

JACOBIN ENTHUSIASM AND THE LOGIC OF LOSS IN MARY HAYS'S *MEMOIRS OF EMMA COURTNEY*

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Written in the radical Jacobin context of the 1790s, Mary Hays's novel lies at the intersection of reason, as theorised by William Godwin, and feeling, as portrayed by Claude-Adrien Helvétius, both seen as sources of virtue and truth. Emma vacillates between these two faculties of the mind in order to propel into action an early feminist mode of expression and agency fuelled by her reading practices, particularly when she comes across Rousseau's *Julie; or, The New Heloise*. I argue that such reading practices prove to be perilous, or rather quixotic, as they highlight a female enthusiast whose laudable intellect and eloquence are eclipsed by her overriding passions, which, contrary to Helvétius's sensationism, obstruct the development of her own character.

Keywords: Jacobinism, radicalism, female sensibility, untutored reading, independence, failure.

1 Introduction¹

A fervent supporter of the Jacobin social and political agenda, whose primary aim was to suppress the Ancien Régime, Mary Hays was a female novelist with a Unitarian background, according to which reason and the pursuit of knowledge, rather than divine revelation, represented vital means of regulating human conduct and, ultimately, of reaching for the truth. Unstinting advocates of the French Revolution, the Unitarians shaped Hays's radical ideas, which were later acclaimed by William Frend and Mary Wollstonecraft, both actively engaged in guiding "her early attempts at polemic journalism" (Bergmann 2011, 10), and by William Godwin, a trusted friend who mentored her when she began to write *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), a novel excoriated by the anti-Jacobin adepts. Wollstonecraft's influence, however, enabled Hays to foreground sensibility as an alternative means of acquiring virtue and freedom, for strong feelings and emotions were highly expressive

¹ The present article is the result of research conducted within the UEFISCDI project no. 116/2022, entitled "The Art of Thinking in the Enlightenment: An Interdisciplinary Reappraisal," run within the University of Bucharest.

of constructive action both politically and fictionally. Thus, the revolutionary ideals were capitalised upon by female writers such as Hays and Wollstonecraft in order to extol—in a proto-feminist manner—women’s intellectual potential, propriety and proactive nature. Concurrently, such fiction served as a useful yet utopian example to young women in their effort to gain a voice and to achieve independence in a patriarchal world. Such is the case of Emma, the protagonist of Hays’s novel, who, animated by the ideal of gaining recognition as an individual, ends up as a victim of society’s prejudice: “I had yet to learn, that those who have the courage to act upon advanced principles, must be content to suffer moral martyrdom.”²

In the 4th issue of *The Monthly Magazine*, a journal which popularised the liberal views of the Unitarians, Hays wrote:

The business of familiar narrative should be to describe life and manners in real or probable situations, to delineate the human mind in its endless varieties, to develop [sic] the heart, to paint the passions, to trace the springs of action, to interest the imagination, exercise the affections, and awaken the powers of the mind. A good novel ought to be subservient to the purposes of truth and philosophy: such are the novels of Fielding and Smollett. (1978, 181)³

In spite of praising Fielding and Smollett for their comic or satirical understanding of human nature and sensibility, Hays zooms in on solipsistic female sensibility, which discards female empowerment and self-awareness as transgressions of gender norms. At the same time, such a solipsistic type of sensibility is held accountable for the fatal consequences incurred by Hays’s heroine’s over-indulgence in unbridled passions and feelings. Janet Todd regards it as a mark of modernity, since Emma stands for a woman who is “the heroine of her own inner life, woman expressing her unnarrated identity or woman caught in the prison-house of feeling” (1989, 243). Furthermore, by upholding the new philosophical ideal of individualism as well as the liberal ideas promoted by Godwin, Wollstonecraft, Rousseau and Helvétius, Hays portrays Emma as an epitome of feminine morality deemed as a warning, not as an example, because women fall victims “to the mistakes and weaknesses of our fragile nature” (MEC xvii). Unlike Fielding’s or Smollett’s incidents inspired from everyday life, the sentimental novel in general, and Hays’s novel in particular, no longer abides by the principle of verisimilitude but by what is displayed as the

² Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 163. From now on, abbreviated as *MEC* in the in-text references.

