your sight, and lay his dead Body by you; so that your Reputation shall be blacken'd, tho you are innocent'. Arminda turns instinctively to Heaven and then to the sword, as if appropriating the traditional rôle of male protector, here using the ultimate symbol of gentlemanly protection, the sword, to save herself: 'I lift my Soul to Heaven...grasp'd the Pomel of his Sword, and with a sudden struggle drew it forth, and stabb'd him in the Thigh'. She continues to show surprising presence of mind in explaining the rope ladder and blood on the balcony, by saying that she has defended herself against a thief. Aubin may be hinting at the popular jocular association of rape and theft but the seriousness with which she views Constantine's behaviour is indicated by his subsequent death.²¹

Aubin presents the threat of rape from a woman's viewpoint, exposing the male-dominated social structure which empowers men and renders women vulnerable. However, in choosing to show Arminda's courage in outwitting her attacker, Aubin presents an alternative to passive virtue: Arminda is perhaps an early vision of the empowered woman; not politically emancipated but strong and crucially, victorious, thus reclaiming a potentially tragic scene. Arminda's escape is problematic in that, however justified her behaviour may be by law, she has killed a man; perhaps conscious of the potential difficulties, Aubin does not allow us to focus on Constantine, denying us any detail concerning the death and having him die 'off stage'.

Violetta in *Count de Vinevil*, provides an even more difficult version of the traditional 'trial by virtue' narrative in that she is not only raped but forgives her rapist, 'saw him with a Wife's Eyes, and thought [herself] oblig'd to do so'. Through Father Francis, Aubin provides a somewhat ironic view of Catholic precepts, on which English canon law was based. He tells her, 'as you were single, a Virgin, and made his by the Chance of War, it was no Sin in you to yield to him, and it would have been wilful Murder to have kill'd him...nay, a Sin not to have been faithful to his Bed, whilst he is living you ought not to marry'(p.92), as if she had married him; indeed she confesses somewhat surprisingly, 'I even loved him'(p.91).

The fact that she comes to love him goes some way to lessening the reader's shock at Father Francis's teaching but may also be explained by the eighteenth-century tendency to use the terms 'rape' and 'seduction'

¹⁸ Sleep was thought to provide a good opportunity for rape. Lovelace seems aware of this tradition and comments to Hickman, 'Perhaps some liberty was taken with her, when she was asleep. Do you think no lady ever was taken at such an advantage?'. He suggests that women are aware of the risk, 'ladies are very shy of trusting themselves with the modestest of our sex, when they are disposed to sleep; and why so, if they did not expect that advantages would be taken of them at such times?', again implying passive if not active female consent. S.Richardson, *Clarissa* (1747-8), edited by A.Ross (London: Penguin, 1985), p.1094.

¹⁹ Fielding presents the same problem in *Amelia*: Miss Mathews threatens to expose Hebbers as a seducer if he does not marry her but he sneers 'whose honour will you injure?'. Henry Fielding, *Amelia* (1751), edited by D.Blewett (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p.45.

²⁰ Sir W.Blackstone, *Commentaries* (1753), twelfth edition, 1793, edited by E.Christian, I,p.445. Blackstone's *Commentaries* were frequently revised and so it is occasionally useful to use later editions, which contain some detail not in the earlier editions. References are to the 1775 edition unless otherwise indicated. Slander was not of course actionable for common people but was deemed 'an atrocious injury' to 'high and respectable characters'. *Commentaries*, 1775 edition, III,pp.123-4.

²¹ Fielding lampoons such vigorous defence of chastity later in the century in *Shamela* (1741), where Shamela openly discusses her defence techniques: 'After having made a pretty free Use of my Fingers, without any great Regard to the Parts I attack'd, I counterfeit a Swoon'. Henry Fielding, *Shamela* (1741), edited by D.Brooks-Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.330.

