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**Rationality, Sensibility, and Female
Independence in Mary Hays's
"Memoirs of Emma Courtney" and
*"The Victim of Prejudice"***

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Introduction

During the second half of the eighteenth century, England saw a massive spike in its literary production, caused by the cultural and economic developments advanced in the decades leading to the French Revolution. This growth led to an increasingly more active role for women in the print culture of the time, as they became able to influence it and the direction it was taking from within. In fact, ladies were slowly becoming a major force as both as consumers and producers of novels and of other literary works. Thanks to their new affluent position in the public life, they could exercise their influence and voice to push for an equitable and inclusive social agenda. This agenda aimed at granting them access to some of the rights which, up to that point, had been denied to them due to their alleged intellectual and moral inferiority, as well as criticizing the double standards related to what was considered socially acceptable for men and women. The outbreak of the French Revolution further exacerbated this situation, and its initially positive acceptance emboldened Radical and non-Conformist thinkers to join the public marketplace of ideas to promote and to share their beliefs about justice, the social order, sexuality, and the condition of women. However, the backlash faced by the revolution in England after its violent turn affected its supporters too, as a result leading to a climate of unrest and to a political witch hunt on the part of the conservative counterrevolutionary side of the British political sphere. The conservative scathing attacks on paper and on the public stage eventually succeeded in irreparably harming the reputation of their rivals, barring them from public life. Before investigating how this cultural shift influenced the public perception of women novelists as well as the way in which they presented themselves and tackled contemporary issues in their works, it is necessary to clarify the factors which contributed to make the novel the prominent literary form of the eighteenth century.

The Cultural Revolution and the Rise of the Novel

In order to properly understand the growth of the novel, one must consider both the social and cultural circumstances of eighteenth-century England. It is imperative to stress that this century saw the emergence of the middle-class, which slowly dethroned the aristocracy both from its economic and cultural hegemony. Not only was this battle for hegemony fought through socio-economic means, but it also took the shape of a cultural clash, which eventually manifested itself in a battle of the books. On the one side there was the aristocratic and formulaic genre of French romances, opposed to the new emerging middle-class novel, which over time assimilated and replaced its predecessor as the dominant form. The novel appealed to the middle-class public due to its emphasis on formal realism. As Catherine Gallagher explains, the shift from romances to novels was marked by a legitimization of the verisimilar as a form of truth itself; its most important trait was that the new stories found in novels were openly revolving around no one in particular, that is someone who did not exist (1994, pp. 164-65).

This factor significantly contributed to the popularity of this form, due to its meaningful connection with the theory of sympathy. In Hume's understanding, sympathy functions as contagion through which the idea of the passion of another is turned into an impression of that passion in ourselves, at which point it is no longer possible distinguish that impression from experiencing the actual sentiment. This entire process revolves around the act of appropriating someone else's passions and is centred on the idea of property itself, since after all we are more likely to feel sympathy for those who are closer to us rather than for strangers (Gallagher 1994, pp. 169-170). On top of that, the production of sympathy might reach full completion only after the original sufferer has been completely disposed of. The emotions of another will always appear cold and distant to us and are only truly felt when they become our possession and lose the quality of belonging to someone else. This peculiar trait links sympathy and the novel in an

indissoluble manner. The fact that its protagonists are non-existent explains the appeal of the novel on eighteenth-century readers, since the new protagonists, by virtue of being fictional, do not have any connection with anyone, which makes it easier for readers to sympathise with them and with their plights, thus making them “emerge as universally engaging subjectivities” (pp. 171-72).

This new genre soon proved to be especially appealing to middle-class women, who began to play an active role in its emergence. The main factor which pushed women to write novels was the fact that the novel itself had acquired throughout the eighteenth century an outstanding reputation thanks to the works of the novelists Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. Richardson’s *Pamela* (1741), *Clarissa* (1748), and *Sir Charles Grandison* (1751) granted the genre an aura of respectability which it had lacked until that point, thus separating the novel from its initial association with moral debauchery and allowing women to publish their works without having to forfeit their reputation (Spencer 1993, p. 89). Moreover, both authors played a major role in encouraging women to join the literary field. In fact, they acted as guides and mentors to authors such as Sarah Fielding and Charlotte Lennox, providing valuable criticism and making corrections and alterations to their works. What made their contributions so remarkable was the fact that, as men, they did not adopt an attitude of inherent superiority when dealing with inexperienced lady-writers, on the contrary they shared valuable comments and suggestions to help them improve on a professional level, thus marking a significant shift from the past which led to the cultural acceptance of women as aspiring novelists (p. 91).

Nevertheless, this male support and approval, while encouraging and empowering, had its downsides. As the eighteenth century progressed, women’s writing had to conform to societal expectations about what was considered properly feminine to be regarded as worthy of consideration. As a result, it became confined to a limited sphere of influence and had to

uphold the conventional standards of the time regarding morality and sexuality (Spencer 1993, p. 92). Furthermore, the association with Richardson and Fielding created a gendered divide in the canon of the tradition of the novel. On the one hand, Fielding's works were perceived as masculine due to their inappropriate themes, and due to Fielding himself placing them within the classical tradition, which was inaccessible to women because of their stunted education. Richardson's writing instead established a certain boundary for works published by women, and it was expected that their writing too would tackle the themes of morality and feelings which Richardson explored in his novels, and that they had to possess a similar exemplary and didactic aim (p. 90).

The Acceptance of Women Writers

The improving reputation of novel writing was achieved not only thanks to the efforts of influential male authors, but was also the result of a shift in attitude towards women writers. During the eighteenth century, women could finally publish their own works without risking of being subjected to the abuses and scorn their predecessors suffered from in the previous century. This remarkable change was the result of the efforts of authors such as Elizabeth Rowe, who helped to establish a public persona for female authors which posed no active threat to their reputation as proper ladies (Turner 1992, p. 48). Rowe's influence shaped most of the expectations reserved to female authors in the second half of the eighteenth century, and led them to be well accepted. Counterbalancing the wit of 17th century female writers, ladies were judged as authors and as individuals according to the qualities of "nature, morality and modesty" (Spencer 1993, p. 77). This cultural shift led to a conflation of the feminine with the literary, which was forwarded by the sentimental culture so prevalent at the end of the century. It is important to stress that the hero of the sentimental novel, the so called 'man of feeling',

possesses himself numerous traits regarded as feminine at the time, such as an excessive sensibility connected to a heightened sense of morality.

These virtues, however, were at the same time rather limiting for women, since they were nonetheless influenced by the double standards reserved for the weaker sex. Firstly, women had to respect and adhere to them more strictly compared to their male counterparts, especially regarding morality, which for men meant to possess the right judgment regarding what they were going to attempt, while for women it was understood as a fear linked to every action or choice they intended to take (Spencer 1993, p. 78). Moreover, due to its association with sentimentalism, their writing became associated with the ambivalent attitudes related to the cultural movement itself. Indeed, the whole movement relied on the idealisation and the glorification of weakness not only for its protagonists, but for real women themselves, who were esteemed for their meekness and timidity, and whose beauty depended on displaying these characteristics. Women and their writing, therefore, came to be seen as inherently weak, a desirable flaw according to the standards of the time.

By the end of the eighteenth century to be a woman writer was as an acceptable position, worthy even of respect and admiration. One of the reasons for the diffusion of writing as a possible profession among ladies is related to their socio-economic status. One should remember that the possibilities available to women in England were rather limited, with marriage and motherhood being the highest forms of personal fulfilment towards which every proper young lady should strive for. Their main hubs of activity were therefore the home and the domestic sphere, while men instead were thought to be fit for public life (Turner 1992, p. 66). Ladies belonging to middle-class families had no need to earn a living, since their financial futures were already established for them, as they were dependent on the protection first of their family and then of their future husbands. Nevertheless, there was still the tangible risk that their financial situation could worsen over time, and in that case, women were severely

held back by the widespread reluctance towards the idea of middle-class ladies earning a living through work. Moreover, their limited education did not provide any form of support in case of financial struggles, as women were indeed taught to read and write to become literate, yet they were not taught any of the skills necessary to partake in employments considered suitable to lower class ladies, such as cheese making or book binding. Similarly, without any sort of financial support, there was no way for a woman to acquire the capital necessary to start her own businesses or to purchase an apprenticeship, forcing her in a constant state of dependence from relatives or friends (p. 69). Novel writing instead required no specific set of skills, thus granting women a way of earning a monetary income to support themselves or their family. Still, it was not a stable source of income, since it was a highly competitive field, with publishers having a wide range of options to choose from, therefore ladies usually settled for another profession to go along with their writing career, such as becoming schoolmistresses.

To thrive in the literary market of the eighteenth century, women writers acquired a certain set of skills and of competences to render their works marketable to the wider public, while also appealing to the moral standards of polite society, so as not to tarnish their reputation. As Susan Civale illustrates in her work, Frances Burney's career is exemplary of the process of public self-fashioning which female authors had to undergo to be successful. Civale argues that Burney's reputation as a self-conscious and timid author was not natural, on the contrary it was the product of a careful construction of a public image meant to appeal to the literary market (2019, p. 19). The way she structured the preface of her first novel *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778) shows an effort on Burney's part to project a particular impression of herself as an author. At the time, the preface of a novel had to follow some specific conventions, such as adopting a humble tone and openly stating the didactic purpose of the work, while also evoking leniency from critics and singing the praises of patrons. Moreover, female authors had to appeal to the sympathy of the public by

apologising for the roughness of their work, for their incapacity, and for resorting to such an unfeminine activity as writing (p. 20). On the other hand, Burney does not adopt this pleading preface for her novel. She still stresses her humility, her virtue, and her morality, yet she does not court critics for a positive judgment, in fact she is careful not to present herself in a feminine fashion and employs a battlefield metaphor to evoke the image of the author-hero, who fights for his work to be judged impartially and truthfully on its internal merits (p. 21). Furthermore, she elevates her work by aligning herself with authors of the calibre of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Tobias Smollett, and Samuel Richardson, who were regarded as masters of their craft and whose works were considered appropriate readings for young ladies and for families, thus assuring that critics would regard her novel in the same manner while also boasting her education and taste (pp. 22-23).

Her *Diary* shows that the outstanding reception of *Evelina* and of its author was not coincidental, as Burney actively managed both the financial and public facets of the authorial profession. Decisions such as employing her older brother as a middleman when dealing with publishers, advertising her novel in *The London Chronicle*, and her choice of having her second novel *Cecilia* (1782) published by another printer are hallmarks of a clear intent to successfully navigate the world of professional authorship (Civale 2019, p. 27). Her diary also highlights how she went through great efforts to build for herself a public persona embodying the virtues of modesty, of propriety, and of feminine decorum. She was aware of how the reception of her novel after its publication will eventually reflect on her public image, and consequently influence her reputation in the eyes of society, therefore affecting her private life too (pp. 29-30). The profits resulting from the publication of her third novel *Camilla* (1796) attest to her mastery of the inner workings of the literary market of the second half of the eighteenth century. Relinquishing the need to sell the copyright of her work to a publisher, she adopted a model of publishing by subscription, thus exploiting her connections and well-established reputation to

earn a greater monetary income. Coupled with her choice of dedicating the novel to the queen, her model proved extremely successful, and her novel became the most expensive work of 1796, selling 4.000 copies during its first publication only (p. 34). Moreover, the moral and didactic intents behind *Camilla* secured for it a reputation which trumped its mediocre critical reception, therefore leading to its author being grouped in the eyes of the public in that category of virtuous and decorous female writers to which Bluestocking women such as Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter and Hester Chapone belonged, while avoiding the slander and humiliation targeting revolutionary sympathisers like Mary Wollstonecraft (p. 37).

In response to this situation, a movement took shape which opposed not only the standards and tropes which dominated and directed the act of novel writing of the time, but also sought to radically change British society and its morals in its entirety. Radicalised by the sudden outbreak of the French revolution, a group of intellectuals became intent on challenging through their works the status quo of British society, with the purpose of influencing the populace to become active agents of social change. These intellectuals have been grouped by contemporary scholars under the label of 'Jacobins' and are known for intermixing in their novels and treatises fiction, science, and philosophy. Counting among their rank figures of the calibre of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, the Jacobin movement and its authors left a deep mark on the decade of 1790s, by advancing a progressive and innovative social agenda aimed at identifying the causes behind the inequality in the distribution of power and of basic rights among British society. They sought to push the public to develop a critical awareness of their standing as individuals in the wider context of society, so as to lead to the birth of a new political subject, one who would fight to gain the basic rights to citizenship, to property, and to justice which were denied to the majority of the British population. Their investigations of society also called into question the treatment and standards of conduct for women at the time, attracting in their ranks several talented and socially subversive female

intellectuals wholly intent on improving the social standing of their sex. Among these women, Mary Hays distinguished herself in the literary scene of the 1790s for her radical feminist beliefs. She sought to redefine the sexual norms dominating the relationship between men and women, and unrelentingly pushed for improvements in the standards of female education, to offer women more opportunities for self-fulfilment outside of the traditional paths of marriage and motherhood.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis focuses on the figure of Mary Hays to demonstrate and to trace the impact of her works on the British literary canon. Far from being a dead end and a failed deviation in the story of the development of British literature, the influence of Mary Hays's legacy is felt not only in the works of her immediate successors, on the contrary her theories on sexuality and femininity constitute a form of early feminism whose revolutionary appeal is relevant even to modern day feminism. Therefore, this thesis analyses her two major novels *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and *The Victim of Prejudice* and takes into consideration the social context where they were written and published, to bring to light those aspect of her ideology to be regarded as innovative and revolutionary for the time.

