

COLERIDGE AND WOMEN WRITERS - PROPOSAL

‘A Thing ugly and petticoated’: Coleridge and the radical discourse of Mary Hays

In a letter to Robert Southey dated 25 January 1800, Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to their mutual acquaintance, Mary Hays, as "a Thing, ugly and petticoated", calling in question her capacity as a writer as well as her appropriation of a male logos. Apparently disturbed by her aspirations to apply masculine "method" rather than feminine "sense", he could barely disguise his contempt for her achievements.

This paper takes as its starting-point the denouncing epithet used by Coleridge when referring to Mary Hays's anachronistic defiance of gender confinement. Focussing on her early work, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, and her attempts to create an unrestrained arena for her tenacious heroine, the paper highlights Hays's capacity for transgressing boundaries and her exposure to the relentless criticism that ensued.

Mary Hays's appeals to the men of her generation bear witness to a utopian belief in the construction of a society governed by mutual understanding between the sexes. Her message is forwarded in a curious blend of extreme sensibility and methodology with affinities to the prevailing ideas of the Romantic Movement. Yet, her supplications were nonetheless regarded as incriminating, due to their obstreperous demands for a feminine freedom of expression.

It is thus inferred that Hays's assumption of a "voice" devoid of gender adherence, which was what evoked Coleridge's derogatory response, is indicative of a controversy in language usage which has remained an unresolved gender issue to this day.