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A DEFIANT AND CRITICAL FEMALE VOICE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: MARY HAYS AND THE *MEMOIRS OF EMMA COURTNEY*

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ABSTRACT. ***A Defiant and Critical Female Voice in the Eighteenth Century: Mary Hays and the* Memoirs of Emma Courtney.** Mary Hays was heavily engaged in examining the position of woman in the patriarchal society of the Age of Enlightenment. The eponymous heroine in Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* becomes the embodiment of female defiance against patriarchal constraints by expressing explicitly her sexual desires and emotions. This article aims at investigating Hays's critique of the social and sexual restrictions and oppressions exerted on women in the late eighteenth century.

Keywords*: Mary Hays, Memoirs of Emma Courtney, gender, the Enlightenment, patriarchy, female defiance, the eighteenth-century novel.*

REZUMAT. ***O voce feminină sfidătoare şi critică în secolul al XVIII-lea: Mary Hays şi* Memoriile Emmei Courtney.** Mary Hays a fost extrem de interesată să prezinte poziţia femeii în societatea patriarhală din Secolul Luminilor. Eroina principală a lui Hays din *Memoriile Emmei Courtney* devine întruchiparea sfidării feminine a constrângerilor patriarhale prin exprimarea explicită a dorinţelor sale sexuale şi a emoţiilor sale. Prezentul articol analizează modul în care Hays critică oprimarea şi restricţiile sociale şi sexuale exercitate asupra femeilor din secolul al XVIII-lea.

Cuvinte cheie*: Mary Hays, Memoriile Emmei Courtney, gender, iluminism, patriarhie, sfidarea feminină, romanul secolului al XVIII-lea.*

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The literary scene of almost all ages except for the last century or so had been canonically monopolized by the male writers. The emergence of the novel genre in the early eighteenth century was no exception. Even after almost three centuries, in 1957, when Ian Watt published his ground-breaking work, *The Rise of the Novel*, there was still not much space allotted to the eighteenth-century women novelists. Ian Watt basically examined the works of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding and attributed the birth and development of the novel genre to these writers, thereby epitomizing them as the fathers of the English novel. However, Aphra Behn had tried her hand at the genre with her *Oroonoko: or, The Royal Slave. A True History* (1688) much earlier than the alleged fathers of the English novel. Furthermore, Eliza Haywood wrote in the same period as Defoe. She published her *Love in Excess* in 1719-20 the same year when Defoe's highly venerated *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) came out. There were many other women novelists who tried their hand at writing novels before Richardson and Fielding. However, all these attempts of women writers were ignored by the male supremacy over the literary arena. More significantly - and unfortunately - not until the 1980s had there been any extensive research on eighteenth-century women novelists. The two most prominent works which brought the long forgotten women novelists to our attention were Jane Spencer's *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (1986) and Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers before Jane Austen* (1986). These books, and many others like them, helped reshape the domain of the eighteenth-century novel studies which had been by far domineered by the studies made mainly on the male writers.

Mary Hays (1760-1843) was one of the late eighteenth-century women novelists and she suffered the same fate of oblivion as the other women novelists. She produced much of her major work in the 1790s and was heavily engaged in exploring and examining the position of woman in a patriarchal society. The bulk of her work essentially provides "the most articulate and detailed expressions of the yearnings and frustrations of a woman living in the late-eighteenth-century English society" (Ty vii). Hays was quite conscious of the oppressing mechanisms of the patriarchal society which imposed certain gender roles on women and confined them to the domestic sphere. She was mainly frustrated by the restrictions placed on women in terms of education and intellectual pursuits to which only men had access. In *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), Hays lays bare the constraints exercised upon women, explores the difficulties women encounter in their lives, and develops, what Jane Spencer calls, "a feminist analysis of social institutions" (130). In *Emma Courtney*, we witness the eponymous heroine live through many obstacles with regard to education,

marriage, and intellectual pursuits. This paper, therefore, aims at investigating Hays's critique of the social institutions and their restrictions on women in relation to female education, marriage, and intellectual pursuits, and also at exploring how Hays manages to defy the limitations placed on women through her character Emma.