³ Nancy Johnson has convincingly observed that Mary Hays treats passion as “deserving of a comprehensive investigation, but she is also careful to observe that political dialogue, legal discourse, and epistemological inquiry are all firmly rooted in rationalism—as evidenced by the formal rhetorical structures of her letters to the *Monthly Magazine*, in 1796, on the materialism of Helvétius and Godwin, the human capacity for learning and the education of women” (2004, 130).

true self from a psychological vantage point, a self which seeks its legitimation by “breaking out of the ‘magic’ circle of constructed impotence” (Todd 1989, 237). Hays’s didactic novel aims at erasing the boundaries between men and women and, at the same time, to dismiss the time-honoured claim that women are able to feel, not to think.

Nevertheless, such a fictional desideratum was counterpoised by the status quo and, therefore, predicated on the logic of loss. By the phrase “the logic of loss” I mean not only the traditional Enlightenment views on reason and self-standing—the exclusive preserve of men—but also the vulnerability of female emotion, empowerment and independence in a patriarchal society. In what follows I shall argue that Emma’s “powers of the mind”—meant to challenge the traditional masculine moral philosophy—and exertion of affections and impressions “depend on a thousand circumstances” which “form the mind, and determine the future character” (MEC 8). Her “powers” are buttressed by her enthusiastic reading of marvellous stories, modern romances and history. However, Emma is a quixotic reader, who is seduced by various narratives which empower her to act and feel in a prejudiced society in which female independence is a chimera. Such a quixotic reading practice proves fatal to the heroine, particularly when she reads Rousseau’s *The New Heloise* (1761), “a mixture of radical liberation and sentimental endorsement that she craves” (Todd 1989, 244). I contend that read in this light, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is actually an anti-Jacobin protest against “excess and transgression justified by delusive or impractical ideas” (Kelly 1989, 63). Todd has cogently argued that Hays, along with Henry Maria Williams and Mary Wollstonecraft, “became both effeminately sentimental and indecorously masculine, the ‘Unsex’d Females’ of the Reverend Richard Polwhele” (1989, 199).⁴ Emma finally becomes aware of her delusions induced by seductive reading and writes her memoirs to her adopted son, highlighting the pedagogical dimension of her unfortunate tale and, more significantly, social custom and prejudice, which prevent women from using their intellectual capacities. Hays makes this point clear in her *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous*, where she inveighs against “the absurd despotism which has hitherto, with more than gothic barbarity, enslaved the female mind,” concurrently deploring “the enervating and degrading system of manners by which the understandings of women have been chained down to frivolity and trifles” (1793, 19–20).

⁴ In “The Unsex’d Females, a Poem” (1798) Polwhele inveighs upon the revolutionary ideas advanced by Mary Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and Mary Hays. According to Polwhele, “unsexed” is tantamount to rebelliousness and indecency.

2 From an Enthusiastic Reader to a Reflective Character

In her epistolary novel, Hays recounts the tragic story of a female protagonist who narrates her life in a series of letters addressed to a young gentleman, Augustus Harley, the son of Augustus Harley senior, with whom Emma falls in love before she even gets to meet him. Emma's letters inform us of her educational background, "philosophical enquiries" (*MEC* 24) and, most significantly, her unrequited love for Augustus's father. Upon finding out that Augustus is married to a foreign woman, although his testator banned him from engaging in matrimony so as to inherit a small fortune, the impoverished Emma decides to marry Mr. Montague, with whom she has a daughter, Emma. Still tormented by strong feelings for her unattainable suitor, Emma finally encounters Augustus, who suffers from a concussion caused by a fall from a horse. He dies after declaring his love for her, which determines Montague to commit suicide, partly because of Emma's neglect of her marital duties, and partly because of his own attempt to take revenge on Emma by leaving a servant pregnant. Willing to adopt Augustus's son, Emma commits herself to raising and educating him and her daughter, until little Emma dies of a few days' illness. Finally, Emma addresses the young Augustus, militating for the emancipation of the human mind "from the trammels of superstition, and teaching it, that its true dignity and virtue, consist in being free" (*MEC* 196).