almost synonymously.²² Women were often accused of passive consent in rape cases, particularly if they became pregnant, since it was believed that pregnancy implied consent. Richardson's *Lovelace* reflects popular belief when he argues 'It is cruel to ask a modest woman for her consent. It is creating difficulties to both'.²³ His idiosyncratic interpretation of the word 'rape' reflects popular belief: 'there may be consent in struggle; there may be yielding in resistance'(p.557), telling Belford, 'thou dost not imagine that I expect a *direct* consent - My main hope is but in a yielding reluctance'(p.719). This belief goes some way to explaining social convention, which often regarded marriage as suitable redress for rape. Blackstone explains that early English law decreed that a rape victim '(by consent of the judge and her parents) might redeem the offender from the execution of his sentence' that is, death, 'by accepting him for her husband'(IV,p.212). The context for such scenes in both *Aubin* and *Richardson* is complex and bears witness to the difficulty in resolving tensions between the often contradictory influences of moral feeling and socio-legal values. It also demonstrates the importance of approaching texts in their socio-historical context.

What differentiates *Violetta's* case from *Ardelisa's* is that when *Violetta* was raped, she did not already belong to a man: 'in *Ardelisa*, who was marry'd to another, it would have been a horrid Crime to suffer another Man for to possess her'(p.92). Ironically, the 'horrid crime' refers not to the rape but to the possibility of a woman not dying in an attempt to defend her husband's property rights vested in her.²⁴ *Munzo Rogers* objects to *Violetta's* situation as 'the most ludicrous example'(p.117) of men regarding women as property. Yet she does not recognise that this is an accurate presentation of the legal position. Women were regarded as 'belonging' to their husbands in some ill-defined way. *Sheridan's* eighteenth-century dictionary defines 'property' not simply as an object but as a 'right of possession'. His definition of 'to possess' is particularly useful: 'To have as an owner, to be master of; to enjoy; to have power over'.²⁵

Only widows and unmarried women over twenty one had an individual legal identity. The legal identity of women under twenty one was vested in the father, that of a wife in her husband. Blackstone explains, 'By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law.' Thus 'the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband'(I,p.442). Since wives had no separate legal identity, injuries to the wife could be considered as injuries to the husband and legal action would be brought in both names. If the injury to the wife was severe and deprived the husband of her 'company and assistance', he could bring a separate legal action to obtain 'satisfaction in damages'(III,p.140). There are clear parallels with the offence of beating a man's servant so that he cannot 'perform his work', an injury based on 'the property which the master has by his contract acquired in the labour of the servant'(pp.141-3); the implications for the marriage contract are significant.

The law regarded rape primarily as a violation of masculine property rights, with prosecutions being brought by fathers or husbands. A father could only bring an action against a seducer or rapist if he could prove that his daughter was, as a result of the rape, 'less able to assist him as a servant, or that' the rapist 'in the pursuit of his daughter was a trespasser upon his premises'.²⁶ Blackstone defines trespass rather broadly as: 'any transgression or offence against the law of nature, of society...whether it relates to a man's person, or his property'(III,p.208). The action for loss of services, established by 1700, only protected girls whose parents could afford to keep them at home, where they could be regarded as being in their fathers' service.

Blackstone explains that 'notice is only taken of the wrong done to the superior of the parties', that is the father or husband and admits 'the loss of the inferior by such injuries is totally unregarded'. He explains that 'the inferior hath no kind of property'(III,p.142) in the superior and so 'can suffer no loss or injury'(p.143). *Aubin's* male characters seem obsessed with the notion of women as property but their comments are not simply expressions of individual misogyny but what is effectively the misogyny of an entire system; in encouraging the reader to reject such attitudes in the text, *Aubin* invites us to challenge them in reality.²⁷

²² Judith Norton insists on making the distinction in *Clarissa*: 'you have fallen by the brutal force of a barbarous ravisher, and not by the vile arts of a seducing lover'(p.990).

²³ S.Richardson, *Clarissa* (1747-8), edited by B.A.Wright, 4 vols, London: Dent, 1967, II,p.147. The Dent edition, based on the third edition of *Clarissa*, contains some material not in the Penguin edition, which is based on Richardson's first edition.

²⁴ *Vives's* influential conduct book, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1523), provides interesting insight into traditional Catholic teaching: 'know thou this, woman, that the chastity and honesty which thou hast is not thine, but committed and betaken unto thy keeping by thine husband. Wherefore thou dost the more wrong to give away that thing which is another body's, without the owner's license'(p.113).