Mary Hays was born into a middle-class family of Rational Dissenters in Southwark, London in 1760. Her Dissenting background helped shape her ideas in relation to religion, politics, and society. In her youth, she attended many local Dissenting meetings where she came to know John Eccles, another Dissenter, with whom she had an affair. However, their parents did not consent to their marriage, yet they continued to correspond in secrecy. At last, the families had to give permission to their marriage but, unfortunately, Eccles became ill and died before the marriage. The death of Eccles, according to Dale Spender, "represented for Mary Hays the loss of a way of life and the end of her dream of being 'taught' much of what she wanted to know" (264) since Eccles was both a lover and also a mentor to Hays. To overcome her grief, she turned to reading and scholarly pursuits. In 1792, when Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Hays was very much affected by its ideas and wrote to Wollstonecraft. This sowed the seeds of a friendship that would last until the death of Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft. As Pamela Bentley states, Wollstonecraft "was a member of an intellectual circle which cantered around the liberal publisher, Joseph Johnson, who published her and William Godwin, as well as many of the other radicals of the period" and thus Hays, as a friend of Wollstonecraft, "soon became part of this select group and so was steeped in the political and social revolution in thought" (Bentley 2-3). In the meantime, Hays also corresponded with William Godwin and exchanged her ideas with him. She had another affair with William Frend, a Cambridge Dissenter, but this time it was not reciprocal. He was not interested in Hays; therefore, Hays turned to Godwin again for his advice. As Dale Spender puts it, "[b]ecause [Hays] was so concerned about the void in her own life, because she was concerned with her personal frustration in John Eccles and William Frend, and with the public frustration of the denial of women's sexual autonomy, William Godwin suggested that she explore this issue in fiction" (266) which resulted in the writing of *Emma Courtney*. On the other hand, Hays lived by her pen. She wrote reviews and articles for magazines and periodicals. She wrote a number of works concerning the position of woman in society and also two novels *Emma Courtney* and *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799). Her fervent attitude with regard to the woman issue got subdued after the death of Wollstonecraft who had supported Hays. After the turn of the century, Hays's ties with these intellectual circles

loosened and she withdrew from writing. Consequently, we do not have much information about Hays' later years.

Emma Courtney is mostly regarded as a sentimental novel; however, it owes much to other genres ranging from autobiography to the epistolary and the philosophical essay. The novel is framed by the letters written by Emma to young Augustus. Yet, as Eleanor Ty argues, it is "not a sustained epistolary work, [because] it is framed by letters to the young Augustus Harley [only] in crucial moments: at the beginning, middle, and end" (xxi). This epistolary frame is structured in such a translucent way that the reader more frequently than not fails to recall its frame. At the beginning of the novel, Emma reveals her intention of narrating her story to the young Augustus: "Learn, then, from the incidents of my life, entangled with those of his to whom you owe your existence, a more striking and affecting lesson than abstract philosophy can ever afford" (*Memoirs* 9). Her main aim in relating her story is to give the young Augustus some advice and instruction because the young Augustus suffers because of his love for a woman who does not return his love and marries someone else. Thus, Emma tries to teach the young Augustus to regulate and subdue his uncontrollable passion and fervent emotions. At the beginning of Volume II, we have a very succinct letter to the young Augustus in which the reader learns that Augustus is interested in Emma's story. The last letter to the young person comes at the very end of the novel where Emma hopes that the unfolding of the errors of her past life will be beneficial to the young Augustus. Emma's letters to the young Augustus are only three out of the whole novel. Therefore, as Pamela Bentley asserts, "it is relatively easy for the reader to forget this [framed] structure and feel as though he or she is being addressed directly. The use of the first person narrative throughout also strengthens this impression" (19-20). There is no other reference to the young Augustus throughout the novel except these three letters. Nevertheless, apart from this epistolary frame of the novel, Emma includes many of the letters that she wrote to her lover Augustus Harley (the father of the young Augustus) as well as to Mr. Francis who guides and reasons with her. Many of these letters were directly taken from Hays's own letters to William Godwin, John Eccles, and William Frend. In this respect, the novel's "genesis as actual letters by Hays and its use of these letters also locate it as a kind of epistolary fiction [. . .]" (TY XXI).