As a Jacobin heroine striving to achieve intellectual prestige and independence, Emma Courtney is, like many other female characters in eighteenth-century fiction, an avid yet uninstructed reader of romances, a deprecated genre because of the baneful effects it was thought to have on the minds of young ladies. After the death of her father, "a man who passed thro' life without ever loving any one but himself" (*MEC* 30), and of her aunt, who had "a refined and romantic manner of thinking" (*MEC* 11), Emma "is left with no guardians, a meagre inheritance and an incomplete emotional education" (Norton 2013, 298). Like Don Quixote, she is unaware of the pernicious epistemological effects of romances because she has not learnt how to discriminate fiction from reality: "I sighed for a romance that would never end. In my sports with my companions, I acted over what I had read: I was alternately the valiant knight—the gentle damsel—the adventurous mariner—the daring robber—the courteous lover—and the airy coquet" (*MEC* 15). By transforming fictional characters into role models she imitates in real life, Emma becomes a "melancholy fantasist," which "was a fashionable image in the late eighteenth century, one particularly attractive to a young intellectual just starting out in the world, keen to distinguish herself from the common run of humankind" (Taylor 2003, 1). It is her aunt who is actually worried about Emma's "ardent and impetuous sensations, which, while they promise vigour of mind, fill [her] with apprehension for the virtue, for

the happiness of my child” (MEC 26–7). This concern is perfectly justified as long as Emma, endowed with reading and recitation skills, cannot comprehend Pope’s Homer and Thomson’s *Seasons*, her uncle’s favourite authors. Moreover, the perils of inexperienced reading become more evident when she “subscribed to a circulating library, and frequently read, or rather devoured—little careful in the reflection—from ten to fourteen novels in a week” (MEC 53). Emma J. Clery claims that in the late eighteenth century, circulating libraries were frowned upon because books were passed from one hand to another, becoming “soiled, marked and defaced,” a state of decay which mirrored “a parallel fate for the (de jure) female readers who devour and internalise the stories” (1995, 97). Although Mr. Courtney attempts to dampen her enthusiasm with Plutarch and history, Emma gradually delves into ecclesiastical history and “polemic divinity” (59) to such an extent that “I reasoned freely, endeavoured to arrange and methodise my opinions [...] I seemed to acquire new strength and dignity of character” (MEC 60). Emma turns into a female philosopher who, in the words of Adriana Crăciun, “by the end of the 1790s, had emerged as one particularly dangerous disciple of the Modern Philosophy, and was above all identified with Mary Wollstonecraft as a politicised avatar of Rousseau’s scandalous Julie” (2005, 31). Above all, it is Rousseau’s *Julie, or The New Heloise* that stirs the strongest emotions in the heroine’s soul and that represents the most dangerous epistemological threat: “The pleasure I experienced approached the limits of pain—it was tumult—all the ardour of my character was excited” (MEC 60). In a nutshell, Rousseau’s novel encapsulates the noxious effects of reading in solitude: “The perceptions of persons in retirement are very different from those of people in the great world: their passions, being differently modified, are differently expressed; their imaginations, constantly impressed by the same objects, are more violently affected” (1810, 7). It is ultimately dangerous because, of the two volumes, Emma only reads the first one, remaining ignorant of the moral lesson taught in the second. Once she has appropriated the conduct of Julie, Emma starts feeling a “mixture of radical liberation and sentimental endorsement” (Todd 1989, 244) and takes Augustus Harley⁵ as a projection of her own sexual desire, as a lover who remains as ideal as her intellectual potential, which cannot be accepted by society.

According to Todd, the development of Emma’s character represents “a summary of the progress of constructed femininity” ensured by the world of romance and

⁵ It is worth mentioning that Emma’s interest in Augustus is first piqued by his mother’s accounts of his son and that she actually falls in love with Augustus’s portrait she sees in Mrs. Harley’s house. Therefore, her desire is first set in motion by an image that acts as a signifier. As Tilottama Rajan has observed, “figuring the precedence of the signifier over the signified, the portrait marks the fundamentally romantic structure of desire [...] a form of Imagination subversively knotted into the symbolic structures of representation and the family” (1993, 156).