This thesis is structured in three parts. In the first chapter, I trace the growth of Mary Hays's mind as an unconventional female intellectual and thinker, providing a summary of her life experiences to identify the influences which played a major role in shaping her mindset and her authorial style. Hays's life is far from conventional, as she had to contend with the difficulties of being an unattractive erudite woman in a society which stifled any kind of intellectual aspiration in the weaker sex. Raised in an environment which granted her only a subpar and lacking education, Hays fought all her life not to let herself be bound by the traditional roles for women, pushed by a desire for self-fulfilment and for independence which sets her apart from most members of her sex. In the second chapter, I perform a close reading

of her novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, to identify its major themes. This analysis highlights how Mary Hays exploits the form of the novel to further push and develop her progressive social agenda delineated in her non-fictional treatises. Therefore, it emphasises how the novel forwards an unrelenting condemnation of the female condition through the story of its protagonist, while stressing the original and innovative role it played in the major philosophical debate of the 1790s. In the third chapter, I focus on Hays's second novel *The Victim of Prejudice*. Through a contrastive reading against her first novel, this part demonstrates how her ideology evolved in the second half of the decade of the 1790s. Turned more pessimistic by the prosecution which she had to endure, Mary Hays still managed to stay true to her beliefs and forwarded a dire denunciation of how sexual prejudices related to the concept of chastity affect and shape the lives of women.

1. Mary Hays: A Radical Novelist and Philosopher

1.1. Biography

1.1.1. Formative Years and First Literary Steps

Mary Hays was born in the year 1759, was raised in a dissenting family, and spent her juvenile years in the town of Bermondsey, near London. Her father's profession was most likely that of a mariner in a commercial fleet, and his death in 1774 pushed her widowed mother to become a wine merchant to provide for the whole family (Hays 2000, p. 30). She fell in love for the first time at the age of seventeen, when she became acquainted with a young man named John Eccles, who shared her same religious background. They soon wished to marry, a match which was vehemently opposed by both families. Hays's mother expressed a suspicion that Eccles had no attachment to her daughter and was planning to marry her simply to gain possession of her dowry, since he was lacking in both employment and fortune. In fact, Hays was considered unsightly for the aesthetic standards of her time, and her lack of charms made it appear so that her only favourable quality on the marriage market was the annual sum of £70 left to her by her late father (Walker 2020, p. 14). Yet, the two young lovers lived close to each other, so they still met clandestinely and exchanged letters for two whole years, from 1779 to 1780. These letters will then be recovered and published as a collection by Hays herself. This collection, as highlighted by Gina Luria Walker, the leading scholar on Mary Hays, is modelled after Richardson's epistolary novels, a characteristic which reflects Hays's formative experiences during her girlhood, mostly composed of informal readings such as poetry and novels, as well as attending weekly to Rational Dissenting services at her local chapel (p. 11)

Eventually, Hays and Eccles overcame the reluctance of their families and became officially engaged. Sadly, Eccles died of a fever in 1780, leaving Hays distraught and depriving her forever of her only possibility of becoming a wife and a mother. This loss was so impactful

for her that she went as far as flauntingly challenging the social conventions of the time by publicly wearing for an entire year the black clothes of mourning as if she were his widow and was thrown in a long period of introspection and self-reflection (Walker 2020, p. 26). She spent her next ten years living a quiet and studious life. She began to pursue a higher education by seeking out tuition from erudite men in the Dissenting community, as she was dissatisfied with the subpar intellectual life to which women were relegated and which mostly consisted of reading novels. By becoming an informal apprentice to these men, she could receive an extensive tutelage, which she required since she was an autodidact like the majority of learned women of her age, and at the same time she could avoid any form of sexual scandal or accusation of improper sexual misconduct, by virtue of being, as self-described, a very plain girl (p. 34).

Her first mentor in the decade of the 1780s was Reverend Robert Robinson, whom she first heard in London, in 1781. He began to correspond with Hays, encouraged her intellectual ambitions and led her to become accustomed to the Enlightenment values. His influence on her was extremely important, as he was a self-taught mentor who dealt with the most controversial and scathing issues of his time such as the abolition of the slave trade and the necessity of adopting universal male suffrage. These egalitarian and democratic opinions were unusual and discomforting even among the Dissenters themselves (Walker 2020, p. 36). During this tutelage, Hays began writing poems and short works of fancy, and even managed to leave her mark on the feminine culture of sensibility of the time through her short story *Hermit: an Oriental Tale* in the *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, published in 1786. This novella combines an exotic setting with allegorical warnings about the dangers of giving into unbounded, excessive passions and sensibilities, and takes as its main source of inspiration Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1759) (p. 35).

After Robinson's death in 1790, Hays began to associate with the extended Dissenting circle of the New College tutors, which included intellectuals of the calibre of John Priestley and John Disney. Her participation in this community allowed her to extend her social network, and to become familiar with some of the Dissenting and Unitarian wives, as well as keeping in touch with two of Robinson's daughters. These factors pushed her to pursue a higher education and to attend the New College at Hackney, the most innovative Dissenting academy which followed the belief of searching for wisdom through knowledge (Walker 2020, p. 89). As Marylin Brooks reminds us, the Dissenting community played a similar role to the culture of Sensibility in providing an outlet for Hays to express her ideas and, with its emphasis on the notion of suffering and martyrdom, taught her to cherish her unique status as an outsider (1995, pp. 5-6). The Dissenting community represented an ideal habitat for a woman with intellectual ambitions such as herself. Firstly, it was characterised by the belief that gaps in intellect between men and women were not justified by any inherent inferiority or flaw in the latter, on the contrary these gaps could be explained by the distinctive environmental and educational circumstances in their upbringing, and so they could be improved. Thus, it represented an egalitarian and safe environment for women to express their individuality and their different experiences (p. 10). In addition, it granted Hays a shield from possible male criticism towards her writing, since social education was to be blamed for any possible error or prejudices which might occur in her works, and not her inferior status as a woman, providing a justification for her controversial attempts at progress while allowing her to present herself "as erroneous but potentially trustworthy; as a failure but as potentially successful" (p. 13).

It was during this period that Mary Hays made her first literary debut with the publication of her pamphlet titled *Cursory Remarks on an Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public Worship*, in 1791. Written under the pseudonym Eusebia, it was a heartfelt response to Gilbert Wakefield's scathing criticism of collective worship. In her pamphlet, she

defended this practice on the ground that it could provide a valuable guidance to those in possession of a limited and feminine understanding such as herself (Walker 2020, p. 46). Critical reviewers received favourably this publication, and it attracted the attention of Wakefield himself. In his response, he quickly dismissed her entire argument through a succession of personal attacks by mocking her unconventional traits of being a self-taught woman and a spinster, while at the same time debasing their entire confrontation by presenting it as a sexual encounter rather than as an intellectual debate (p. 49). It is this public humiliation which eventually led to the fateful encounter of Hays with the college Unitarian William Friend, who communicated to her his support and condemned Wakefield's inappropriate remarks.

1.1.2. The Jacobin Experience and the Radical Turn

William Friend was a leading and central figure in the British Radical circle of the 1790s, whose opinion were so controversial as to have him expelled from Cambridge on the grounds of religious blasphemy after the publication of his pamphlet *Peace and Union Recommended to the Associated Bodies of Republicans and Anti-Republicans*, in 1793. It is highly probable that he and Hays already had at least a superficial knowledge of each other since the Rational Dissenting and Jacobin circles to which both belonged were small, and they possessed a common acquaintance in the character of Robinson (Oliver and Purdie 2010, pp. 94-96). After Friend moved to London in 1794, they met in person on multiple occasions and kept a constant correspondence throughout the year, which led Hays to believe that she had found in this man a kindred spirit who belonged to a world where sexual attraction, relationships, and marriages were based on a sharing of beliefs and of feelings (p. 97). She mistakenly believed that he reciprocated her love, and wrote him a series of sexually charged letters, in which she explicitly expressed her attraction to him; this direct and socially inappropriate behaviour led to her being rejected by him in 1796, a rejection which caused a personal crisis (Walker 2020, p. 116).

Nevertheless, this mostly one-sided relationship will ultimately manage to considerably influence her professional career and the rest of her adult life.

In 1792, George Dyer lent Hays a copy of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792) and, after following his suggestion to read it, she was so deeply impressed by her ideas about sexuality and society that she began to correspond with Wollstonecraft (Waters 2004, p. 423). This first contact eventually developed in a tight friendship and in a profitable relationship of mentorship for the former which deeply influenced Hays's future works. In fact, Hays had already begun to write her next work titled *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793), which she asked Wollstonecraft to comment on, hoping to exploit her expertise to considerably improve her writing and to take advantage of her connections to obtain a contract with the publisher Joseph Johnson. This work contains materials by Hays and her sister Elizabeth, and deals with themes such as domestic life and proper manners, as well as education, philosophy, and religion. Of great importance is its emphasis on the need for suitable female education, so that women could attain financial independence and become useful active members of society. Mary A. Waters explains that two of Wollstonecraft's advice were of particular importance to Hays's growth as a professional writer. Firstly, she instructed Hays on how to properly present herself to a public of learned men by criticising the meek and humble tone which had characterised her works until that point. Hays had to abandon this common feminine trope of constantly apologising for her own faults and deficiencies in education, and instead had to adopt a more confident and credible stance, as pleading to the readers serves no purpose since authors who lack the strength necessary to overcome their own limitations have no right to litter the already saturated marketplace with their own deficient works (p. 424). Furthermore, Wollstonecraft taught her to pay attention to her own writing style, that is, she stressed the importance of writing clearly to be understood and of employing certain strategies of language in her writing

to avoid being branded by the public as ‘feminine’, a derogatory term to which could be applied to male authors as well and was meant to undermine a person’s authority (p. 425).

Another significant relationship which left a deep mark on Hays’s growth as a person and as an author was her friendship with the anti-establishment philosopher and novelist William Godwin. Their acquaintance began when Hays, after Frennd suggested to her to read Godwin’s *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793), decided to acquire a copy of it, and since the circulating libraries at the time lacked this particular work due to its price, she opted to write directly to its author to ask to borrow a copy, in 1794. Her boldness proved successful, as she received both volumes of *Political Justice* from him, and he even decided to pay a visit to her in person the November of the same year (Walker 2020, p. 117). From that point, they began to meet and correspond on a regular basis and Godwin became another one of Hays’s mentors. Their exchanges were of a different kind compared to her previous correspondences, as Godwin demanded an objective, truth-based and rational form of debate and would respond to her letters in person, whereas Hays was accustomed to being treated with excessive care and soft manners by Unitarian men (p. 119).

In 1795, Hays decided to abandon the safety of her family’s home in Blackheath and moved to the Hatton Garden section of London, where she rented a set of room from a female engraver. This move constituted a great risk for the time, since her meagre pension of 70£ per year was not enough to provide for the standards of living which Hays desired, and she began to develop the ambition of starting a professional career as a writer to provide for herself. Moreover, she would have to suffer greatly from social censure, isolation, and loneliness since an unmarried young woman living on her own was considered inappropriate by eighteenth-century British society. Nevertheless, it also came with numerous advantages, as it allowed Hays to detach herself from her sister Elizabeth and her mother, so she could experience for

the first time a greater degree of personal independence and freedom, while also letting her live close to Godwin's and Frennd's social circles (Walker 2020, pp. 121-22).

Godwin played a crucial part in the creation of her first novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, as it is to him that Hays wrote in order to seek guidance and receive counsel while working on it. This request, however, drove a wedge between the two, since Hays reacted negatively to Godwin's criticism and could no longer accept to abide to it without retorting and defending her choices. In fact, Godwin was heavily critical of numerous aspects of this novel. Firstly, he found the work to be overtly philosophical and unlikely as whole and argued that it suffered from a lack of believable characters and situations (Walker 2020, p. 138). Moreover, he held the protagonist Emma in low regard, considering her to be too self-absorbed and strict, and disagreed with Hays's choice of telling the events entirely from her point of view. Similarly, he was not convinced by the plot of the work, which lacked tension and resolution, while being too repetitive and suggested to her to revise and alter it substantially to follow the precedents set by other novels which aimed to educate and entertain their readers (pp. 139-40). Despite Godwin's remarks, Hays stayed true to her plans and *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* was published by George Robison in November 1796. It is an epistolary experimental novel, whose basis is strictly autobiographical, as Hays used as materials her passionate and disappointed love along with excerpts or even entire letters taken from her exchanges with both Frennd and Godwin, who in the text appear in the guises of Augustus Harley and of the philosopher Mr. Francis.