Emma starts to relate her story from the very beginning of the novel. Her mother dies during her birth and she is given to her aunt Mrs Melmoth who recently lost her child. Consequently, Mrs Melmoth adopts Emma as her own child. The latter enjoys a real family life with the Melmoths. Then, her father, Mr. Courtney, takes on the responsibility to educate Emma. By the time

she is nineteen, both her aunt and father die. Then she stays with the family of her father's brother, the Mortons. She makes friends with an older man, Mr. Francis, who acts as her counsel and guide and with whom she exchanges philosophical ideas through letters. Emma is acquainted with a Mr. Montagu who is attracted to her and whom she marries during the latter half of the novel. Emma develops a close friendship with Mrs. Harley with whose son (Augustus Harley) she falls in love. However, "[a]fter meeting Harley and gaining his friendship, she confesses her love for him and actively urges him to love her, to no avail. As it turns out, in a mysterious gothic fashion, Harley is already married to a West Indian" (Pari 61) woman. Emma leaves for London and looks for the means to support herself. She tries her hand at teaching as a governess, yet she cannot find a constant job. She puts all her money into an annuity investment in a bank which goes bankrupt and leaves Emma penniless. Therefore, she is forced to accede to Mr. Montagu's proposal. But Montagu violates Rachel, the eighteen-year old nanny, in a fit of jealousy after Augustus Harley's return to Emma's life. Rachel conceives a child whom Montagu tries to abort with pills, to no avail. When the child is born, Montagu kills the baby with his hands. Grief-stricken, he shoots himself. Emma reconstitutes her family with little Emma, her daughter, Rachel, the violated nanny, and the young Augustus Harley (the son of Augustus Harley) whom she adopts after the death of her lover as she promised him she would do.

One of the issues Hays constantly addresses throughout the narrative is the problem of female education and its dichotomous separation from male education. In the first half of the novel, Hays emphasizes the question of female education, especially its efficacy. Emma reveals that she grew up, listening to her aunt Mrs Melmoth who would relate "the stories from the Arabian Nights, Turkish Tales, and other works of like marvelous import" which "produced, in [her] young mind, a strong desire of learning to read the books which contained such enchanting stores of entertainment" (*Memoirs* 14). She learns to recite many passages from "Pope's Homer and Thomson's Seasons" at the age of six (*Memoirs* 14). Reading becomes her passion and, at the age of fourteen, she subscribes to a circulating library and "devour[s] – little careful in the selection – from ten to fourteen novels in a week" (*Memoirs* 18). However, as Eleanor Ty rightly asserts, "[t]he freedom with which Emma pursues literature is contrasted with the restrictive nature of her formal education" (XXIV). At boarding school, the formal education Emma receives is in a stark contrast to what she is used to: "Ah! never shall I forget the contrast I experienced. [. . .] my actions were all constrained; - I was obliged to sit poring over needle-work, and forbidden to prate; - my body was tortured into forms, my mind coerced, and tasks imposed upon me, grammar and French,

mere words, that conveyed to me no ideas" (*Memoirs* 15). Moreover, the books and novels that she procured to read during the intervals between classes "were often wantonly taken from [her]" (*Memoirs* 16) because novels "were, in the eighteenth century, believed to foster dangerous sentiments in young women [. . .]" (Fisk 48). In this regard, the restrictions Emma encounters at boarding-school anticipate the further limitations of the society exercised upon women. The female education provided at such boarding-schools aims "to create the male fantasy of a feminine and sexualized woman with superficial ornamental skills" (TY XXIV). For instance, while Emma lives with the Mortons (Emma's brother's family), she, "being ever desirous of active and useful employment" offers to teach the young Mortons "music, drawing, French or any other accomplishment" (*Memoirs* 35). However, Mrs. Morton retorts by stating that "[her children's] expectations are not great, and [Emma's] *elegant* accomplishments might unfit them for their future, probable, stations" (*Memoirs* 35 italics in the original). As Mary Ann Tobin rightly argues, "Mrs. Morton's emphasis on the elegance of Emma's accomplishments connotes their unsuitability in her particular middle-class social sphere [. . .]. Once again, Hays emphasizes the enforced passivity and utter uselessness of female intellectualism in her upper-middle-class society" (49). The case of the Mortons is no exception: Mrs. Morton turns down Emma's offer merely because she wants to establish her daughters by marriage, and more significantly, such knowledge or teaching might spoil the minds of her daughters which, Mrs. Morton fears, would fail them in their prospective marriages. In this regard, Hays laments the fact that women are adorned with superficial skills and external attractions as if they were up for sale in a marriage market.