Rousseau's sexual fantasy in *The New Heloise*, which puts her "in far more social, if not psychological, danger" (1989, 243). Emma confesses that her reading of Rousseau is responsible for "a long chain of consequences that will continue to operate till the day of [her] death" (MEC 60). It is true that Hays's novel "makes clear its allegiances to the Enlightenment, championing free inquiry, private judgment, equality, the struggle against 'prejudice' and 'superstition,' a faith in progress and the ameliorating effects of knowledge" (Norton 2013, 298). Yet, the social and emotional consequences of untutored reading are evident. Reading Rousseau's novel with utmost enthusiasm, Emma puts into practice Helvétius's philosophy, according to which passions underlie the formation of one's character: "The character of a man is the immediate effect of his passions, and his passions are often the immediate effects of his actions" (Helvétius 1810, 26). As a result, her unrequited love for Harley is the mimetic effect of Rousseau's text, which enables her to develop strong feelings for Augustus. At the same time, this spark of excitement is generated by the world of fiction she reads voraciously. Animated by Rousseau's novel, undisciplined imagination and unprincipled feeling shape Emma's politically engaged self, which is at once unstable and unconventional. As Nicola Watson has shown, in the 1790s, radical women novelists like Helen Maria Williams, Charlotte Smith, Eliza Fenwick, Mary Hays, and Mary Wollstonecraft attempted to transform *The New Heloise* into a radical, feminist work. They aimed at discriminating between "the feminist author from the disempowered and eroticised heroine of sensibility exemplified by Rousseau's *Julie*" (1994, 23), who was reinterpreted by conservative writers as a misbehaving heroine. Such is the case of Eliza Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), an anti-Jacobin satire in which the ugly Bridgetina Botherim appears as a caricature of Emma because of her excessive sensibility, unattainable ideals and preposterous philosophical ideas. Bridgetina's superficial reading of Rousseau and Godwin determines her to abandon her domestic duties—the exclusive preserve of women—and claim independence, much in the vein of Rousseau's *Julie*. However, her pursuit of knowledge nourished by a total misunderstanding of Godwin's philosophical practices, coupled with her unfettered passions for a totally unresponsive man inspired by Rousseau's *The New Heloise* and her support of Wollstonecraft's feminism "illustrate the confounded mess that the 'Modern Philosophy' was in conservative eyes" (Crăciun 2005, 50).

Discussing the influence of the New Philosophy⁶ in the 1790s in Britain, Jacqueline Pearson writes that the revolutionary agenda upheld by William Godwin

⁶ As a radical philosopher and ardent believer in self-independence and reason as the ultimate means of controlling our actions and making the right choices, William Godwin argues that individuals must be granted the right to act according to their own judgement, rather than being subdued

was criticised by conservative fiction because “the conservatives argued that the New Philosophy infected history, scientific and religious books; Godwin was believed to advocate social levelling and the dismantling of monogamy and the nuclear family” (1999, 79). This is why *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is a “warning” against a quixotic type of female sensibility, which highlights “a peculiarly disempowered individual, trapped within his own bodily sensations and unable to imagine or effect any social change whatsoever” (Watson 1994, 24). Joe Bray has a similar view, claiming that “the reading practices of Hays’s heroine owe more to the philosophy of the French thinker Claude-Adrien Helvétius than that of her early mentor and leading figure in the ‘new science of mind’ which influenced the Jacobin novel of the 1790s, William Godwin” (2009, 58). Despite the references to Godwin’s necessitarian view, according to which any human action is determined by prior causes, Hays chooses “a universal sentiment” (*MEC* 35) as the subject matter of her novel. Informed by Helvétius, Hays shows how human character evolves by “receiving impressions” and how “the force of those impressions depends on a thousand circumstances, over which he [man] has little power; these circumstances form the mind, and determine the future character” (*MEC* 42). Emma realises that circumstances are of paramount importance, especially when she employs the epistolary form to examine her past. Echoing the correspondence between Hays and the Cambridge minister William Frend, whose unreciprocated love determined her to write *Memoirs* in 1796, Emma’s letters—much like the ones in Richardson’s *Pamela*—represent the means of rendering the authentic female feeling in written form. They unravel the identity in the making of a female protagonist who, in retrospect, is able to understand the operations of her mind and heart. The letters reveal a reflective Emma who warns the young Augustus against the perils of considering strong emotions a constructive human impulse. She pleads for the unshackling of the human mind “from the trammels of superstition, and teach it, that its true dignity and virtue, consist in being free” (*MEC* 196). In addressing the young Augustus in a didactic manner,

