

"I am neither a philosopher nor a heroine": Mary Hays's Fictionalisation of the Conflict Between Reason and Romance

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft rallies against the condescending attitude to woman as "the weaker vessel" and formulates her plan to obliterate the reigning ideal of passivity through a strategy of argumentative reasoning. Her own tendency to lapse into the pitfalls of gender-bound rhetoric, however, using the very "flowery diction" she professedly warns against, has led to her being questioned by certain feminists, particularly on the basis of the discrepancy between her philosophical aims and her fictional characterisations.

Mary Wollstonecraft's contemporary and friend, Mary Hays, deemed to be less outstanding as a feminist, as well as less "theoretical", has been more successful in combining the persona of the enlightened thinker with that of a female fictional voice. In her *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* the main character professes that she is "neither a philosopher nor a heroine," but "a woman" fettered in the "sexual character" society has imposed upon her. By exposing an awareness of her confinement as a woman writer, however, she is capable of creating her own "discursive authority" based on a strategy, not of aggression, but of appropriation.

This paper investigates Mary Hays efforts to reinforce the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft in her own fiction while superseding her through the use of a double voice that both takes command over a masculine discourse while seemingly rejecting the inhibiting forces of female sensibility. The language of Emma Courtney's letters to an unresponsive lover are curiously defiant and revealing even to a modern reader. The air of superiority vis-à-vis the desired object is as incongruous, as it is revelatory of a passionate woman who refuses to remain in silence.