Dale Spender states that "[i]n general Hays wrote about women's position inside and outside marriage" (265). Indeed, since Hays is quite engaged in defending and improving the position of women in society, she could not help exploring – and also being critical of – the idea, or rather, understanding of the marriage institution within the late-eighteenth century context. Hays argues following in the footsteps of Wollstonecraft. She condemns Swift, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Sterne for their courtly morality which supports regulating and civilizing desire (especially female desire), and believes that "such ideas have produced 'two classes of victims:' those for whom marriage is merely a form of prostitution in which sexual favours are exchanged for material security and those who reject marriage and are forced by social convention to remain celibate and deny their natural sexual desires" (Kelly 92). In either case, Hays sees women as victims because marriages were made mainly for financial purposes which Hays finds degrading for women

and goes further to think of such arranged marriages as prostitution. As Emma's father, Mr. Courtney, asserts in the novel: "Marriage, generally speaking, in the existing state of things, must of necessity be an affair of *finance*" (*Memoirs* 50 italics original). Mr. Courtney's intention was to establish Emma by marriage because Emma will inherit no fortune from his father after his death. Yet, Emma, just like Hays, believes in the power of desire and love which would bring happiness to a marriage when these feelings are reciprocal. In shaping her ideas about marriage, there are two significant marriage examples: the Melmoths and Emma's own parents. Emma tells of her parents: "My father was a man [. . .] of superior rank in life, but dissipated, extravagant, and profligate. My mother, the daughter of a rich trader, and the sole heiress of his fortunes, was allured by the specious address and fashionable manners of my father [. . .]. My father courted her hand to make himself master of her ample possessions [. . .]" (*Memoirs* 10). In this regard, the example of Emma's parents is simply a union between rank and money made exclusively for securing material gain. On the other hand, since Emma grows up in the Melmoths' household and witnesses the marriage of her maternal aunt and uncle which is shaped by love and tenderness in a cosy atmosphere, she wants to have a marriage and family like that of the Melmoths. However, Emma's revolutionary character lies not in her advocacy of love and passion in a marriage, but in her belief in the possibility of such reciprocal and healthy desires *outside* marriage. She says to Augustus Harley: "*My friend – I would give myself to you*" (*Memoirs* 124 italics original). As Jane Spencer puts it, "Emma Courtney's offer (never accepted) to live with Augustus Harley outside marriage, because, she tells him, '*the individuality of an affection constitutes its chastity*,' made the novel and its author bywords for immorality [. . .]" (*Memoirs* 98). Such a suggestion on a woman's side exceeded the boundaries of the idea of propriety prevalent in the eighteenth century, thereby making Hays be severely criticized. Emma's aspirations for such a reciprocal love and desire in a relationship are shattered by Augustus Harley who does not return her love. Emma, having no fortune at all to support herself, is ironically made to marry Mr. Montagu for mere financial purposes at the end of the novel. This undermines the whole argumentation put forward by Hays with regard to marriage. Yet, as Caroline Pari puts it, "[m]arriage is presented as the only choice left when [Emma]'s options run out [. . .]" (61) which, in a sense, justifies her marriage for finance in the latter half of the novel.