The publication of *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* was received initially with mixed responses, both supporting and damning. The *Analytical Review* was overall pleased with her work describing it as "chaste and simple", while expressing some doubts about her portrayal of the relationship between Emma and Augustus, arguing that there is no way such a strong attraction would still be present in a woman after so many years of indifference on the part of

a man, and was also not convinced by his choice of keeping his first marriage a secret to Emma and by her choice of marrying Montague (Hays 2000, pp. 292-93). Similarly, the *Monthly Review* sang the praises of her work, distinguishing it from the other vulgar novels of the time, which aimed to simply engage momentarily the unoccupied mind of the readers by providing some casual allusions to the daily toils of life, and was particularly impressed by the second volume (pp. 294-95). Of a different tone was the review by *The British Critic*, which still recognised Hays's talent as a writer while completely disapproving of her work and sources, accusing her of having harmed the content and message of her novel due to her preference for that class of authors such as Helvétius and Rousseau, who, "with little scruple, sacrifice morality at the shrine of passion" (pp. 297). Three years later, the conservative journal *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* published a complete condemnation of Hays's character, which harshly disapproved her attempts to advocate for greater freedom for women by accusing her of wanting to corrupt young ladies and to lead them away from their duties as Christian daughters, future wives, and mothers, to turn them into revolutionary agents. The review ended by calling into question the judgment of the reviewers of the *Monthly Review*, adding that, if the work had conformed to the proper values of morality and virtue, their review would have been less liberal than it was (pp. 300-01).

1.1.3. The Controversies and Tarnished Reputation

Starting from January 1797, Wollstonecraft began to employ Hays as reviewer in Johnson's *Analytical Review* under the pseudonym V.V. by asking her to write a comment on Jayne West's *A Gossip Story* (1796), a task which Hays kept fulfilling even after her death in September 1797. She became the journal's only novel reviewer and had the responsibility of managing the editorship of this department for a few months in 1798 (Waters 2004, pp. 427-28). After leaving the journal, Hays still maintained a professional relationship with Johnson until his death in 1808. He published her next two books and helped her to land a contract with

his friend and publisher of the *Monthly Magazine* Richard Philip, who commissioned her *Female Biography: or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of All Ages and Countries* (1803), her most famous work along with her novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (pp. 428-29). Unlike Johnson, her relationship with Godwin soon deteriorated after Wollstonecraft's death, a shift caused by his decision to deny Hays to see Wollstonecraft on her deathbed on 5 September 1797, only for her to pass away five days later. This controversial decision started a huge quarrel between them; she was offended by his denial of her request since Wollstonecraft was a dear friend of hers and she had even introduced her to Godwin, while he took her request to return all the letters she had sent to Wollstonecraft without reading them as a sign of disrespect and vanity (Walker 2020, pp. 188-89).

This tragic situation soon worsened due to the reception of *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* among the larger British public. Taken to be an entirely factual account of her life, it terribly harmed her reputation among her peers and acquaintances. Firstly, she became alienated from the Rational Dissenting and Unitarian communities and was turned into an object of contempt due to being seen merely as a sexually aggressive woman, and as a living proof that the result of partaking in religious heterodoxy would be immorality (Walker 2020, p. 160). Furthermore, her association with Wollstonecraft and Godwin, while intellectually and professionally profitable, proved to be detrimental in the eyes of the public. On the one hand, she was considered as nothing more than an echo chamber for Godwin's allegedly nonsensical ideas, a mere puppet with no mind of her own. Similarly, her social awkwardness and her timidity, along with lack of physical appeal, provided a stark contrast when compared with Wollstonecraft's charming looks and sociable temperament. For this reason, Hays's persona was associated with immorality and sexual scandals, although Wollstonecraft was the one with the reputation of being sexually active (p. 162). In addition, her fellow writers turned her into an object of mockery. The one to cast the first stone was the novelist Charles Llyod with his

anti-Jacobin novel *Edmund Oliver, a roman à clef*, published in 1798. This novel presented Hays as a misguided and misled, and yet still dangerous, victim of Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's beliefs by parodying her and her novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* through the character of Lady Gertrude Sinclair (p. 198). Richard Polwhele's misogynistic poem *The Unsex'd Females* (1798) soon followed this jab. The poem targeted all Jacobin women for their perceived lack of feminine charms and decorum by contrasting them with more proper female authors such as Ann Radcliffe and Frances Burney (p. 199). Another blow to her reputation came from a woman with the publication of Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* in 1801, which explicitly and savagely parodied Godwin and Hays in the characters of Mr. Myope and Bridgetina Botherim. Not only was Bridgetina physically repulsive and humourless, but she was also presented as someone completely self-absorbed and detached from reality, who was turned into an object of contempt after developing a one-sided obsession with a man, Henry Sidney, to whom she began to write unwarranted and rambling letters, thus drawing a parallel to Hays's relationship with William Frend (pp. 202-03).

Nevertheless, these controversies did not deter Hays from advancing her literary career, as the years 1798-1799 were especially fruitful for her. In 1798, Johnson published a treatise titled *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain on Behalf of Women*, which later would be attributed to Hays. Addressed to the entirety of British women, this work expanded on her previous feminist views by providing numerous arguments in favour of a reform of the educational system for young girls, while disproving the claims of a biological gap in the intelligence of man and women, showing instead how the subpar female education was entirely responsible for stifling women's potential (Walker 2020, pp. 194-95). In 1799, Johnson published her second novel *The Victim of Prejudice*, whose manuscript still underwent Godwin's supervision. In this fictional work, the protagonist's plights represent a pungent denunciation

of the constrictive prison represented for women by the patriarchal system, which constantly stifles every attempt of the charming and educated heroine Mary Raymond to assert herself as a valuable and autonomous individual. Moreover, the constant discrimination she is subjected to after the circumstances of her birth are revealed, that is being the daughter of a disgraced woman, highlights the enormous importance which wealth and class still carried within British society. This novel then can be understood as an amalgamation of Wollstonecraft's and Godwin's teachings. On the one hand, it recuperates and further expands the theme of female independence, along with denouncing the intolerance and prosecution which target those women who strive for freedom, as Wollstonecraft did in her unfinished novel *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) (p. 193). On the other hand, the protagonist Mary Raymond was inspired by Godwin's Emily Melville, who fails to oppose and is subjected to the double standards of chastity and morality for women (p. 194).

As the eighteenth century approached its end, the attitude towards Jacobin and socially revolutionary ideas worsened considerably in England, as the British population reacted with horror and disapproval to the violent turn taken by the French revolution, and so its supporters abroad were subjected to public censure and prosecution. Due to her reputation, being a well-known follower of Wollstonecraft and Godwin who furthermore had gone even as far as developing and expressing her fair share of radical feminist ideas, Hays soon became the scapegoat for the anti-Jacobin sentiment. A particularly telling example of this hostile climate was her mistreatment by Charles Lloyd. After gaining her trust, he began to spread vicious rumours about her among their mutual acquaintances, claiming that she was deeply in love with him and insinuating that she would have offered herself to him in a similar fashion as with Friend, depicting her then as a promiscuous and hysterical woman. When confronted about his behaviour, he used as an excuse the fact that Hays's ideals were so immoral to him that they justified his attempts to vilify her (Walker 2020, p. 199). After her public reputation had been

thoroughly tarnished, Hays decided to retire to private life and began a new phase of her literary career, which focused on writing about the lives of historical women.

Her first attempt at this new genre was the 49 pages long *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* commissioned to her by the editor Phillips in 1800 (Walker 2020, p. 216). This memoir was a correction and an improved version of Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798), and presented Wollstonecraft in another light. It highlighted her role as a woman and feminist intellectual who faced and resisted the numerous obstacles and gendered prejudices against women, instead of portraying her simply as a heroic political figure as her husband did (pp. 218-19). In 1803, this work was followed by her lengthiest project, a compendium composed of six volumes which recounted the lives of 288 women titled *Female Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious or Celebrated Women, of All Ages and Countries*, which intended to provide an alternative text for women in male-dominated field of history writing (p. 225). Moreover, she publishes two other novels *The Brothers, or Consequences* (1815) and *Family Annals* (1817) which were less daring and experimental than her first two fictional works, while adopting a more didactic and moralising approach. In 1821, she released her last piece of life-writing under the title *Memoirs of Queens*, and after its publication Mary Hays spent the last two decades of her life retreated from society in the close company of her Unitarian friends and of her family, until her death in 1848.

1.2. Intellectual Influences

Having recounted the tumultuous life of Mary Hays, it is of major importance to shed a spotlight on the different intellectual groups present in British society at the end of the latter half of the eighteenth century. Mary Hays played the part of an active member in multiple learned communities at the centre of the social scene of those years, while also being exposed through her studies and readings to past and foreign sources of knowledge. These numerous schools of thought all had a deep influence on our novelist and essayist, and these influences

are ultimately responsible for shaping her worldview, her understanding of social issues, and her considerations on how to improve the condition of women in British society. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a short description of the beliefs and characteristics of these groups, if one wants to have a better grasp of the roots, of the content, and of the importance of Mary Hays's essays and novels.

1.2.1. The Dissenting Community

Starting from her girlhood years, one of the sources of intellectual gratification for Hays was her participation in the Dissenting community, which represented for her, along with her informal readings of novel and poems, a valid and vital source of proper erudition. Its emphasis on non-conformity and suffering was of significant importance, to the point that one might argue that Dissent tended to glorify the condition of being an outlier and an outsider. In a similar fashion to sensibility, Dissenters regarded the capacity to suffer as an indicator of true genius, a belief which will sustain Hays throughout her entire life (Brooks 1995, pp. 4-5). This emphasis on individual experience was especially important because it allowed women such as Hays to gain an importance and self-worth which they would have lacked within traditional British society. Therefore, the Dissenting community granted women the means to express their own experience and uniqueness, as they were to be held accountable for their mistakes only in front of God and of their own conscience. Moreover, it also dispensed with the widespread erroneous belief in the innate inferiority of women, identifying its source in purely environmental and educational factors, which could be then corrected and removed entirely, thus fostering a climate favourable to female progress (pp. 10-11). With its emphasis on cherishing differences, Dissent openly challenged the assumption that sexual differences were natural, on the contrary there was no such thing as an inferior sex, the discriminated position of women was nothing more than the consequence of the subpar education they received. This was the reason for their lack of understanding and of formal knowledge, which contributed to

further aggravate the biases and prejudices against the fair sex. From her dissenting education, Hays derived her theory that education for women had to be considerably improved, otherwise this erroneous belief would subsist and the condition of women in society would keep worsening (p. 13).

Moreover, thanks to her acquaintance with the New College tutors, Mary Hays acquired the invaluable philosophical insights at the centre of her peculiar brand of Feminism. Under the tutorage of the father of Unitarianism John Priestley, combined with her reading of David Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1791), she became acquainted with the concept of materialism, which deeply shaped her understanding of the philosophy of John Locke and of Claude-Adrien Helvétius, distinguished her from her friends and mentors Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, and established her as an independent philosopher with her own original ideas, and not as a mindless follower of her more charismatic peers. Furthermore, materialism is central to her novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and to its protagonist, to the point that, as stated by Scott A. Nowka, it almost plays the same role in its interpretation which Freud's psychology had in understanding the Modernists (2007, pp. 522-23). Her studies of Locke, Hartley, and Helvétius led Hays to the conclusion that there were no material differences in the intellectual powers of men and women, as mechanical or physical phenomena, along with the minds of men themselves, had their origins and were predetermined by the same source, God. Therefore, the different behaviours of the sexes must have been the result of external influences, such as parenting, education, and cultural pressures, which relegated women to submissive and dependent attitudes even though they were supposed to be the natural equals of men (p. 524).

Nevertheless, this condition is not as hopeless as it might initially appear, on the contrary Hays's materialist approach is ultimately focused on rectifying the oppression of women, which deeply distinguishes it from Godwin's idealist necessity, as they displayed two

different interests in looking at the causes of human motivation. Godwin's idealism had at its core the Platonic concept of Truth, which eventually, following the downfall of the political institution and states, identified by him as the roots of most social ills, will become our guiding principle and will allow the human mind to shape matter itself (Nowka 2007, p. 527). Hays instead displayed a fascination with the mechanical causes of our actions, which she understood to be passions and affections, and not the abstract idealist truth which Godwin so much cherished. Her aim was to understand the causes which led to women being relegated to such an inferior position, so that they could be tackled and improved, and she was not satisfied with the assumption that political justice will be granted to both sexes in an unspecified future by the Godwinian truth, as she aimed to improve the everyday lives of women in the here and now of her own time (p. 528).

Her notion of materialism owed much also to Hartley's insights, whose theory of mechanical association is felt in the works of Priestley and Helvétius too. For Hays and her mentor, the mechanical associations of external sensations and ideas provided not only a valuable explanation of the inner workings of the human mind, but also led to a sort of psychological determinism through which the character and actions of the individual are constantly subjected and influenced by material reality (Nowka 2007, p. 529). Women's upbringing and education trap them in restrictive gender roles from which they have no escape, and due to this they cannot conceive nor manifest a desire to assert their rights as independent individuals, since their very own sensibility has been completely mangled by the sexual character projected upon them by society. This then explains why most female characters in *Emma Courtney* are so limited in their aspirations, as they are the hapless victims of the limited version of womanhood foregrounded by eighteenth-century British society, while Emma herself due to her peculiar upbringing is able to aspire instead to reach a state of financial and

intellectual independence, and is brought multiple times to despair by the condition of idleness forced on her throughout the novel (p. 531).