to an oppressive government, although they should consider the advice of others. As he writes in *Political Justice*, freedom is unconstrained, “except that of reasons and inducements presented to the understanding” (1798, 66), whereas “each man must be *taught* to enquire and think for himself” (1798, 288; emphasis in the original). Such claims were regarded as delusive ideals, particularly when pursued by women like Emma, and also as a threat by British anti-Jacobins and anti-Jacobin writers alike, who believed that ethical and social relations were undermined by anarchism. As Matthew O. Grenby has pointed out, “the New Philosophy targeted women as a vulnerable portal through which they [Jacobin writers] could attack all of society, corroding the relations which bound it together,” whereas anti-Jacobins perceived the New Philosophy “as a system which aimed first and foremost at deluding women out of their genuine duties and virtues” (2001, 88). This is also suggestive of “the logic of loss,” which substantiates my argument.

Emma reveals the idealistic liberalism advocated by William Godwin, which is essential to maintaining harmony in society. In fact, Emma's letters are analogous to Hays's message conveyed to a sensible and unbiased reader: "The philosopher [...] may, possibly, discover in these *Memoirs* traces of reflection, and of some attention to the phaenomena of the human mind" (*MEC* 37).

A telling example of determination and desire for intellectual recognition, Emma's story is a mixture of philosophical ideas, which is the result of "references to Helvétius, on the one hand, and on the other, the concomitant intertextual presence of Godwinian rationalism contesting with Rousseauvian sensibility" (Bergmann 2011, 28–29). It is worth mentioning that before she embarks on the doomed pursuit of Harley, Emma strives to put her virtue to work, to display her intelligence and, ultimately, to redress, however unsuccessfully, an unshakeable patriarchal society: "[...] 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 any taking part in the great, though often absurd and tragical, drama of life" (*MEC* 85). In a radical Jacobin vein, the heroine transgresses the boundaries of traditional norms of conduct recommended for young women. Her philosophical conversations with Mr. Francis are a case in point, as are the discussions with her uncle and her relatives' harsh criticism of her sophisticated dialogues with Francis, which she straightforwardly dismisses. According to Bergmann, "the problem with communication between men and women being sexualised to such a degree that it excluded anything but courtship as a possible basis for interaction and dialogue was a moot point for Mary Hays" (Bergmann 2011, 42). Although her mind "began to be emancipated" (*MEC* 59), Emma goes out into the adult world under the auspices of rationality and alleged independence which, more often than not, prove to be unsuccessful. In a socially and politically vulnerable context, her sensibility is only complemented by reason, since Emma's assertiveness and ferment of ideas are indicative of social disorder. She thus enacts Helvétius's philosophical principles: "But do you perceive, that my reason was the auxiliary of my passion, or rather passion the generative principle of my reason?" (*MEC* 172). Her short-lived rebelliousness is a characteristic of most of the Jacobin novels, whose conclusion "would have a logical truth and necessity which would make them simply the imaginative reenactment of a philosophical argument" (Kelly 1989, 216). Notwithstanding her sagacity, Emma ends up as a social outcast who actually echoes Hays's staunch belief that "society could be perfected, that changes could be brought about, if men and women would only consent to being educated and working together in compliance with a principle that was founded in a Jacobin vision of equality" (Bergmann 2011, 39). Nevertheless, apart from Mr. Francis, who, guiding her mind in a reflective manner, becomes "her friend and

counsellor” (*MEC* 72), the society in which Emma Courtney lives turns out to be averse to gender equality and, most notably, to women’s perfectibility, compelling her to remain “a solitary enthusiast, a child in the drama of the world” (*MEC* 133).