On a wider scale, all the issues explored above can be put down to Hay's main aim to criticize the patriarchal society and its designation of women to whoever male authority finds suitable. For Hays, "society does not

allow women enough scope to exercise their talents constructively" (TY XV). In her letters to Godwin and in other writings, Hays lamented heavily the restriction of women to domestic sphere and the total banishment of women from intellectual pursuits, in the novel she gives voice to these issues through the character Emma. This strategy is simply because novels were widely read by women at the time and were more accessible. In a letter to Godwin, Hays voices and bemoans what is valid for all the women who yearned for intellectuality but were denied the access in the eighteenth century: "I'm not a mere fine lady, a domestic drudge, or a doll of fashion. I can think, write, reason, converse with men and scholars, and despise many pretty, feminine, prejudices. But I have not the talents for a legislator or a reformer of the world, I have still many shrinking delicacies and female foibles, that unfit me for rising to arduous heights [. . .]" (Hays "Appendix A" 248). By stepping outside the norms attributed to women and into the male sphere with her thoughts, writings, and reasoning, Hays defies the gendered spaces of the society which are also strictly observed in the society's values and mores – especially in their designating "proper" behaviour for both men and women. Just like Hays, Emma "is aware of the restrictions placed upon her and spends much of the novel lamenting and rebelling against these established moral values" (Bentley 21). Emma converses with Mr. Francis, has breakfast with him and attends him through a walk in the garden. However, when these are revealed, Mr. Morton, her paternal uncle, becomes the ultimate voice of the society in what he says to Emma: "You are but little acquainted [. . .] with the customs of society; [. . .]. This, with your late walk yesterday evening, and evident emotion on your return [. . .] wears an indecorous appearance: – the world is *justly* attentive to the conduct of young women, *too apt* to be censorious" (*Memoirs* 43 italics mine). By making Emma defiant of the restrictions of the society, Hays aspires to lay bare the unequal treatment of women in society and show that "women were only inferior to men because of their lack of education and exclusion from meaningful, intellectual pursuits" (Bentley 11). Furthermore, for Hays, the problem lies at the heart of society's patriarchal foundation. Women are manipulated and the only solution the writer envisages is to change the prevailing system in the society. As Audrey Bilger contends, "[b]y scoffing at masculinist authority as the foundation for society [through her writings and stance as well as her character Emma], Hays hoped to topple the entire system. Once the principle of male superiority disappeared, social and domestic politics could perhaps be rebuilt upon an equitable foundation" (49). Hays tries to bring both men and women to equal terms, which seems improbable because the society fetters women with

"adamantine chains" and casts a very powerful "magic circle" (*Memoirs* 32) around them. This closed space stands for woman's confinement and limited sphere and it is nearly impossible to shatter or dissolve. At the end of the novel, Emma reconstructs the idea of family by forming a family consisting of women (including herself, little Emma and Rachel), which signifies the female solidarity. As Caroline Pari remarks, "[a] healing recovery, after the tragic events of Montagu, is possible only with female solidarity. Only in the reconstituted family of women, living without marriage and patriarchy, does Emma find independence" (62). Such reconstitution is of great significance because Hays, in a way, defies the established institutions of family and marriage, and refashions and appropriates them in accord with woman's needs which will supply her with much yearned-for independence in this patriarchal society. In this regard, the novel ends on an optimistic tone with its reshaping of the institutions of family and marriage which anticipates the improvement of the position of women in society in the future.

In conclusion, Mary Hays, one of the most fervent defenders (next to Mary Wollstonecraft) of the rights of women in the late eighteenth century, ardently opposed the patriarchal dominance over women in almost every sphere of society and its institutions. She wrote passionately about the woman issue all throughout the 1790s and, argued that excluding women from intellectual pursuits and fettering them into domestic sphere helped increase the prevailing power of patriarchy in the society – to women's detriment. Seeing this unfair attitude towards women, Hays chose to depict, in her novels, "defiant" heroines who yearn for reading and develop passion for intellectual activities. However, these attempts came to be criticized simply because Hays' characters did not fit with the "proper" and "decorous" lady or woman the patriarchal world wanted to see. This also explains why women novelists of the eighteenth century were marginalized. As Dale Spender rightly observes, "[t]here has been little room for plain sharp women in the heritage constructed by men – which is why the novels of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays have not found an enduring place in the cultural heritage" (268). Still, a huge surge of interest in these long-forgotten women novelists in the last two decades evinces that they have finally attracted the attention they rightfully deserve.

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