1.2.2. The Bluestockings and Contemporary Female Authors

The issue of improving female education was dear not only to Mary Hays, but also her literary predecessors and her fellow novelists discussed it. These different sources contributed to shaping her understanding of this topic, as well as influencing her own approach towards it. When referring to her sources of inspiration, one cannot fail to mention the vital contribution that was given to eighteenth-century literary discourse by the group of authors who were identified under the label of ‘Bluestockings’, whose works established three primary features which characterise intellectual women’s works in the 1790s and are reflected in Hays’s own preoccupations and musings. Firstly, they conceived the act of reading as an activity meant to engage the mind of the reader through a self-imposed rational and disciplined approach, thus shunning any sort of frivolous or purely absorptive reading, which would constitute a mere waste of intellectual powers (Bour 2015, p. 149). In addition, the subject of their works had to be taken directly from reality, since their aim was to represent faithfully the reality of women’s and men’s everyday experiences, drawing attention then to the nature of the human heart itself (p. 150). Lastly, these materials had to be treated so that they would not engage the readers through a sensational or purely materialistic depiction of reality, their imagination had to be stimulated to produce moral and social improvements in themselves and in society. The Bluestockings then conceived the purpose of novel writing as the exploitation of the fictional imagination in order to spark in the reader’s mind the impulses to commit benevolent and kind deeds toward their fellow human beings (pp. 150-51). While the early Bluestockings were mostly pushed by a commitment in delineating a Christian calling for women, nevertheless the character of their fiction deeply influenced the conception of female professional authorship for the rest of the century. Their successors then shifted to secular stance which favoured and

further emphasised their efforts to shape the world around them through their literary inputs (p. 153).

Their lasting influence was especially apparent in the novels published by female authors, including Mary Hays, during the 1790s. These works were characterised by the recurrence of episodes which deliberately denounced male violence, sexual objectification, and the precarious condition of women by having their main or secondary characters subjected to some of the worst possible vexations, dishonourable acts, or terrible fates which could befall women in British society, thus providing a striking depiction of the absolute power that men held over women at the time (Stafford 1997, pp. 27-28). An accurate amalgamation of these concerns was to be found in the trope of the imprisoned woman, a staple of the Gothic genre. The imprisonment may be literal, as in the case of a vulnerable young lady trapped inside a mansion or abbey by a debauched evil man under the constant threat of rape. Or the protagonist may be subjected to a different kind of entrapment, such as being forced by her guardian to forgo her plan of marrying the man she loves to be bound to a much older, and richer suitor whom she strongly dislikes. All these examples demonstrated the dire state of dependence which was the common lot of those gentlewomen lacking the means for supporting themselves (p. 28). This female powerlessness may even be pushed to its extreme outcome through the tale of the prostitute. In this case, the prostitute was depicted in a sympathetic light, she was shown to be the victim of male machinations and subterfuges which have pushed her to lose her honour as an absolute last resort to survive, casting her in a state of absolute moral degradation. This tale was a powerful metaphor of the exclusion of women from holding property or even from having access to respectable employment (p. 29).

These narratives took a realistic approach and depicted their heroines in the typical gendered roles of their time, they lacked any kind of agency and were not actors, on the contrary they were constantly acted upon by forces which were beyond their control. They revealed the

overarching structures of societal and sexual order, denouncing the myth that a woman simply had to be meek and comply with the status quo to gain everlasting happiness and stability (Stafford 1997, p. 30). A sort of escape from this gendered prison was provided by the feminist polemics of the 1790s through the *Bildung* narrative. This narrative was also found in novels but was mostly present in non-fictional writing such as treatises or conduct books. At its heart, it favoured the acquisition of a moral and mental growth, which was achieved through the cultivation of the mind via constant serious reading, not necessarily to the exclusion of novels. What was important was that women devoted a significant portion of their reading to non-fictional materials such as history, science, and philosophy (pp. 36-37). Furthermore, control over passions was strongly advised, the proper development of every woman should aim to cultivate her rationality, since the capacity to pay attention permitted women to maintain a coherent and whole self, completely warded against externalities. Dissipated women, those who were completely absorbed by the frivolous fashionable society, had on the other hand their self constantly pulled apart and determined by external influences and were doomed to have their lives controlled by feeling, passions, and passing whims (p. 39). This cultivation of the mind shared the same purpose preached by the Bluestockings, as it was to be fostered along with the heart and its benevolent affection. In a similar fashion to Sensibility, general impartial benevolence towards all human beings was kept in the highest consideration and was thought to be liberating, since it provided women the means to exert their influence over a wider public, countering the risk of fixing one's affection obsessively over a single individual. The *Bildung* narrative then did not have the purpose of helping women to achieve societal recognition, its aim was not to make a young lady fit for the role that is expected on her by society. It provided the picture of a woman who had freed herself from gendered roles and was able to live as a complete human being, even if this independence might still not be realised economically or materially.

When discussing the influence that women thinkers had on Mary Hays, one cannot overlook her relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft, which started as a mentorship for the former and slowly turned into a deep and cherished friendship that became profitable for both authors. In an age when the old-fashioned practice of literary patronage was waning, Wollstonecraft was one of the first women who managed to earn a considerable part of her outcome from her work as a literary critic for the publisher Johnson, providing for Hays a living example that women could seek and obtain independence through their intellect and literary achievements (Waters 2004, p. 416). By virtue of being one of the most influential thinkers of the last decade of the 1700s and a recognised forerunner of modern feminism, she was a great source of inspiration for Hays's ideology with her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and furthermore she paved the way for her friend's entrance in the professional literary world and taught her how to present herself to be respected as woman author (pp. 417-18). Her literary influence on Hays's writing and worldview is apparent in her *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous*, where Hays masterfully combines everything she had previously learned from her male Dissenting mentors with Wollstonecraft's critique of female oppression.

The preface of the work itself is pretty telling, Hays still opens her work with an apology for its incompleteness and overall subpar quality, however she specifies that these issues are not to be blamed on the author being a woman, and are instead the consequence of her defective training, whose harmful effects cannot be countered even by learned ladies, dooming them to a life of frustration and ignorance in spite of all their efforts to improve themselves (Walker 2020, p. 66). Hays praises Wollstonecraft for opening her eyes regarding the true nature of the divide in men's and women's capacities, which is not founded on any natural principle. Social conditioning instead is to be blamed for the weakness taught to young girls from an early age, which led them to regard meekness as inherent to the female character (p. 66). For this reason, Hays shares her friend's belief that the education of a young girl must begin under the

supervision of her own mother, who must be a caring and flexible teacher and help her daughter to cultivate her own ideas, since it is women's responsibility to educate themselves and the next generation (p. 70). One of the most important lessons to be taught was the eradication of violent passions, which according to Hays should be substituted with controlled familiar affections to counter the prejudiced attitude of men and unleash the full potential of the female mind. The act of controlling one's emotions then acquired a subversive potential in accordance with Wollstonecraft's theories (Joy 2010, p. 222).

In the letter "to Amasia", this principle was expressed through the portrait of the fictional spouses Hortensius and Hortensia. Despite their different sexes, they represented the perfect example of an ideal marriage for Hays, as they were completely equal in intellect and in dedication to their work. In case of a disagreement of opinion, their emotions were regulated by their rationality so that they were never at risk of being overwhelmed by their passions, and the damage to this equilibrium was always kept to a minimum, as if they lived in a state of perpetual harmony (Joy 2010, p. 223). The knowledge necessary to manage one's own passions is learned from a young age; therefore, it should be a priority to impart it upon the youth. Nevertheless, Hays and Wollstonecraft argued that through hard work and dedication it could be acquired by everyone, as affections are a form of emotion experienced by those who possess a great self-control, and so anyone could obtain harmony and self-contentment by exercising rationality and reason (p. 224). When *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* was published, its incorporation of realism caused this rational self-control to crumble; Hays distanced herself from her mentor by expressing the right of women to publicly vent their frustrations and inner passions, in the same way men have been allowed to do from time immemorable. This point was also advanced in her response to a letter from Godwin, where she cited Petrarch as an example of how a man expressing his deeper emotions is regarded and praised as creative, while the same deed done by a woman is instead seen as an unspeakable scandal (p. 228).

1.2.3. The Jacobin Community

The desire of challenging the status quo of British society and bringing forth a radical change was not exclusive to Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays; on the contrary it was shared by numerous writers who made their debut during the 1790s. These writers were radicalised by the recent Revolution in France and intermixed in their works philosophy, fiction, and revolutionary discourse, as they discovered the subversive potential hidden in the sympathetic relationship between readers and fictional characters and aimed to exploit it politically to influence public discourse. Their novels were meant to spread a new political awareness among the population and to become agents of change in the social order, similarly to how the French revolution appeared to have been sparked by the opinions and works of just a handful of authors (Lynch 2013, pp. 1-2). Since the 1970s, these novels have been grouped by literary scholars and academics under the label 'Jacobins'. This categorisation can be misleading, due to the fact that in England it was employed to single out and stigmatise those British citizens who were supportive of the French republic, whereas the British populace never expressed any sympathy for the extremist and violent side of the revolution even among its most radical authors. Nowadays, instead it signals their ambition to reimagine British society, a shared effort among these authors who constituted a close-knit group linked by friendship and a common religious non-conformity and included among their ranks Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and Mary Hays (pp. 2-3).

The Jacobin authors hid behind the plot of their novel a political denunciation of the tyranny exercised by men over other men in the current social system. For this reason, an image shared by multiple Jacobin works is that of the trial, which was meant to challenge the assumptions that the state is responsible for the wellbeing and safety of its citizens, since these courts are always represented as morally and socially corrupt. As a matter of fact, the heroes of Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* recount their own

misadventures to the reader within a jail cell. In the case of female protagonists, the image of the prison could be projected upon the private household, which became a place of imprisonment and deprivation of rights and dignity for mothers and daughters alike, as to reflect the threat of patriarchal tyrannical oppression that loomed over women in society as a whole (Lynch 2013, pp. 3-4). Moreover, these novels tended to portray philosophy as a ubiquitous ever-growing fascination, whose influence was represented by a number of characters with the habit of speaking, reasoning, and debating philosophically the relevant issues of the time. These individuals were characterised by an enlightened belief in the civilising power of reason to dispel prejudice and error and to lead men to universal truth, and displayed confidence in the power of human rationality to overcome every hardship and social limitation (pp. 4-5). Another common element shared by the Jacobin imagination was the understanding of the power that reading possesses over the individual. The lives of the protagonists of these novels tend to be irretrievably altered by their encounter with an enlightening book, a strong demonstration of the influence that books can exert over their readers and at the same time a glaring problematisation of the ease with which the mind of man can swayed away from rationality by ideology.

This Quixotic echo recurs in the novels of most Jacobin authors, who no longer assume that every story of individual lives has an inherent progressive and didactic value, and instead aim to create a balance between entertaining the reader by recounting the adventures and misadventures of their characters while exposing how the political order is responsible for the suffering and thriving of the numerous social groups which were the backbone of British society (Lynch 2013, pp. 6-8). For this reason, the *Bildung* of the protagonists is a process of learning to develop their own particular experiences starting from universal and general statements about the condition of society, as to be able to identify the inner workings of the system responsible for framing the societal and legal structures which allowed some men to

thrive on the suffering inflicted upon others and achieve as a result a complete mental emancipation. The Jacobins, in fact, considered the formation of the individual to go past the influences received during one's childhood by schooling and family, it was intended to be a process which included experiences gained from travels abroad, from encounters with all kinds of characters, from experiencing romantic love and personal suffering. Their narratives reflected this belief by adopting the form of the autobiography, told from the point of view of their older and wiser protagonists reflecting on the aspirations and errors of their youth (Wallace 2009, pp. 24-25).

These radical novels then depicted the struggle of their protagonists in developing their own consciousness against the censure of society, politics, and public opinion as call to action for the citizen subject. Through the act of attentive reading, they aimed to educate the readers and to shape them in political resistant subjects, who must act in the world and oppose the injustice and oppression which plagued the law and the government (Wallace 2009, p. 21). This endeavour required the questions of the rights of men to be addressed, and regarding this topic Jacobin thought rested on the assumption that they are inherent to the individual and yet at the same time questioned it by analysing the ways people are shaped by education, experience, and society. This led the members of the Jacobin circle to develop their own theories of how society influences its citizens. For example, William Godwin argued that individuals are never truly free, as they are subjected throughout their lives to pressures and influences from education, society, and experience which limit the way one can act. This 'theory of necessity' tried to strike a balance between intellectual independence and the reality of men as social animals. Mary Hays herself was a 'necessarian' and subscribed to this theorisation of human subjectivity which advanced a belief in the equal rights of women, and also in the principle that rank and wealth should not determine the value of the individual, which must be based on usefulness instead (pp. 21-22). Since fiction could educate the reader

through a simultaneous appeal to emotions and reason, the Jacobins wanted to create their own necessity through their works. Nevertheless, these works tended to stage revolutionary impulses within the household, since domestic tales could still carry a subversive political message, due to the similarity in the roles played by the king and by the head of the family, so that the children questioning the authority of their parents and wives opposing tyrannical husbands evoked the image of political reform in the readers' minds, without risking of being accused of treasonous intentions by mentioning directly the king or parliamentary politics (pp. 22-23).