²⁵ T.Sheridan, *A General Dictionary of the English Language* (1780), 2 vols (Menston, England: The Scholar Press, 1967).

²⁶ Blackstone, *Commentaries* (1753), 1793 edition, III,p.142.

²⁷ *Lovelace* provides a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the laws which regarded women, and thus rape, in terms of property, referring to rape as theft and arguing that he 'ought to be acquitted of everything but a common theft, a private larceny'.

The issue of rape is further problematised by traditional religious teaching. Vives's popular *Instruction of A Christian Woman* (1529) provides a useful example of the values which would presumably have informed much of Aubin's Catholic education. Vives writes confidently, 'Virginity was ever an holy thing even among thieves, breakers of sanctuary, ungracious livers, murderers', romanticising it in a manner which comes far closer to Richetti's alleged 'hysterical fustian' than Aubin's narratives do: 'Virginity hath so marvelous honor in it that wild lions regard it'(p.104).

Taken in the context of such teaching, still popular in the early eighteenth century, Aubin's accounts reveal themselves by contrast, in spite of the conventions of romance, to be almost brutal in their realism: many of the women in her narratives, though clearly virtuous, do not escape rape. Vives teaches, 'We have read of women that have been taken and let go again of the most unruly soldiers only for the reverence of the name of virginity'(p.104). Aubin is clearly aware of such comforting mythology but she reworks it: her female characters are sometimes spared but it is their ingenuity or their status as married women, not their virginity which saves them. Belinda informs her captor in *The Life of Mme de Beaumont* (1721): 'I am already marry'd, and with child' and he replies, 'fear nothing from me, Virtue and Honour are as dear to me as to you'(p.68). It is unclear whether he spares her because she is another man's property or because she is now a mother figure in his eyes.

His respect for her status as wife and mother also denotes his honour as a Catholic noble. His behaviour reflects Aubin's ideals of masculine honour and highlights the moral shortcomings of men such as Glandore, kinsman to Belinda's husband, who threatens her, 'oblige me not to use Force'(p.60), suggesting that they 'enjoy one another without public Scandal', seeing her status as wife and mother-to-be as protection: 'You are, I know, with Child, and therefore need fear no discovery'(p.61).

There is some tension in Aubin's narratives between her belief in marriage as a religious sacrament, a spiritual and emotional union, and her rejection of the socio-legal constraints which it entailed. Her position is articulated through Father Francis in *Count de Vinevil*: 'Our wise Creator inclin'd us to love one another so tenderly, with a more glorious Design than that of only propagating Mankind; it was to render us useful to each other in the greatest Concern of life, that of obtaining eternal Happiness'(p.59). Interestingly, Aubin uses a Catholic priest to refute traditional Catholic teaching that marriage is primarily for procreation, preferring to advocate affective and spiritual bonds.

Aubin's heroines defend their chastity out of respect for their own honour as well as their husbands' but they reject the notion that they are their husbands' property. Belinda insists on seeing the insult as purely personal, declaring, 'if you force me like a Brute, what Satisfaction will you reap? I shall then hate and scorn you, loath your Embraces...you shall drag me sooner to my Grave, than to your Bed'(p.62).

Aubin's work expresses the discomfort felt by many women of her time, her heroines clearly declaring their chastity to be a personal and moral issue, the language of the would-be rapists expressing crude sentiments of property, for example, a robber rescues Belinda only to tell her, 'I have purchas'd you with the hazard of my life...I hope you will not grant me the Possession of your Person with reluctance'(pp.112-3); Mahomet threatens in *Count de Vinevil* to 'force Ardelisa to give up all her treasures...and glut [him]self in her embraces'(p.35). It is particularly damning to see the proximity of heathen attitudes as expressed by Mahomet, where rape is presented as the custom of his country, to European attitudes.