3 What Price Independence?

Labelled as a “romantic enthusiast” (*MEC* 146), Emma’s mixture of unprincipled feeling and intellectual fervour places her in an unconventional realm of gender equality. In the eighteenth century, the term “enthusiasm” was first linked to religious error and explained by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke as an eccentric effect of Methodism and, in general, as the enemy of human understanding. On a par with Romantic imagination, vision or prophesy, enthusiasm “was desired in Romantic writing” (Mee 2003, 1). As a politically-charged term, particularly in the context of the French Revolution, “enthusiasm,” explains John Mee, was expressive of both “excessive social energy” and “a restorative draft of emotion” (2003, 18). Caught between these two drives, Emma is a heroine who wishes to become actively engaged in improving society, on the one hand, and to experience the kind of love consistent with the model offered by *The New Heloise*. Despite the misfortunes she goes through, Emma is always convinced that “without some degree of illusion, and enthusiasm, all that refines, exalts, softens, embellishes, life—genius, virtue, love itself, languishes” (*MEC* 112–13). The heroine’s steady concern for the development of her moral and intellectual qualities—among them being “genius,” understood by Helvétius as the result of chance and education (1810, 201)—is predicated on a counterbalance between reason and feeling whenever she tries to assert her civil disobedience. Nevertheless, it is Mr. Francis, her mentor usually identified by interpreters as the critical mouthpiece of William Godwin, who urges Emma to use her reason, which he deems to be the hallmark of independence and, implicitly, of personal happiness: “The first lesson of enlightened reason, the great fountain of heroism and virtue, the principle by which alone man can become what man is capable of being, is *independence*” (*MEC* 140; emphasis in the original). In their conversations, Mr. Francis displays his disinterested benevolence “as a *philosopher*, not as a *lover*” (*MEC* 78; emphasis in the original), appreciates Emma’s intelligence and, above all, encourages her “to rest on [her] own powers” (*MEC* 70). This is an excellent opportunity for a woman like Emma to earn a respectable place in society, but this image remains “the wishful thinking of many a young woman of Emma’s inclination” (Bergmann 2011, 41) and, in the economy of the novel, strictly circumstantial. Mr. Francis is the only man capable of establishing a real constructive dialogue

with Emma, in stark contrast to Dr Montague, a man “with an impetuous temper and stubborn prejudices,” whose “language of gallantry” (*MEC* 69), fortune and marriage proposal are at once dismissed by Emma, a daring resolution which sparks her relatives’ discontent. Inculcated by Mr. Francis, independence as a guarantor of well-being is a view which runs contrary to Helvétius’s⁷ and gets closer to “the Stoic-Socratic notion that the true good can only be found *within*, making one’s happiness beyond the reach of chance and external circumstances” (Norton 2013, 299; emphasis in the original). Under the influence of Godwin’s philosophical ideas of character and necessity advanced in *Political Justice*,⁸ Emma asks Mr. Francis in their correspondence: “To what purpose did you read my confessions, but to trace in them a character formed, like every other human character, by the result of unavoidable impressions, and the chain of necessary events?” (*MEC* 177) In contradistinction with Godwin’s normative philosophical discourse, the subjective tone adopted by Emma reinforces the heroine’s excessive sensibility, which is only temporarily amended by Mr. Francis’s rational remarks meant to support Emma’s self-analysis in a Stoic manner. Similarly, echoing Wollstonecraft’s key principles posited in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792),⁹ Emma’s aunt suggests

⁷ Heavily influenced by *De l’homme* (1772), translated into English as *A Treatise of Man; His Intellectual Faculties and His Education* in 1777, Hays shows great interest in Helvétius’s notion of character, with particular reference to the education of youth, whose mind is a Lockean *tabula rasa* suffused with impressions coming from the outside world. This is the moment, comments Helvétius, when “he [the youth] receives the most efficacious instruction; it is then that his tastes and character are formed” (1810, 24). The character is, therefore, explained in conjunction with chance or external factors: “It is chance, moreover, that places him in this or that position, excites, extinguishes or modifies his tastes and passions; and that has, consequently, the greatest part in forming his character” (1810, 26).