Nevertheless, The Jacobins did not just attempt to advance a radical reform, another strain of their political beliefs had to do with their considerations on the place of women in society. Debates about the nature, education, influence in the family, and role of women in society were abundant in the 1790s, and the Jacobins' opinions on these topics are responsible for providing the basis for the modern feminist movement of our days. Since the revolutionary debates of the decade revolved around defining and establishing who was entitled to human rights, the Jacobins recuperated and further developed the arguments that were advanced by the Bluestockings thus giving birth to what might be regarded as an early form of feminism which sought to define and improve through criticism the role of women within society. In the Jacobins' effort to rearrange the world in an ideal state, it is possible to notice "the emerging consciousness of a group calling themselves "women," conceived of as female-embodied, possessed of reason and sensibility, constrained by law and tradition in debilitating ways, bearing special responsibilities toward children and mates, and alternately represented as like men in all but education and bodily strength, or as bearing particular advantages and talents" (Wallace 2009, p. 27). The redefinition of masculinity was another important Jacobin concern, which found the standards for male behaviour, of manhood, of masculinity delineated by Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* and by Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the*

Revolution in need of a reevaluation. The new male identities were established in opposition to the failure of the past identities represented by male figures such as the rake or the elite aristocrat. This was a contended issue for both revolutionary and conservative thinkers alike, who contended to establish which side could claim the mantle of man for themselves.

The Jacobins attempted to realise all these efforts through the medium represented by the novel, which in their hands became a site for political action via the exploration and redefinition of subjectivity, along with the critique and analysis of the domestic sphere to shape a new social contract. Inspired by Godwin's theories, they did not distinguish between the public and the private, and the novel represented the ideal form to investigate the reality of domestic despotism which was reflected in the nation (Johnson 2004, pp. 4-5). They regarded the novel as a form of 'action in the world', which had to provide instructions to its reader and had to push for them to look at reality through critical lenses, and to constantly question the world around them and themselves via rational inquiry. Inquiry had to be imperative, as it was required to bring forth changes, and the Jacobins expressed an unshakable faith in the power of the novel to reveal to the populace the truth (pp. 6-7). They were so keen on stressing the importance of inquiry because their intentions were ultimately of delineating a new form of subjectivity, one which would grant to the reader the complete and coherent self which is a prerequisite for citizenship. Not every Briton was entitled to citizenship and rights, those more vulnerable and economically dependent were systematically excluded from any claim to natural and civic rights. By framing their political theories in their works, the Jacobins provided vivid and convincing examples which demonstrated that those rights were the only form of protection for the individual against the government and its fallible laws, and as such they should be granted naturally to everyone (pp. 8-9). Their interest was rooted in the relation between the individual and the world, and how it affected the agency of the former.

With its simultaneously personal and public nature and its tendency to affirm identity, the memoir became the instrument of the Jacobins, and of their opponents, in carrying out this investigation. The Jacobin memoirs cast into the spotlight the dilemma which emerges in the clash between the protagonist's will and the values of society, in which the protagonist is firmly rooted. The individual is studied in relation to the family and the family in relation to the nation, with a preference for the lives of those who have always struggled to maintain a self in the outer world, such as women and those in a state of financial dependence, showing the devastating effects of inherited rights on personal liberty (Johnson 2004, pp. 10-11). Therefore, the form taken by these domestic novels was rather peculiar, as they openly criticised the oppressive structure of the traditional British family drawing the ire of conservative critics, who accused the Jacobins of trying to undermine the stability of the family and of the nation. These novels were trying to define a new theory of rights and to demonstrate how inalienable rights could not be substituted by mere domestic authority, as actual the capacity to own property, to rely on one's own intellect, to administer one's own affairs, and legal subjecthood come with a political power which is far more desirable, especially for those who had been lacking it for centuries (pp. 11-12). The Jacobin novels are not to be considered a list of instructions, while sometimes they can be excessively didactic and moralistic, they always establish a dialogue with their reader and allow them to think and to reflect on what is important for themselves, giving them a frame of thought and analysis while encouraging them to participate in their debates over rights and social responsibilities (Wallace 2009, p. 31). In their enterprise to gain citizenship and rights for those who have so far been neglected by history, Jacobins also pondered on whether they are inherent in human beings, have to be earned through empathy and the capacity to feel sympathy for others, or are acquired through education and learning (p. 33).

1.3. Summary

In conclusion, multiple influences were the source of inspiration for Mary Hays's theories of feminism and subjectivity. Her intellectual journey started from her early participation in the Dissenting community, which granted her a welcoming and supportive space where she could learn to appreciate and value her uniqueness, and to cherish her non-conformity in traditional society. There, she was introduced to the philosophical treatises of Hartley, Helvétius and Priestley, that constituted a considerable part of her erudition and contributed to delineating her understanding of female issues. Another important influence for her came from female intellectuals: the Bluestocking authors, her literary predecessors, and her friend and mentor Mary Wollstonecraft. They provided her the tools with which to understand the patriarchal nature of British society and led her to form her calling of improving young girls' education to counter the prejudices about the intellectual inferiority of women that were so prevalent throughout the century. Lastly, her acquaintance with her fellow writers and friends, the Jacobin group, left another mark not only in her understanding of society and of the question of natural rights, but also came to have a considerable impact on the form, themes, and images which she employs in her two fictional works *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and *The Victim of Prejudice*.

2. Memoirs of Emma Courtney

2.1. Introduction

Mary Hays began writing *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* in November 1795, when William Godwin suggested to her to transcribe her experiences in a fictional form to recover from the depression caused by William Frennd's rejection. Published the following year by George Robinson, it will prove to be Hays's most ambitious and controversial project. Modelled after her correspondence with Frennd and Godwin, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* revolves around the tragic unrequited love of its protagonist Emma, an intelligent, introspective, and sensible young lady, for the detached and mysterious Augustus Harley. The novel narrates the life of Emma starting from her childhood, passing through the period of her intellectual growth, then focusing on the passions, on the misadventures, and on the mistakes of her adult life. This whole endeavour is realised by an older and mature Emma, who is retracing her life for the benefit of her stepson Augustus Harley jr., to dissuade him from committing the mistakes incurred by herself in her youth, that is falling in love and courting a woman already engaged with another man.

This chapter will provide a close reading of *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* to prove how this work on the one hand continues the investigation and the denunciation of the issues related to the female condition in eighteenth-century England which Hays had already introduced in her non-fictional pamphlets and dissertations, while at the same time innovating and advancing Hays's personal ideology. To achieve this purpose, the chapter will be divided in two parts. The first part explores how Hays exploits the depiction of Emma's formative process and of the vicissitudes of her adult life to bring to light the harmful consequences that gendered education and prejudices had on the future aspirations of middle-class ladies during the eighteenth century. The second part aims to contextualise *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* in the

philosophical and literary scene of the 1790s, investigating its relationship with William Godwin's philosophy and with the ideology of the Jacobin circle, to demonstrate how the novel simultaneously draws upon and challenges its source material.

2.2. Social Commentary

In *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Mary Hays draws on her own experiences and studies to express a harsh criticism of the status quo of eighteenth-century British society. In a similar fashion to her friend Mary Wollstonecraft, Hays's critical gaze is directed towards the constricting circumstances which shaped and moulded the life of women during her own time, relegating them within the confines of their households and negating them access to the wider social world. Whereas middle-class men were educated to enter the workforce and consequently become active influential members of society, ladies on the other hand had to learn trifle and irrelevant notions, which provided them with no skills to survive on their own and forced them to live in a constant state of dependence under the protection of their fathers, brothers, or husbands. This gap in educational quality was the result of flawed and stereotyped preconceptions of women's natures and social roles, as they were regarded as inherently sensitive and irrational, thus lacking men's capacity for learning and developing their minds. Therefore, a lady had to spend her life in her household, where her duty was to act as the submissive and quiet pillar of the family, with no intellectual or social ambitions of her own beyond impressing her fellow ladies with her beauty and her fashionable charms.

Moreover, despite being considered sensitive beings, women were nevertheless excluded from the sexual sphere, since it was believed that women were pure creatures who lacked any form of libido, and as such had to keep under control the instincts and advances of men. Virginity was conflated with virtue in eighteenth-century Britain, so young women lived under the threat of being shunned entirely from society as fallen women, were they ever to let themselves be swayed by the wiles of cunning and depraved men. However, this form of social

death did not affect men's reputation, since sexually active men would simply be regarded as rakes. A worse fate awaited those women who dared to express any sexual desire, as they were seen as unsexed creatures, a label which singled them out as oversexed lustful pariahs who had no place nor role in polite society. In her first novel, Hays sets on a quest to dismantle this harmful and toxic understanding of women. By closely following the life of the eponymous protagonist, Hays exploits the structure of the *Bildungsroman* and of the sentimental novel to demonstrate how the consequences of a flawed education coupled with the constraints of society can irreparably alter and ruin the intellectual and romantic aspirations of a young and active unconventional female mind, severely limiting her future prospects and casting her in the inescapable state of idleness and melancholy which was the destiny of all middle-class ladies.

2.2.1. Subpar Education

A point advanced throughout *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* involves Hays's understanding of the importance of education in the development of the mind, since she dedicates a significant part of the opening of her novel to describe the formative years of her heroine. Her purpose is to illustrate how Emma's experiences and readings contributed to shape her character, thus being responsible for her inquisitive and independent mind, while at the same time fostering that excessive sensibility that will prove to be her downfall. Emma's education is from the very beginning flawed. After her mother died of childbirth and her profligate father displayed no interest in her, Emma was left in the care of her mother's sister and her husband, Mrs. and Mr. Melmoth. Due to the sensitive, romantic, and rather submissive character of her aunt, Emma spent her early years free from any form of control or stern parental influence, being allowed to give vent to all her urges and instincts (Hays 2000, p. 45). This lack of external restraints made her develop a fickle and inconstant character, for example she would

shift between boundless affection and deep rage whenever she believed that she had been slighted in any way.

Mrs. Melmoth also allowed Emma to indulge freely in activities which for the time would have been considered more suitable for young boys, such as playing tricks on older ladies at church, or engaging in role playing with her friends, during which she would alternate between traditionally male and female roles, as she could be a brave knight or courtesan depending on her whims. Her aunt is also responsible for fostering her love for reading and romances; she would read every night to her and to her cousins stories from *The Arabian Nights* and other types of Eastern fairy tales, transmitting to her the desire to learn how to read and making her yearn for a romance that will never end (Hays 2000, pp. 48-49). Emma experiences authority for the first time when she is sent to a boarding school at the age of twelve. There, her rebellious and autonomous character must contend for the first time with the limitations to freedom and intellectual inquiry which represented the golden standard of women's education. Her attempts to resist this situation are rather short lived, and only succeed in making her miserable for her entire first year. Her teachers suppress her every attempt to express her individuality, constantly confiscate her favourite novels, and punish her by forcing her to read Bible verses in French. Her only successful endeavour is managing to satirise her oppressors by writing spiteful rhymes against them, a deed which proves to be rather popular with her peers (pp. 50-51).

By the start of the second year, Emma stifles this rebellious streak, and she adjusts to the norms of proper social behaviour for a lady, excelling in her studies while simultaneously proving how the only chance of avoiding the status of social pariah for women is guaranteed by suppressing one's own uniqueness in favour of yielding to conformism. This lesson will recur throughout her life, as the clash between the uniqueness of her character and societal expectations for women will spoil her pursuit of happiness and of freedom in her adult life.

However, upon her return home Emma soon forgets the virtue of self-restraint learned during her stay at the boarding school, which might be regarded by eighteenth-century society as the only valuable lesson that she had acquired in the two years she spent there. Indeed, without any form of authority to guide her, because her maternal uncle passes away leaving Mrs. Melmoth distraught in her grief, Emma is left to her own cares and lingers in idleness and melancholy, completely absorbed in the world of fiction and in her readings, which reach the number of ten to fourteen novels per week. This escapist coping behaviour fits a common stereotype of the time, as it was believed that women were more vulnerable to the snares of fiction compared to men, and as such could become so enamoured with their readings to the point of completely neglecting every other activity, while fostering an almost dangerous and uncontrollable sensibility in themselves.

This last point is further reinforced by Emma's sudden shift in circumstances, when her absent father suddenly decides to develop an interest in the upbringing of his child. Emma's life is overturned by his authority; she must leave the sheltering cares of her aunt to spend at least a day per week in the library of his house. One of the first issues her father raises as he witnesses the state of his daughter's mind is her excessive sensibility. Not only he regards her sensibility as far too acute to survive the harsh environment of modern society, but he is also shocked to discover that Emma's love for fictional and make-believe scenarios has left her completely ignorant of the actual world and of societal history (Hays 2000, p. 55). Her education under his watch is of a different character, while still maintaining some of the flaws of her previous experiences. Emma must study on her own once more, but her father's library lacks any kind of books which would normally interest her, since the only works that are arranged in its numerous shelves are historical and philosophical treatises and pamphlets, such as the *Lives* of Plutarch. The purpose of this endeavour is to stifle the prevailing sensible and irrational side of Emma in favour of nourishing her rational mind.

Emma is initially disgusted by this imposition, yet she soon acquires an appreciation for all these new subjects, and begins to foster a passion in theology, history and even philosophy. It is noteworthy to stress that this development is in line with Hays's theory of education for women, since she had deemed fiction as a valid starting point to acquire a passion for reading and intellectual inquiry, provided that at a certain point a shift is made towards more challenging and rewarding topics, thus leading to that state of intellectual emancipation which was the prerogative of men at the time. In fact, Emma herself states that thanks to this more complete education she acquired a new dignity of character and elevated herself to a higher plane of understanding (Hays 2000, pp. 59-60). However, Hays does not oppose sensibility against reason as instruments to interpret the world, in fact both can be effectively used by the female philosopher to greater results when compared with a purely logical mindset, as will be later demonstrated in this thesis.

