

SUSTAINING ROMANTICISM - BARS SUMMER CONFERENCE, LIVERPOOL 2001

Creating herself a "victim to enthusiasm of feeling": Mary Hays's Simulated Suppression of Romanticism in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*

The feminist writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays came into being at a time when, the opposition between 'Reason' and 'Sensibility' had become "polarised into rival political myths" in which the "Reason" of the radical philosophies of William Godwin and Tom Paine was opposed to the sensibility of Edmund Burke (Cf Bell 52). As Claudia Johnson reinforces in her study, *Equivocal Beings*: "in the 1790s men of feelings were decidedly conservative types" (Johnson 8). To Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays who recognised "the imprisoning cultural construction of female sensibility" (Todd 237), the problem of succumbing to emotions cut across the rift between Conservatism or Radicalism and was considered generally detrimental to the liberation of women. Reason or "Philosophy" was read as "a masculine discourse" (cf Kelly 95) and according to Paul Keen in *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s*, "radical feminist authors staged their claims for full literary status in terms of an appeal to reason as the basis of their contention that women were equally capable, and with absolute propriety, of 'masculine' behaviour" (Keen 116-117). Denoting sensibility as "the mania of the day" (cf Johnson 7), Mary Wollstonecraft consistently warned young women against the dangers of "excessive novel reading" (Keen 111). It was in support of the ideal of tempered rationality of her close friend, that Mary Hays, wrote her illustrative account of the traumatic experiences of a hyper-sensitive and impetuous heroine: *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796).

If, ostensibly, as Paul Keen suggests, "Emma Courtney was to be read as a means of

instruction rather than distraction” (Keen 189), the author’s own statement in her Preface sustains her didactic intent. She informs the reader that “the errors of my heroine were the offspring of sensibility; and the result of her hazardous experiment is calculated to operate as a warning rather than a an example” (*MEC* xviii). However, no one could experience the ambivalence of being pivoted between the two rival “myths” as acutely as did Emma Courtney, and the outcome of her experiences offers no unilateral solution.

The warning example of Emma’s yielding to unbridled passions and emotions is related in retrospect through a re-reading of her letters to an unresponsive lover, Augustus Harley. The letters included in the work are largely authentic, since they had been written by the author herself to the Radical Cambridge Philosopher, William Frend, with whom Mary Hays had had a passionate, but platonic relationship. Thus, the work bears the character of an early female “confessional”, having been consciously, according to Gary Kelly, designed as a form of “self-therapy” (Kelly 93). Inevitably, Mary Hays’s outspokenness regarding female sexuality threatened “the reinforced taboo on women avowing their feelings in courtship” (Watt 226). A prolific writer of articles on the woman question, Mary Hays now novelised the issue of female choice and right to action, “not only asserting the existence of female desire, but also challenging the objectification and silencing of women” (Ty 50).

Relying essentially on an epistolary form, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is constructed in four movements, one of which constitutes a metafictional superstructure, embracing the other three. The ultimate reader of her letters, Augustus Junior, the surviving son of Emma’s one great love, has a crucial, passive role. Though he does not bring the narrative forward, he is vital to the completion of it. Emma addresses him as “child of my affections” (*MEC* 3) as she

sets out to uncover “the sacred and mysterious veil” (*MEC* xviii) she has spread over her relationship with his father. When, in conclusion, he is referred to as “my more than son” (*MEC* 158) and “son of my affections” (*MEC* 199), the triple meaning of this epithet has become clear. Although not biologically related, he is her fond son, as well as the “son” of her one time affection. He is also “more than a son” with a view to the public role she has assigned for him in the future as a forerunner of a new kind of matrimony based on love and sound companionship. When Emma, middle-aged and emotionally lacerated, writes to young Augustus, she has assumed the role of a female mentor advocating Mary Wollstonecraft’s ideals for the education of the young. Through her own theory of second-hand projection, Emma Courtney foresees that Augustus Harley, having confronted the dangers of illusory dreams of passionate fulfilment, can be prematurely purged of their compelling force. At the end of the novel, Mary Hays envisages her foster-son “restored to reason, to the vigor of his mind, to self-controul to the dignity of active, intrepid virtue!” (*MEC* 199).