⁸ In Book IV, Chapter 5 of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, Godwin clarifies the meaning of “necessity” as follows: “He who affirms that all actions are necessary, means, that, if we form a just and complete view of all the circumstances in which a living or intelligent being is placed, we shall find that he could not in any moment of his existence have acted otherwise than he has acted. According to this assertion there is in the transactions of mind nothing loose, precarious and uncertain” (1798, 285). Further on, he defines “character” in relation to the cause-effect relationship: “If there were not this original and essential connexion between motives and actions, and, which forms one particular branch of this principle, between men’s past and future actions, there could be no such thing as character, or as a ground of inference enabling us to predict what men would be from what they have been” (1798, 291–92). Godwin’s “essential connexion between motives and actions,” much like Helvétius’s understanding of “character,” enabled critics such as Gary Kelly to suggest that Jacobin novels sought to show how “character and incident were linked together like the parts of a syllogism” (1976, 16).

⁹ As a programmatic and proto-feminist text, Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* aimed to empower women, laying stress on their need for rational education and independence, two major prerequisites radically opposed to the long-held perception of women as domestic and passive

that “rational independence” is an imperative in a society in which inequalities, “by fostering artificial wants, and provoking jealous competitions, have generated selfish and hostile passions” (*MEC* 27).

While Emma wishes for independence, briefly taught by Mr. Francis how to exercise it, Hays’s novel questions, in a rather anti-Jacobin manner, the possibility for women to act accordingly. The reflective Emma straightforwardly admits that gender inequality is in place and is acutely aware of the prejudices which, in Godwin’s own vocabulary,¹⁰ are imposed by the tyranny of social and political institutions which hamper the individual from being independent and, at the same time, fulfilling his duties for the wellbeing of society: “Cruel prejudices! [...] Why was I not educated for commerce, for a profession, for labour?” (*MEC* 32). Furthermore, the limited role of women in society is imposed not only by social custom, but also by the fact that, living with prejudice, women do not know “how to dissolve the powerful spell” (*MEC* 85) or are unable to do so. Addressing the problem of feminist autonomy in the context of real-world prejudices, Brian Michael Norton explains that autonomy “depends rather on the exercise of a developed repertoire of self-reflective skills [...] which are themselves acquired through socialization” (2013, 301). In this sense, Mr. Francis poses as an eye-opener who, however, fails to elevate Emma to the status she yearns for, because her reason is, as she confesses, “the auxiliary of my passion” (*MEC* 61). Her infatuation with Harley before seeing him is the consequence of Rousseau’s *The New Heloise* which, like her reading of the book itself, represents “the prelude of physical seduction” (Watson 1994, 46). By falling in love with the portrait of Augustus, which hangs in Mrs. Harley’s library, Emma behaves like a female Quixote, whose passion for an abstraction denaturalises her perception. Consequently, Emma’s “sickly sensibility” feeds on “chimerical visions of felicity, that, touched by the sober wand of truth, would have melted into thin air” (*MEC* 61). By the same token, her letters, which remain unanswered by Augustus, are an “epistemic testing ground for imagining how women can know their hearts in the new romantic landscape” (Binhammer 2009, 3). This ill-fated epistemological

beings unable to think. For Wollstonecraft, independence is “the grand blessing of life, the basis of every virtue” whilst women’s impossibility to develop intellectually is formulated in the following terms: “It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of men” (1992, 85). In a more radical manner, she bemoans the condition of women, claiming that “it appears to me necessary to dwell on these obvious truths, because women have been insulated [...] they have been stripped of the virtues that should clothe humanity” (1992, 122).