Nevertheless, Hays is wary of the excesses of sensibility. This point is made clear in multiple instances of Emma's story. Two particularly crucial events in Emma's youth serve to as a demonstration of these dangers. Firstly, there is her causal encounter with Rousseau's *Emile* in her father's library, whose powerful sensations completely shake her whole character, and she finds herself weeping and trembling along with its characters. The book is immediately snatched from her hands and locked away by her father, yet the impression that it had made upon her mind is so strong that it will influence her whole life (Hays 2000, p. 60). In addition, her dying aunt's parting words serve as a keen reminder of Emma's excesses of character. Indeed, she warns her to "still the importunate suggestions of [her] sensibility; preserve [her] sincerity, cherish the ingenuous warmth of unsophisticated feeling, but let discernment precede confidence [...] lest the illusions of imagination should render those powers, which would give force to truth and virtue, the auxiliaries of passion" (pp. 61-62).

2.2.2. Stunted Life

Regrettably, Emma's education has done nothing to hinder this overwhelming current of passions. Furthermore, it also failed to give her the necessary tools that an individual would need to survive on their own in eighteenth-century society. As a matter of fact, after the death of Mr. Courtney, she finds herself in an undesirable position as her inheritance is too meagre to grant her a form of financial independence. For the first time in her life, faced with the prospects of having to resort either to the role of educator or to lower herself to a state of dependence, Emma becomes aware of the magic circle which entraps women within the confines of polite society, limiting them through artificial impositions in their search for self-fulfilment and freedom. For this reason, she is forced in a state of dependence at Mr. Morton's house, where she experiences a condition of social isolation, having to rely for long stretches of time solely on the company of her petty cousins, of her spiteful aunt, and of the unstable and predatory Mr. Montague.

These upper middle-class environments recur constantly throughout the novel and serve as a way for Hays to show the consequences of the traditional upbringing of women on the development of their character. For example, this section of the novel characterises Emma's older cousins Sarah and Ann Morton as superficial and coquettish, thus lacking the introspective and melancholic disposition that is the main trait of the protagonist. This is clearly an issue caused by the education that they received under the care of their mother Mrs. Morton, who raised them so that they could be respectable ladies and wives, and nothing more. In fact, she blatantly refuses Emma's offer of providing tutorage for her other younger children on the grounds that their futures prospect could in no manner be improved by Emma's intellectual accomplishments (Hays 2000, pp. 68-69). Another meaningful instance of the harms of eighteenth-century prejudices against educated women is found during the episode of the dinner in Mr. Melmoth eldest son's house. His wife is depicted as a stunningly beautiful

Jamaican woman, whose mind on the other hand is completely empty. Mrs. Melmoth throughout the dinner receives praises for her ignorance by the male interlocutors, whereas Emma's intellect and inquisitive nature are instead seen as mere oddities not worthy of consideration. At a certain point the guests even joke on the fact that women and servants have no use for a thinking mind, or in the former's case it may only serve them to help make themselves and their surroundings prettier to the male gaze. This comment is met with indignation on Emma's part, however Mrs. Melmoth and the other ladies regard it as hilarious and its source, Mr. Pemberton, as charming and elegant gentleman. It is in vain that Emma tries to explain to them that it is no compliment to be regarded as idiots (pp. 144-45).

This is not the first time in the novel when this character conflates the charms of women with their lack of judgement and intellectual capacities. During a dinner at Emma's father's mansions, Mr. Pemberton describes virtues such as learning, and reading as belonging strictly to the male sphere of influence. What makes a lady attractive to men is her subservience, her mind must not be anything more than a white sheet to be folded and marred as one desires. On the contrary, an educated lady is but a mere apish imitation of her male counterparts, a being who cannot stand on their same intellectual level due to the inherent defects of her mind, and as such has only managed to spoil her charms in her frivolous attempts to be on par with men (Hays 2000, p. 57). It is no wonder then that women's education does not provide them with the basic skills for survival in society, as Hays presents a clear picture of how the social norms which ruled the middle-class valued them mostly for their beauty. Since a woman's purpose was to be married to a wealthy man, to provide support to him, and to nurture their future children, then ladies had no need for theoretical knowledge or practical skills and educating them these in subjects would prove rather detrimental, as it would spoil their beauty and harm their prospects.

However, problems arise when a lady is unable to find a suitable partner or has no interest in being married, since a woman without the financial means necessary to be independent would find herself in dire circumstances. In this regard, Emma's story serves as a cautionary tale, meant to denounce how ladies are driven by their deficient education to follow only a set road, and any diversion from this path will lead to unhappiness and ruin. As previously shown, Emma's worst fear is to be relegated to a state of dependence upon someone else, a condition which she constantly equates to nothing more than servitude. Her independence of character then acts as a hindrance in the social context which she must navigate. In fact, her will to be herself is so strong that, throughout the novel, she demonstrates no intention to compromise on her feelings, even at the risk of becoming a social pariah due to the peculiarity of her notions according to the social norms of the eighteenth century. This moral fortitude brings her only unhappiness. Since Emma would never opt for a traditional marriage for convenience, and no available middle-class partner would ever treat her as an equal in the current state of society, she is forced on a path of solitude and depression from which she never recovers. Her entire being as a woman craves for strong connections, as she explains to Mr. Francis, and only exercising her affections freely and to their complete potential can grant her any happiness. However, these strong emotions are not allowed to flow due to her lack of emotional connections. This condition of total social isolation, combined with her inability to admire virtue in its ideal abstract form separated from the human being itself, condemns her to melancholy and idleness (Hays 2000, p. 80).

2.2.3. Regulated and Excessive Sensibility

Affections are not harmful on their own, on the contrary *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* provides multiple instances displaying how they can be beneficial to society if properly regulated. As a matter of fact, Emma demonstrates a nurturing and protective nature, heightened by the sympathetic character which is at the centre of the man and woman of feeling

of sentimental literature. If sympathy is to be considered a virtue, then Emma proves herself to be worthy of admiration and respect. Her sympathetic side manifests in numerous parts of the novel. For example, even after the brash Mr. Montague subjects her to constant harassment throughout her stay at Mr. Melmoth's house, she nevertheless cannot stop herself from weeping along with him after he is heartbroken by her rejection of his advances (Hays 2000, p. 89). Her kindness is even more apparent when one considers the fact that she is willing to forgive, and then provide shelter and support to the young servant girl Rachel, even though she had been the object of her husband's attention and an unwilling accomplice in his infidelity. Considering that their adulterous affairs is based on an imbalance of power, this is a condition which Emma cannot ignore, having been subjected herself to the plights of servitude (p. 219). In addition, Emma's capacity for sympathy has a practical side which emerges whenever she must act in a life-threatening or dangerous scenario. During these situations, she overcomes her fears, and acts as a lifeline to those around her by providing assistance and first aid. For instance, she assists in the recovery of Montague when the carriage they were riding loses control, even though he had injured himself in an attempt to escape while leaving her to her fate. Soon after, she is responsible for saving Augustus Harley's life after he injured his head during their rescue by hastily requesting for help to a group of passing strangers, staying at his bedside throughout his recovery (pp. 97-100).

It is not surprising that, as Montague's wife, Emma becomes his assistant and acts as a nurse for his patients. Her feeling nature renders her sympathetic and empathetic to the pain of others, it is not a display of an empty and passive sympathy which merely provides a temporary balm to ease the pain of those who are suffering, a trait which has been the primary flaw of the man of feeling. On the contrary, her attempts at helping are proactive and effectful. Moreover, her denunciation of the ills of sexed education and of gendered stereotypes, if analysed under this lens, acquires another depth, as her negative experiences coupled with her almost

overwhelming sympathy have made her especially cognisant of the struggles of middle-class women in their daily lives. Thus, her letters to Augustus jr. possess another additional purpose, other than warning him about the danger of excessive sensibility, since in the future he is bound to be part of the ruling class on the grounds of his social position and sex. Therefore, Emma is also attempting to educate him on these subjects so that this could lead to an improvement in women's circumstances in the future. In a similar fashion to Mary Hays's and her Jacobin peers' aim while writing and publishing their works, Emma has understood that social change can only be achieved through the education of the populace, and that sympathy represents an effective tool to achieve this end.

Sympathy and sensibility do indeed possess a tremendous power to push people to alter their perception and behaviour towards others. However, the novel advances a meaningful point that their potential is only realised when they are moderated and carefully regulated. On the opposite end, whenever there are no effective bounds imposed on their influence, they instead become destructive and harmful forces which sweep everything along with them, similarly to an overflowed river. The most poignant example of the risks involved in an unbounded capacity for feeling is the fate of Mr. Montague. From his introduction, Montague is a rather finicky and unstable young man, who is always shifting on the slightest whim in his infatuation of the Melmoth girls and of Emma, thus driving discord between the two sisters, who consequently develop a strong jealousy due to his preference for the latter. His flaws are especially evident in his approach towards Emma in the early days of their relationship, when in his pursuit of her favours his erratic and overtly insistent behaviour tarnishes her opinion of him. In fact, Emma herself provides a rather damning condemnation of this extreme type of character, describing him as follows:

“With a glowing and rapid imagination, he had never given himself time to reason, to compare, to acquire principles: following the bent of a raised, yet capricious fancy, he

was ever in pursuit of meteors, that led him into mischief, or phantoms, that dissolved at his approach [...] accustomed to feel, and not to reason, his tastes and opinions were vehement and uncontrollable [sic].” (Hays 2000, p. 71)

His insistence in carrying out his courtship under any circumstances betrays a selfish and stubborn nature, which in the course of the story will not improve. This unchecked sensibility is at the centre of the tragedy that befalls our protagonist at the end of the novel. Whereas for the most part *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* has revolved around a story of personal and domestic suffering, its conclusion takes a tragic and gruesome direction due to Montague’s instability. Firstly, their marriage does not quell his rashness. Despite having finally found a life companion towards whom he can direct his unbounded flow of sensations and feelings, he still does not acquire any hold over his worst instincts. Thus, Augustus’s death does not in any manner end his jealousy, on the contrary he becomes irater and more spiteful towards Emma, even if she has been at his side for more than two years and the only threat to the stability of his marriage is gone forever (Hays 2000, p. 207).

Moreover, Montague drags along in his desire for revenge towards his wife the young servant Rachel, while ignoring Emma’s pleas that being involved in a sexual scandal would literally bring the poor girl to ruin, as her reputation would be irreversibly tarnished, and due to her inexperience and immaturity she would have no way of coping with such a burden (Hays 2000, p. 209). His abuses do not stop, and his attitude worsens when in the presence of the infant Augustus jr., as the mere sight of him is enough to send Montague in a maddening rage, which is then discharged on Emma, who cannot do anything but bear his abuses. Montague knows that this is not how a proper British gentleman should behave towards a lady, and profusely apologises after every outburst, yet this does not mend his relationship with his wife and only causes her heartbreak and suffering (p. 210). The grotesque spectacle reaches its climax in the form of the most horrific and heinous act of the novel. Pushed over the brink by

his passions, Montague murders the new-born child of his adulterous affair with Rachel, and soon after coming home he commits suicide with a pistol shot to the head (p. 213). As he explains in his final letter, his seduction of Rachel was merely an act of petty revenge, and since the passage of time made it so that Rachel pregnancy could no longer be hidden from public gaze, he sought to cause an abortive birth for the child with herbs and medicines. Nevertheless, the baby survived a premature birth, and this caused him to fall to madness and to murder the poor child with his own hands like a feral beast, having completely lost control of himself as one mere thought was enough to push him into action (pp. 216-17).

Sensibility without restraints then can deprive humans of their rationality, and in Montague's case it throws him into madness and transforms him in an animal which follows his base impulses without a thought given to the consequences of his actions. Whereas Montague is an extreme depiction of the risks of unbounded sensibility, Emma herself is not spared from serving as a grounded cautionary example of these dangers. As a matter of fact, her story showcases how these overabundant feelings are responsible for her tragic destiny. As previously argued, the condition of solitude of her youth acted as a barrier to the flow of emotions that was part of her character, causing her to be frustrated and melancholic. When these repressed emotions find an object to latch onto in the form of Augustus, their power fully manifests and takes control of Emma. Indeed, her fascination with Augustus himself is not natural at the beginning, as she becomes madly infatuated with him based on the description of his character by his mother and on a portrait of his likeness in her study.

While recalling those days in her narration, Emma herself stresses how the source of her infatuation with Augustus was Mrs. Harley's admiration of him, it is as if the love that Emma felt for Mrs. Harley had transferred to her son due to the concentration of emotion causes by her state as a social outcast and by the monotony of her life (Hays 2000, p. 91). This condition proves to be unbearable for her. Despite knowing that the object her love was nothing

more than an idealisation, she still cannot bring herself to reason. Augustus plays no part in her seduction, Emma seduces herself without having met the man once and, despite being aware of the causes behind the entire process, still cannot mend her ways, because as she herself explains: “my reason was but an auxiliary to my passion” (p. 93). After becoming more closely acquainted with Augustus and learning that she had no possibility of being together with him, Emma keeps being in doubt on whether to renounce her pursuit. She justifies this stubbornness to herself by arguing that it is part of her being to dispense and receive sympathy from others. It is only through love from the man she admires that she can extend these feelings to the entirety of creation. She is “neither a philosopher, nor a heroine - but a *woman, to whom education has given a sexual character*” (p. 149), and as such cannot be satisfied by the pursuit of wealth or admiration, as the act of loving and of being loved is everything that she requires to be truly happy.