However much the meta-construction of the reconvoluted letter, which is to be opened and read by a young, malleable addressee serves to sustain a didactic intent, the use of a “double discourse” (Ty 156) is imminent. For, even though the lesson taught is to shun “the lurking poison” served in “a Circean cup that lulls into fatal intoxication” (*MEC* 199), when order is restored, it can only be effectuated with a void, that is, without the fulfilment of the heroine. The passionate aspirations, although apparently subdued, are never entirely extinguished.

If *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is to be read as a discourse on the crucial opposition between Reason and Romance, with particular reference to the masculine and the feminine, it is

noteworthy that in the written expostulations on this subject, Mary Hays makes her heroine address herself uniquely to men. In the primary epistolary framework, Emma's tone is parental and guiding. Within the movements inside this framework, her discourse alters in accordance with the identity of the recipient of her missive. The bulk of her correspondence consists of monological effusions addressed to Augustus Harley, the father, in which she conscientiously rejects "the decorous female language of silence" (Todd 246). What she is met with, in her turn, is a silence which is condemning and complacent in its assertion of an impenetrable patriarchal order.

In her ceaseless attempts at reaching Augustus Harley, Emma voices a precocious desire for a relationship which is fulfilling, both spiritually and sexually, and, in extension, that could lead to an appropriation of the much desired Symbolic order, which Harley, sublime and distant, embodies to her. The inter-textual presence of Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is manifested in the author's many note-references to this work as dangerously enchanting. At the same time, Harley's combined role of lover and teacher/mentor seems to be modelled on Saint Preux. Over him Emma laments: "Must we then separate forever – will you no longer assist me in the pursuit of knowledge and truth – will you no more point out to me the books I should read and aid me in forming a just judgement of the principles they contain?" (MEC 101).

As Emma's cajoling attempts at detaining her lover fail she turns to moving him through a radical discourse of reason, seeking ultimately to outwit him. As Eleonor Ty suggests in *Unsex'd Revolutionaries*: "According to Lacanian myth, Hays like Wollstonecraft is writing

from the point of view of the daughter”, as someone expressing “a desire to conform to the symbolic world with its emphasis on language and reason” (Ty 57). By adopting a male discourse which she tries to “feminize” (Kelly 95) and presenting Harley with five hypotheses as to why he would fail to reply to her letters, she hopes to impress him and gain respect. Needless to say, it does not work. Her ambition to “arrange, under five heads”, since, she asserts: “(on all occasions I love to class and methodize” (*MEC* 122), does not come across as a successful means of seduction.

Despite these efforts to mollify Harley through logical reasoning, the prevailing mode of her writing to him is rapturous and marked by “excessive sensibility” (Barker-Benfield 377). After a long delayed confirmation that his failure to respond is due to “Another - a prior attachment (*MEC*128), although not entirely desisting, Emma retracts from her unflinching “pursuit of knowledge and truth” (*MEC* 101) and addresses herself instead to a Mr Francis, a Radical philosopher and friend of her father, for clarification. This second movement, which is developed purely as a dialogue between pupil and mentor, is again largely authentic since it consists of “copious extracts from letters between Hays and Godwin” (Kelly 99). If Emma’s tone in the first movement is “rapturous” then the mode of expression she uses when addressing Mr Francis can be termed “philosophical”. In fact, the same lines, originally written to Harley, are repeated, and then repeated again, a third time, in Francis’s replies to her together with his comments. So, as her assertion that there is “no subject, in fact, that may not be subjected to the laws of investigation and reasoning” (*MEC* 126) is reiterated, the import changes as the speech function recedes from aspiring to effectuate a change in a lover’s behaviour to becoming a statement to be philosophically scrutinised. Also, in her exchange with Francis, Emma goes beyond her personal obsession, connecting her own

hyper-sensitive nature with a wider plight of women in a patriarchal society:

While men pursue interests, honor, pleasure, as accords with their several dispositions, women, who have too much delicacy, sense, and spirit to degrade themselves by the vilest of all interchanges, remain insulated beings, and must be content tamely to look on, without taking any part in the great, though often absurd and tragical, drama of life (*MEC* 86).