In giving her male characters such language, Aubin is not simply denouncing the practices of rakes and heathen such as Mahomet and Osmin; she is challenging traditional English teaching regarding female sexuality and morality, as expressed by Vives, who warns of the dangers of female sexuality and claims that 'no man will take [a woman's virtue] against her will...except she be willing', seemingly unaware of the inherent contradiction. While appearing to praise chaste young women, he suggests clearly that rape is only possible if a woman is not sufficiently virtuous. He expresses traditional notions of female sexuality as 'low and vile', distracting men 'from the study and thinking of high and excellent things'(p.109), presenting female sexuality as a dangerous force which men cannot resist: the onus is on women to repress their sexuality and therefore avoid drawing men into sin.

Aubin presents a number of male characters who claim that they are unable to resist feminine charms, but the texts clearly repudiate such views and reveal the men to be weak and sinful, the women to be strong and virtuous. In *Mme de Beaumont* we read that Glandore 'was resolved to enjoy [Belinda], tho by Force, and determined to run all Dangers rather than miss of what his headstrong Passion persuaded him he could not live without'(p.59)'.

Aubin challenges the notion of female culpability for rape but also bravely challenges the prevailing judgement that women lost their virtue after rape, rejecting the notion that virtue is a commodity which can be stolen against the woman's will. Antonia argues in Mandeville's *The Virgin Unmask'd* (1709) that a virtuous

Clarissa, p.1439. Lovelace's use of legal language to support his rakish humour provides an implicit criticism of the law. Through Lovelace, Richardson is perhaps criticising Lovelace's peers, responsible for the laws he finds amusing but which many female readers at least, find offensive.

woman cannot 'lose her Honour, unless she be ravish'd; and then 'tis a Question, whether she loses it or not'. Lucinda replies, no doubt echoing popular views, 'a Woman that is murder'd, loses her Life as much as she that dies of a Fever.'²⁸ The issue was still being debated at the end of the century: 'miserable beyond all names of misery is the condition of a being, who could be degraded without its own consent!'.²⁹ Aubin goes so far as to declare that Violetta 'thought only of retiring to a religious House, to weep for a Sin, of which she was in reality altogether innocent'(p.90).

Aubin overturns popular traditions of 'fallen' women dying or retiring to convents by providing Violetta with a suitor, Monsieur de Feuillade. He is aware of the history of her rape and subsequent cohabitation with Osmin, yet refers to her as 'a Lady of the nicest Vertue'(p.113). He insists, 'You are not pre-ingag'd, the Villain, who possess'd that lovely Person, had no Title to it but lawless Force; he neither was a Christian nor a Husband'(p.116). Even he focuses on notions of property; if Violetta had been 'pre-ingag'd', she would have belonged by law to her intended, which would have aggravated the crime of rape in that Osmin would have infringed another man's property rights. The word 'title' reinforces this, in that it is a legal term denoting property rights, often used in the eighteenth century regarding husbands' rights over the bodies of their wives.³⁰ Osmin dies and so Violetta is free to marry, although she insists on a period of spiritual contemplation before doing so, a period cut short by the entreaties of her friends, enabling Aubin perhaps to pay her dues to convention by showing Violetta's instincts to be impeccably virtuous but also to indicate that six months in a convent is unnecessarily strict.

Careful reading of such narratives demonstrates clearly that Aubin does not regard sexual assault purely as a romance motif. The sheer number of sexual assaults in her narratives, the ugly detail of the incidents and the language of the perpetrators, ensures that we recognise the brutality of the issue; the religious and legal comment invite us to consider the wider implications of her narratives as a comment on early eighteenth-century society and its values.

Aubin presents the threat of rape from a woman's viewpoint, exposing the male-dominated social structure which empowers men and renders women vulnerable. Her heroines' nobility lies partly in suffering, in martyr-like declarations of faith in the face of probable death. Their virtue, like that of Richardson's Clarissa to come, is absolute and as such, operates as a damning indictment on the moral relativity of Aubin's society. It is perhaps significant that, in spite of church teaching regarding men's spiritual headship over families, it is Aubin's female characters who supply the moral register to her narratives.