It is the strength of this feeling that pushes Emma to break all social boundaries of acceptable behaviour in her pursuit of Augustus, without realising in her drive that her actions are detrimental to her aims. In her letters to him, one can find multiple instances of this trend. She adopts an active role while attempting to discover if he has already an attachment to another woman, going to the length of asking directly whether his heart is currently free (Hays 2000, p. 113). One must consider that in eighteenth-century British society women were not supposed to display direct manifestations of sexual interest, because they were regarded as lacking any sexual character whatsoever. Such a bold act on Emma’s part is a dire transgression of this social norm, which would as a result paint her as an unsexed woman, on par with prostitutes in the eyes of society. She justifies this unusual approach to Augustus by arguing that the natural flow of emotions should not be hindered by the artificial barriers of society, and that women are more susceptible to strong affections due to their upbringing, so they should not be ashamed

of expressing their feelings. As a matter of fact, since sympathy is at the source of affections, then it should not matter on which side this affection originates.

Emma is aware that she is walking on an arduous path due to the singularity of her beliefs, yet she is still willing to walk it nonetheless (Hays 2000, pp. 120-21). The same cannot be said for Augustus and he stops all forms of communication with Emma, who is left in doubt for three months on whether he had even received her messages. Pushed by his erratic behaviour towards herself, Emma sends him a letter which the standards of the time would regard as immoral and depraved. While speculating on the reason for Augustus's avoidance of her, Emma reminds him of the boundless affections that she had always felt for him and of the admiration that he had awakened in her. Reminding him of the worthiness of their previous relationship, predicated on affinity of character, of opinions, and of beliefs, she advances a scandalous proposal, as she states that she would be willing to give herself to him even outside of marriage, stressing that this is a gift that is not meant to be overlooked or underestimated (pp. 154-55).

The meaning behind this proposal is outstanding. On the one hand, it represents an empowering act for Emma, she rids herself of the passivity that has been seen as the societal trademark of the fair sex, assuming the role of the seducer in the interaction and challenging as such the status quo of British society, by showing that women themselves possess a sexual drive. Her desires are human and should be freely expressed, even those of a sexual nature, their repression has nothing to do with nature, on the contrary it is the result of the artificial impositions of society. The argument that women lack a sexual character is empty and contrived, women have the same capacity to feel as men, therefore their sexuality should be conceived as functioning in the same manner. Moreover, she provides a strong rebuttal of the belief that chastity and virtue should be conflated. Emma has her own flaws of character such as her rashness, impulsivity, and pride, nevertheless she is a virtuous individual. Her love and

attachment for those she cares deeply about, in addition with her capacity for undertaking brave acts, and with her selflessness and her passionate nature all demonstrate a virtuousness of character that can in no way be doubted.

Therefore, her attempt at seducing Augustus should not be viewed through a critical or negative lens. Firstly, she is pushed by the conviction that marriage would be beneficial to both of them. As kindred spirits, she believes that their union would heighten their virtues since she would act as a pillar of support to her husband, while he instead would grant her access to that world of activity, of possibilities, and of experiences that was denied to her for being born a woman (Hays 2000, pp. 139-40). Furthermore, she is excused by her ignorance of Augustus's actual situation, since she is only informed later that Augustus is involved already in a previous marriage. Upon this discovery, she immediately feels a paralysing sense of guilt at the thought of almost having been part of an act of adultery, proving that her morality has not been compromised (p. 165). Moreover, Augustus's attitude towards her has been ambiguous and shifting, as he would alternate between treating Emma with disdain and aloofness, in a manner which suggested irritation and coldness, whereas in other instances he would behave warmly and fondly, as he had done at the beginning of their friendship.

If one takes these factors in consideration, coupled with Augustus's refusal to provide to Emma any sort of explanation or answer to her letters, then it is not surprising that Emma chose to take the initiative, no matter how much of a risk this decision carries with it. As a matter of fact, in the end she is proven right by Augustus's confession with his dying breath that he had always loved her and was stopped from expressing his feelings by his previous marriage. His fate in this regard is as tragic as Emma's, as he had to repress his feelings due to the harsh dictates of society, while also having to contend with Emma's strong passions (Hays 2000, pp. 205-06). Thus, Emma's actions are not harmful in themselves or motivated by immorality and malice if one considers the context in which she had to make her bold choices.

2.2.4. Social Conformism

Unfortunately, this explanation would not work in eighteenth-century British society. Emma's attempt at achieving happiness for herself is directly opposed to the beliefs of the time. The hold which society possess on individuals is strong, and behaviours such as hers can only be seen as repellent examples from which to learn from and never to repeat. Her destiny was then set from the very beginning, and her attempts were doomed to fail, condemning her to a destiny of solitude and desperation. Emma survives all the men of her life, but the price she must pay for her survival is steep. Not only is she condemned to a life without love, but she is also forced to relive her experiences through the wrong choices taken by her adoptive son Augustus jr., who falls in love and decides to court an already married woman. However, one can argue that her worst punishment is the loss of her uniqueness and individuality. The older Emma, who acts as the narrator of the entire novel, is but a shadow of her former self, someone who has abandoned her non-conformist passionate attitude in favour of becoming an average middle-class lady.

Emma's sensibility was indeed excessive, but her refusal to be repressed, coupled with her desire for freedom and love, are nevertheless positive traits and represent a steppingstone for future improvements. Similarly, her denunciations of the ills of society were grounded on her own life experiences and denoted a strong ambition to affect actual changes in society. On the other hand, old Emma has lost her fighting spirit completely and appears to conceive her past as lacking any positive aspects. It is especially telling that, until Augustus jr.'s rashness pushed her to act, she had never told him or her own daughter about her story. She views her past in a strictly negative light and describes it as "the loathed and bitter portion of [her] existence" (Hays 2000, p. 41) which must be forgotten and repressed, and just the act of unearthing these forgotten memories causes her only suffering. The lesson which she wants to

impart to her young protégé is sound and sensible, her objective is to dissuade him from his fruitless attraction to Joanna by teaching him the risks of being misled by one's passions.

Nevertheless, her teaching is flawed, as from the very beginning she is guilty of lacking that unequivocal sincerity in her relationship with Augustus jr. for which she had repeatedly chastised his father, demonstrating then the same doubleness that was the major flaw of Augustus. Moreover, Emma has even not managed in her old age to free herself from the tyranny of the passions which caused her so much pain. What is left at the end is a woman who has abandoned all her hopes, crushed by her years of suffering, and the premature death of her daughter acted as the final blow. Her reaction to distress has not changed during the years, her feelings become so overbearing and unmanageable that the only way for her to cope with them is to abandon herself to "habitual, hopeless, dejection" (Hays 2000, p. 220). Therefore, despite her preaching, Emma herself has not learned the lesson which she wishes to teach to Augustus jr. and has accepted her fate as a relic of the past which is bound to disappear, with one last hope that the next generation will learn from her mistakes and enact those social changes which she had so much desired.

Emma's tale is indeed tragic, it is at its core the story of a bright young woman whose ambitions and aspirations were stopped in their tracks by strict rules which governed eighteenth-century British society. Subjected to the flawed education of her time, she was not provided the necessary knowledge and skills which would have allowed her to successfully navigate the harsh environments of society. Intellectually motivated, with a desire to amass knowledge and a love for learning, she was not permitted to pursue a higher education or to dabble in independent studies on the ground of the alleged intellectual deficiency which was attributed to ladies. Deprived of the means to guarantee her own economic independence, Emma could not even follow the traditional path of marriage, which was the accepted path for those of her sex. Educated to be a sensible being, her sexual character was then repressed by

the norms of society, which granted to women only empty lives characterised by isolation, idleness, and boredom within the confines of their household. This lack of possibilities for Emma to expand her energies and allow her emotions to flow freely, in addition to a childhood which was characterised by a lack of restraints and corrective influences, caused her to develop an excessive and uncontrolled sensibility. In the eighteenth century, women were conceived as strictly irrational creature, only driven by their passions and incapable of rational judgements. Whereas this trait was assumed to be linked to a natural disposition, on the contrary it is society which shapes them to behave in such a manner and then exploits these imposed flaws to discriminate them. Even when Emma uses the instruments granted to her by society to express herself, she is still condemned for it. Women are expected to look pretty, to be nothing more than prized possessions for their husbands, and even if their education has raised them to be emotional beings, these emotions should be repressed. Unfortunately, Emma is ultimately crushed by this unbearable weight, as her ambitions were sadly too advanced for her times. Yet, there is still hope that in the future the situation will improve thanks to those martyrs such as herself, whose sacrifice and whose mistakes will serve as the sparks for the enactment of societal changes by those who will follow in their footsteps.

2.3. Philosophical Commentary

In *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Mary Hays displays an interest in the subject of social criticism, and it is undeniable that a considerable portion of this work is devoted to expressing her beliefs and views on the matter. However, it would be superficial to summarise the whole novel as a mere piece of social commentary, as one must remember that its author had also a remarkable passion for various fields of knowledge. Hays wrote her novel during the period of her life when she was involved and on friendly terms with some of the more noteworthy authors of the British literary scene, moreover her own readings and studies have also influenced the themes tackled in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. Her participation in the Jacobin circle left its

mark in her work, and it is not uncommon to find whole sections of the novel dedicated to the major points of contention of the Jacobin philosophical school of thought. Hays has been portrayed by her contemporary critics and by her peers as a pupil of William Godwin and of Mary Wollstonecraft, and their influence on *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* cannot be denied. Nevertheless, it would be a grave mistake to regard her as an uncritical follower of her talented mentors. She subscribes to the validity of their theories, yet her own beliefs are not the result of a mindless assimilation of them. On the contrary, Hays is not afraid to express her own criticism, bringing attention to those points advanced by their philosophies which she perceives as deeply flawed, while attempting to correct them with her own brand unique brand of female philosophy. As an author and a philosopher Hays is capable of walking her own path and, while owing a great deal to her previous influences, she demonstrates a unique style and philosophy which contribute to her worthiness as a major contributor to the British literary scene of the 1790s.

2.3.1. Necessity in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*

Mary Hays thoroughly discusses in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* the theories at the centre of the philosophy of William Godwin¹, the author of the political treatise *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1793) and of the novel *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794). Firstly, one must consider the repeated mentions to the topic of necessity in the novel. That is, the belief that the influences to which individuals are subjected in an early stage of their life can leave a deep mark on their character. Men cannot be truly free, because their material and social circumstances shape their upbringing. Moreover, their surroundings and peers equally influence them throughout their lives, so that consequently our character is an amalgamation

¹ A thorough exploration of the relationship between Mary Hays and William Godwin can be found in the first chapter of this thesis.

of these external impressions, which affect our ideas and beliefs. Emma on multiple occasions refers to this phenomenon. Her memoir opens with a statement that emphasises the role that the circumstances of her youth have had in the formation of her character. They are responsible for “modifying and controuling [sic] our characters, and introducing, mechanically, those associations and habits which make us what we are” (Hays 2000, p. 44).

Emma is aware that her life and decisions are the result of external influences over which she had no control, a lesson which she is trying to impart to young Augustus. For example, she recounts the death of her uncle Mr. Melmoth as a life changing event, responsible for making her experience for the first-time true sadness (Hays 2000, p. 52). Likewise, the loss of Mrs. Melmoth left another lasting impression upon her, as she found herself without a guide to accompany her in the hazardous world of adult life and had to navigate society on her own with no one to quell her passionate and extreme disposition. Emma herself ponders on whether her character would have developed differently had she been given the possibility of staying for longer under the influence of a milder and more moderate lady such as her aunt (pp. 61-62). On another occasion, while reflecting on youth from her own advanced age, Emma stresses how it is a period of the human life during which people tend to invest themselves recklessly in engagements which will affect their future and their character without them knowing (p. 79). Another force capable of producing a chain of reactions and impressions is that of one’s first romantic attachment, whose lasting influence may not be felt in the spur of the moment, yet in retrospect can be traced back to that fatidic first love (pp. 91-92).

Furthermore, the Godwinian Mr. Francis advances a similar argument in his first letter to young Emma. In an attempt to guide Emma to temper her emotions to allow the light of reason to dispel her prejudices and correct her mistakes, he provides an apt description of the source of the current social ills of their time. The human mind, being at the moment of its conception akin to a tabula rasa, is subjected to the influence of the circumstances in which it

is raised. These circumstances are the product of the political institutions which influence them. Improvements can only be reached through the process of trial and error at the core of the scientific method, unfortunately this methodology cannot be adopted by the political institutions. Their understanding of how to achieve virtue and truth is hindered by their longevity and by their permanence, and due to these factors, their reasoning is as inflexible as that of a young child, who wishes to appease their immediate desires and cravings without any forethought for the future and for the changes of their own body, fully believing that the same solution will function under any circumstances (Hays 2000, p. 82). Society can be improved through a modification of the minds of men, a gradual process thanks to which truth will claim its deserved place at the centre of men's existence. For this to be achieved, the first step must be the eradication of violent passions through education, and any step taken in the correction of the mistakes and prejudices of men will bring them closer to truth and happiness (pp. 83-84).