As their discussion of the crucial distinction between reason and emotion and its relevance to the male and female modes of expression is expounded, the interplay between them reaches a climax when Francis is shown to grow increasingly aware of the “creeping unreason” (*Mullan* 217) in Emma’s argumentation. His rational standpoint is made clear as he professes himself to be “full of admiration for your qualities and compassion for your insanity” (*MEC*141). Perhaps more conspicuously than anywhere else in the novel, Mary Hays’s use of a “double discourse” cuts across the line of diction in allying itself with a rationalist fear of losing self-control just as much as with a recognition that “insanity” is a naturally conditioned reaction, an idea that was expounded by Luce Irigaray some two hundred years later in *Speculum of the Other Woman*: “How could she be anything but suggestible and hysterical when her sexual instincts have been castrated, her sexual feelings, representatives and representation forbidden?” (*Irigaray* 59-60).

Emma’s ardent and vociferous pursuit of Augustus Harley is both libidinal and threatening to a patriarchal order. Her acquisition of the language and logic of the male domain even more so. Yet, fitting a male into her gaze and then priding herself on her “perseverance” (*MEC* 148), leads her no farther than to a “self-destroying impasse” of propriety (*Todd* 234). As

Irigaray reminds us: “Seeing remains the special prerogative of the Father” (Irigaray 323). So when, the novel moves towards its closure, the only path open to Emma after her letdown is that of penitence.

For Emma, abandoned at the death of her relatives, a proposal of marriage by a former suitor, appears as a conventional escape from her predicament. In the novel’s third movement, she speaks and writes to her husband, Montagu, a London physician, using a new discourse. Her passionate outbursts and philosophical argumentation defending the “wild, ardent fervent excesses of a vigorous and exalted mind” (*MEC* 130) are here replaced by mortification and compensatory manoeuvres. Inevitably, for Mary Hays, mercenary marriage could not provide a solution, no matter how much the heroine in her communication with her husband is shown to condemn her previous “fatal attachment” (*MEC* 188) and denigrate the “tragical consequences of indulged passion” (*MEC* 192).

As Augustus, by a strange stroke of circumstances returns to die in her arms and Emma is given custody of his son, a hope for the future is born, despite the tragedy and horrendous consequences of extreme jealousy, an extension of unbounded passion, acted out by her husband. Even though the author seems to want to mislead the reader into believing that she is sticking to her initial definition of the novel as a “warning” (*MEC* vii), *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is not a work that purports to evade the complexities of the eighteenth-century duality under which it had been constructed. Instead, it undercuts its finalising statement, which is, that society should be spared from “the tyranny of passions” (*MEC* 199), for the “double discourse” (Ty 156) is never suppressed. The novel is too firmly based in an “authentic subjective experience” (Kelly 95), enhanced by the use of an “epistolary method”

which, according to Ian Watt, “impels the writer towards something that may pass for the spontaneous transcription of the subjective reactions of the protagonists to the events as they occur” (Watt 192). Consequently, in spite of the author’s endeavours to suppress the power of feelings by accentuating their destructive capacity it is difficult not to discern the obvious links between the inspiration underlying her novel and that of the Romantic poets. Indeed, if, as Janet Todd has pointed out: “What women did not write was Romantic poetry” (Todd 223), it is a case in point that Mary Hays’s literary achievement is coloured by her endeavour to stultify and deny the “overflow of powerful feelings” she was so curiously capable of emulating. Emma’s position is one of solitude as well as personal elation, the author’s use of authentic epistolary material ensuring an “affective verisimilitude” (Bell 152) reminiscent of the “emotions recollected in tranquillity” to which her poet friends would so often find recourse.

The lasting power of *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* resides not in its being morally instructive and rationally articulate but in its bursting with feminine impatience and a desire to turn from object into subject:

I loved you, not only rationally and tenderly – but passionately – it became a pervading and devouring fire!...my affection was modest, if intemperate, for it was individual! (*MEC*130-131)

Most importantly, in choosing to speak so directly to her male counterparts, in urging for an open dialogue on equal terms, however unrewarding it might turn out to be, Mary Hays paved the way for untried forms of communication. Be it that her attempts at loving with reason were just as ludicrously brave as they were endearing. They were first and foremost a means of accommodating the Rational and Romantic impulses of her day.

Memoirs of Emma Courtney is an outcry against a ruling order which determines the right to express feeling only to those who have gained permission. It is noteworthy that the subtle gaps and propensities of male and female behaviour that the author exposes, have remained mysteriously irreconcilable to this day.

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