Whicher argues that 'idealistic romances were generally justified as mirrors of all desirable virtues. Pious Mrs Penelope Aubin wrote no other kind of fiction'; he appears somewhat dismissive towards Aubin's religious convictions, failing to recognise her use of romance as a means of considering religious and legal values which affected profoundly the lives of her readers.³¹ MacCarthy notes briefly that Aubin 'endeavoured to weave together romance and realism' but does not consider the nature or rôle of this realism.³²

Aubin's stand-point is clearly primarily moral but she shows awareness of legal realities and the way in which they disable women. The very fact that it is their moral strength and Providential intervention that saves them, not the law which ought to protect them, is surely an implicit indictment on the androcentric legal system. It seems impossible to imagine that Aubin could have failed to recognise the emotions such issues could raise in her female readers; indeed, she presumably wished to raise such emotions in order to encourage greater awareness and consideration of women's problematic legal and social position.

The concept of virtue as property and the legal problems it engenders has a long history, one which cannot find resolution easily. Eighteenth-century writers' discussion of the ideal of virtue reflects consideration of it by legal experts such as Blackstone. The law provided a framework for discussion, since it presented officially the national stance on the issue and people shared common knowledge of it. Religious thinking provided an alternative framework for such discussions, since it too influenced attitudes and behaviour and was part of the collective consciousness, alongside but distinct from the law.

Gilbert comments that what eighteenth-century women writers 'wrote may have seemed docile enough' but 'it was often covertly subversive, even volcanic, and almost always profoundly revisionary', arguing that 'women writers have frequently responded to sociocultural constraints by creating symbolic narratives that express their

²⁸ B.Mandeville, *The Virgin Unmask'd*, 1709 (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1975), p.183.

²⁹ M.Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), edited by M.Brody (London: Penguin), p.166.

³⁰ Lord Ogleby in Colman and Garrick's *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766) asks the appropriately named Lovewell, 'by what right and title' he has 'been half the night' in Fanny's bedroom. Lovewell replies, confident in his legal position, 'By that right that makes me the happiest of men; and by a title which I would not forgo'(V,sc.i).

³¹ G.Whicher, *The Life and Romances of Mrs Eliza Haywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1915), p.66.

³² B.MacCarthy, *Women Writers: Their Contribution to The English Novel 1621-1744* (Cork University Press, 1944), p.254.

common feelings of constriction, exclusion, dispossession'.³³ All these problems are rooted in law and supported by aspects of religious tradition.

Writers such as Aubin and Astell, who argued that virtue required religious conviction and rationality were by implication challenging the fundamental assumptions of English law and custom, which reduced female morality to part of the property mechanism, summed up by Johnson: 'all the property of the world depends' on 'the chastity of women'³⁴ because, as 'Philogamus' phrases it in *The Present State of Matrimony* (1739), an adulterous woman, or even a rape victim, 'imposes a spurious Breed on her Husband's Family; makes a Foreigner Heir to his Estate; depriving sometimes his own real Children begotten afterwards'.³⁵

Watt judged women's rôle within the development of the novel and found it wanting: 'the dominance of women readers'³⁶...is connected with the characteristic kind of weakness and unreality to which the [novel] is liable - its tendency to restrict the field...to a small and arbitrary selection of human situations'.³⁷ Virginia Woolf comments rather more pertinently, 'When a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values - to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important', arguing that a male commentator would be 'genuinely puzzled' and would see 'not merely a difference of view, but a view that is weak or trivial, or sentimental, because it differs from his own'.³⁸ It is perhaps for this reason that early eighteenth-century women's novels have been dismissed as 'trivial' or 'sentimental' when they were engaging with some of the most important issues facing their culture, issues which have yet to be resolved.

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³³ S.M.Gilbert, 'What Do Feminist Critics want?'. In *The New Feminist Criticism*, edited by E.Showalter, p.35.

³⁴ *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (1776), edited by G.B.Hill and L.F.Powell, 1934-50, V, p.208.

³⁵ 'Philogamus', *The Present State of Matrimony* (1739). Quoted in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, compiled and edited by V.Jones (London: Routledge, 1990), p.78.

³⁶ He does not of course discuss women writers.

³⁷ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus), 1963, p.311.

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, edited by Leonard Woolf (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), II, p.146.