¹⁰ See Book V, Chapter 14 of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, where Godwin firmly asserts that “implicit faith, blind submission to authority, timid fear, a distrust of our powers, an inattention to our own importance and the good purposes we are able to effect, these are the chief obstacles to human improvement” (1798, 494).

undertaking, however, cannot be cured by Mr. Francis, no matter how conversant he is with her blissful enthusiasm which, for him, is the expression of her sheer “insanity” (*MEC* 168). He finally admits that “your present distress is worthy of compassion” (*MEC* 139), whereas Hays describes Emma as “a desolate orphan” who falls prey to social circumstances. Her *Bildung* is articulated only in terms of a progress of the mind stimulated by the philosophical conversations with Francis, whilst her inner torments and misfortunes—shared with the young Augustus so as to serve him as a lesson—unveil her capacity to scrutinise her own self built on a logic of loss. Thus, Mr. Francis’s rationality entitles him to conclude that Emma’s suffering and pain are self-inflicted, rather than the result of external circumstances: “You addressed a man impenetrable as a rock, and the smallest glimpse of sober reflection, and common sense, would have taught you instantly to have given up the pursuit” (*MEC* 167). Such a twisted ideology of female sensibility fuelled by excessive sentimentalism inspired by Rousseau’s *The New Heloise* and by Helvétius’s physical sensations and formation of character is ostensibly regulated by the “heroism and virtue” dictated by independence under the authority of reason and education, as recommended by Godwin and Wollstonecraft.

Realising that she let herself fall prey to the pangs of sentiment, Emma seeks “to recast her own doomed relationship with Augustus Harley by fostering an attachment between Augustus’ son and her own daughter” (Golightly 2012, 105), but the death of her daughter determines her to write her memoirs to her son in order for him to learn about the frailties of her human character and thus to avoid a similar tragic romantic affair. Subjugated by “the barbarous and accursed laws of society” (*MEC* 15), she eventually accepts that affections like hers have ethical value only within the realm of domesticity and that, without the proper use of reason, ethical deliberation is impossible. As a female protagonist of a Jacobin novel, she actually performs an anti-Jacobin critique of improbable ideals, when it comes to women’s intellectual emancipation. As a female novelist writing under the ambit of Wollstonecraft, Hays gradually refuted Godwin’s radical model of reason and remained faithful to emotions as an indispensable part of human nature. As Miriam L. Wallace affirms, “Hays consistently casts passion and sensibility as central to ‘female philosophers’ and as a corrective to the abstract reasoning of her mentor, William Godwin” (2001, 236). But Emma, like Hays, ultimately fails as a Jacobin reformer of contemporary philosophical ideas, which are the exclusive preserve of a patriarchal society.

4 Conclusions

As I hope to have shown, Mary Hays creates a heroine who aims to achieve independence and, at the same time, questions whether this status can be applicable to women who live in an oppressive society. Inspired by Godwin's rationalism, on the one hand, and by Rousseau's and Helvétius's sensationist philosophy, on the other, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is a testing ground for key philosophical debates with which it actively engages. Dedicated to "the feeling and thinking few" (MEC 5), its didacticism resides in urging readers to be mindful of the lures and ruses of empathy. Although an avid reader who becomes able to exercise her intelligence in public, Emma remains an untampered enthusiast enclosed in "the magic circle" of prejudice and also faithful to her ideal of being free and unmarried. Emma Courtney epitomises "the political impasse of sensibility" which might degenerate into insanity—induced by the reading of Rousseau's *The New Heloise*—and "make subjectivity subject" (Todd 1989, 252). As I have argued, the "cured" Emma's critique of prejudice draws her closer to an anti-Jacobin heroine who is conscious of her inability to transgress well-established eighteenth-century gender norms.

Hays's novel can be read as a warning against uncontrolled imagination, which is ironically productive of strong passions that are juxtaposed in the novel with the philosophical conversations unfolding under the aegis of reason. In the long run, Emma realises that the development of her character is paradoxically subscribed to a logic of loss which, nourished by her sentimental delusions and untutored reading, prevent her female agency from manifesting itself in a patriarchal society that forestalls the transformation of woman "from sentimental seducer into a dangerous republican philosopher" (Crăciun 2005, 30). However, in spite of Emma's failure as a proto-feminist character, Hays's novel may be considered a trailblazer insofar as the construction of an independent mind is concerned. Like her heroine, Hays remained a "romantic enthusiast" who challenged, along with Wollstonecraft, the late eighteenth-century socio-political and philosophical biases against women's reason, sensibility, education and free thinking.

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