In one of her letters written to Mr. Francis after her rejection by Augustus, Emma proves to have understood how political institutions are responsible for the ills and prejudices of mankind. Nevertheless, she does not consider violent passions and the permanence of political institutions as the main culprits behind the stagnation of society. Her argument centres around the conflation of human virtue with sexual chastity, which led to an unmendable division between the sexes. Women became victims and had to suppress their desires, doomed to a life of limited, and circumscribed empty experiences, whereas men were legitimised in appeasing their immoral and brutal instincts and gained access to the wider world (Hays 2000, pp. 173-74). Mr. Francis's belief that men can free themselves from prejudices through reason and truth appears farcical and artificial, women cannot possibly be expected to gain independence on their own when the founding principle of rational society itself is actively against them. Therefore, pushing women to free themselves from their shackles amounts to nothing more

than mere mockery, fuelled by a lack of understanding of their condition on Mr. Francis's side (p. 173). Since the exchanges of Emma and Mr. Francis are based on the actual correspondence between Mary Hays and William Godwin, it appears that the two authors, while sharing an understanding of the concept of necessity, significantly differed in their interpretation of the causes behind societal flaws.

2.3.2. Reason and Sensibility: Wollstonecraft's Contribution

Moreover, this is not the only source of conflict between the two characters in the novel. As a matter of fact, Emma is especially critical of Francis's condemnation of passions, which he deems as responsible for leading men to error and prejudices. As Francis argues, Emma's misfortune is the result of her own actions, she is sorely to be blamed for having let herself be swayed by the power of a passion which she herself had nurtured. Moreover, if one analyses the pain Emma is currently experiencing due to her unrequited love through the lens of truth, then it will become apparent that it is only a trifle if compared to the misfortunes that befall upon men. As he stresses, the entire ordeal could have been avoided, had Emma merely "worshipped at the altar of reason but half as assiduously as [she had] sacrificed at the shrine of illusion" (Hays 2000, p. 169). Through his advice, Francis displays a stunning lack of empathy for Emma's suffering, thus exposing the coldness and sterility at the core of a purely rational philosophy, which appears unable to conceive issues such as Emma's, who as a woman had to experience a completely different reality to that of Mr. Francis.

Emma's response is a strict condemnation of this philosophy and of its aims. As a sensible creature, Emma refuses to detach herself from her passions, as they are a crucial part of her being. Passions are the source of powers; outward impressions are at the core of our being and to deny them would correspond to erasing our true self. She should not be blamed for the choices she made, as she is nothing more than the victim of necessity, of the corresponding chain of impressions which shaped her character (Hays 2000, pp. 176-77). In

the state she had found herself in, reason failed completely as an instrument to rectify her mistakes, it possessed no hold over her, as she was swept along a self-destructive path by her passions, whose authority was of a higher influence compared to that of reason. Francis is wholly mistaken in accusing her of having been swayed by her passions, as they constituted the point of origin of her reasoning, and not an alternative force to it (p. 172). It is pointless to argue that her suffering should be recontextualised, as the fact that other people are in an even worse condition bears no significance to her, whether the pain she is experiencing is physical or psychological is irrelevant as only the results matter (p. 171). Furthermore, Francis's philosophy can offer no balm for this condition, rationality cannot mend a wounded heart, and her wretchedness cannot be solved through any kind of rational argument, as it is a wound which has its origin in her strong passions (p. 166).

As stated by Miriam L. Wallace, Hays provides us with her own solution to the problem of uniting philosophy and sensibility. She rejects the abstraction inherent in Godwin's philosophy. Passions are not relegated to the realm of the personal, they on the contrary are the foundation of our reasoning, which is based on our personal history and experiences (Craciun and Lokke 2001, pp. 236-37). There is a dangerous side to sensibility, yet it can also act as the motivation behind personal improvement, development of genius and that of reason (pp. 237-38). Furthermore, it can act as the instrument through which women, being of a more passionate nature compared to men, can learn to think critically and rationally, so that it can be the starting point in the creation of female philosophers (p. 239). The female mind, after being first stimulated by the strength of a particular passion or feeling, will eventually be motivated by a desire to transform this personal experience in a more general and universal model, and for this she will require the analytical tools that are only provided by philosophy (p. 254).

Whereas the male philosopher acts primarily through cold rationality, the female philosopher is a working model, her reasoning is filtered through her own life and feelings, and

as such is likely to commit errors, such as those done by Emma. In fact, the minds that are more prone to developing a talent for philosophy are those more easily misled by the passions and by the illusions of sensibility (Craciun and Lokke 2001, p. 249). Hays then is exploiting Godwin's philosophy; she is no copy-cat as his works serve as the material to construct her own model of the female philosopher (p. 244). Thus, women through their unique sensibility provide an invaluable contribution to philosophy. Sensibility and effeminacy should not be considered personal flaws to shun and be ashamed of, they are inherent in our nature and their rejection, such as has been done by Mr. Francis and Augustus, constitutes an unnatural act (p. 246). Moreover, the oppression of women is represented by Hays as double fold, on the one hand there is its more apparent aspect which deprives women of the rights which are enjoyed by men. Yet, this process is similarly perpetuated by the radical philosophers and intellectuals, who are guilty of having monopolised philosophy and knowledge by excluding sensibility and passions due to their own prejudices against them, thus equating them with the kings and aristocrats who have been oppressing their fellow men for centuries (p. 248).

Hays's new brand of philosophy is specifically feminine, and functions through the harmonious union of the male element, that being rationality, and the female element of sensibility. It can even be argued that rational philosophy, with its sorely abstract nature, is lacking the vital component of sensibility and thus represents a mere imitation of true female philosophy (Craciun and Lokke 2001, p. 250). Moreover, this model can function as a way of escaping the self-indulgence of the male autonomous subject, as the conflation of sensibility and femininity has empowered the sensible subject, transforming their personal experience in powerful methodology of systemic analysis. The critics' response to *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is an undeniable proof of how the personal story of a single woman mediated through the mediums of reason and sensibility represented an active and deeply felt threat to the male cultural hegemony of British society.

Hays's philosophical model then subverts the negative connotation associated with the cultural conflation of femininity with sentimentality, transforming sensibility in an empowering and valuable attribute for women. This trait differentiates her not only from Godwin, but also from her other mentor Mary Wollstonecraft, whose attitude towards passions was entirely negative. In her treatise *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft identifies sentimentalism as the culprit behind the collapse of gendered distinctions (Johnson 1995, p. 23). She does not promote a positive discourse on femininity, on the contrary her purpose is tackling the degeneration of masculinity caused by sentimental culture, which has made men adopt the weakness, dependence, and irrationality inherent in the female condition, thus abandoning their true nature (p. 24). For Wollstonecraft, sexual difference does not possess a political relevance, anyone should be entitled to basic rights regardless of their sex, yet it should not be eradicated, as the advancement of women's rights depends entirely on the strengthening, and on the revitalisation of men. Whereas women are educated for frivolity, vacuousness, and hedonism, on the other hand a whole class of men has willingly adopted the former's worst faults. Both sexes are kept in subjection by effeminacy, nevertheless women have it even worse. They have been deprived of their inherent affective qualities by the masculinization of sensibility, therefore they are either forced in hyperfeminized condition of excesses or must fill in the position of rationality abandoned by men, a role which does not suit them due to their faulty upbringing (pp. 30-31).

Wollstonecraft identifies this progressive emasculation as the result of a monarchical political agenda, which weakened its male subjects through the culture of sensibility to easily dominate and subjugate them. Women's role in this process is equivocal; on the one hand, they are the victims of the system of education which has taught them to cherish weakness, only then to exploit it as a valid cause to justify their discrimination. Nevertheless, women also serve as the main perpetrators of the sentimental ideology (Johnson 1995, p. 36). In accordance with

her pupil Hays, Wollstonecraft does not believe that the spheres of activity of the sexes should be kept apart, women must still be able to access the wider world outside their homes, and men must participate in the process of child rearing. However, she does not attempt to shape a new path for the weaker sex, as her call for rationality, independence, and freedom for women is based on the belief that it will help them be better wives and mothers, thus advancing a more responsible sexual division (p. 40). We can then see how Mary Hays clearly disagrees and sets herself apart from her female mentor both through her understanding of sensibility and through her conflicting radical political agenda, once again demonstrating the uniqueness of her feminist ideology.

2.3.3. Innovating the Novel

Furthermore, in her article Louise Joy demonstrates that Hays's emphasis on passions is a revolutionary element for the Jacobin novel. Whereas the discussion of emotions had mostly followed their movement on an abstract level, Hays aims to convey the importance of real and particular emotions, since the previous Jacobin mode of discussion was in itself flawed as it produced a purely artificial perspective. This constitutes a central reason for the adoption of the form of the epistolary memoir as it allows its readers to gain a level of identification with its heroine and her emotions which would be impossible in a traditional philosophical pamphlet, while granting Hays the perfect context to successfully show the limitation of our control over our emotions (2010, p. 225). This approach forces the readers to confront a rather dire reality which had barely been addressed by her contemporary fictional writers, that our engagement when discussing emotions is directly dependent on the degree in which we are able to link them to our experiences. Thus, the potential of fiction comes into play, as it can depict emotions with a degree of truthfulness and an authenticity that abstract philosophy lacks entirely (p. 226). Nevertheless, to experience passions is not necessarily an intrinsically female trait, women might be more subjected and in tune with them, yet they can be experienced with

the same strength by men, therefore passions are not gendered by Hays. Emma does not experience extreme emotions because she is a woman, her unfulfilled desires for self-realisation and social utility are the main culprits for their overwhelming strength, a trait which equates her with Godwin's hero Caleb Williams and the philosopher Helvétius (pp. 227-28).

Hays's argument does not merely revolve around the importance of emotions, as she is also in favour of their free expression, since women and men share the same passions after all. Spontaneous self-representation is an act which requires strong violent passions, not calm and collected affections. Despite this impasse, the novel tries to pursue both aims, with Emma constantly preaching about the importance of subduing one's own passions while being herself the main advocate for the right of letting her passions flow unrestrained (Joy 2010, p. 228). Young Emma's attitude best exemplifies this issue, on the one hand she is keenly aware of the urgency of controlling her emotions. Nevertheless, whenever she is emotionally stimulated, she cannot help but to regard emotional outbursts as the only valid form of response, and never stops to consider what other options might be available to her (p. 229). Her passions take complete control of her in these situations and her reactions happen automatically without her having any agency over the role played by herself in a distressing scene. This emotional indulgence is presented as valid and moral, it is as if Hays is suggesting that human beings possess no capacity to control the trajectory of their emotions, it is only possible to trace their course in retrospect with the benefit of hindsight, as the older Emma has been doing as the narrator of the novel. The capacity to control our emotions is then tied with their absence, it is not possible to adopt an objective standpoint in the spur of the moment as they exert an influence over us which is too overwhelming to detach ourselves from them. This becomes apparent when one regards the narrational style of Emma. She is quick to chastise herself for her responses to her past mistakes, yet while doing so she betrays a similar inability to control herself through her language, which is as passionate as it is inflamed (p. 230).

It is important to stress how passions in Hays's novel are never depicted as moderate due to her use of the memoir form, which can only allow for the adoption of a subjective perspective dependent on Emma's point of view. The lack of other perspectives corroborates the illusion that the other characters of the novel are more capable of controlling their emotions than Emma, despite the fact that their emotions will be perceived by themselves with the same volatility with which Emma experiences her emotions. This is a problem which *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* presents as unbridgeable, even during Emma's exchanges of correspondence with Mr. Francis, when the readers are granted access for the first time to the ideas and emotions of another character. These letters are frustrating for the readers because the lack of a third person perspective makes it impossible to build a bridge between the two characters. The letters must be taken as they are and they highlight a clear lack of compromise in Emma's and Francis's philosophical positions, there is no dialogue or exchange of common ideas, their worlds and perspectives are wholly apart from one another. The readers are forced to shift from one perspective to the other without any possibility of considering their positions from a third point of view (Joy 2010, pp. 231-32).

This condition is apparent even during their conversations in person; it is evident that Emma's incapacity of viewing her emotions objectively and Francis's cold rationality are the culprits behind their miscommunication. Thus, their exchanges serve only to increase the distance between them, they cannot in any way adopt the other's point of view and constantly fail to grasp the meaning of each other's words. This divide should not be blamed on a gendered or a philosophical distinction of the two characters, it is a consequence of the fact that passions cannot be experienced objectively. Therefore, Hays is advocating for the novel as the only instrument for comprehending the emotions of another. Philosophical debate fails in this task as it cannot trace the complete trajectory of one's emotions from a first-person perspective, the novel on the other hand permits readers to grasp the context in which these emotions have been

experienced, freeing them from the restricted field of vision intrinsic in the spur of the moment, thus granting them the required detachment and objectivity needed to truly understand the emotions of the other interlocutor (Joy 2010, pp. 232-33).

Hays's revolutionary approach does not stop at the unification of sensibility and philosophy, as her ambitious novel represents an avant-garde breakthrough in the canon of the British novel. As a Jacobin fiction, in a fashion similar to William Godwin's *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* and Thomas Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives* (1792), *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* attempts to reconcile two mediums subjected to the class distinctions of the time, the novel and philosophy. Furthermore, Hays attempts to bridge the gendered gap which singled out the characterisation of her protagonist as a female philosopher by constructing her story through the models of Godwin's pseudo-memoir and of Holcroft's epistolary form and philosophical dialogues (Kelly 1993, p. 105). Emma's story shows how a woman who has been shaped by societal influences to follow a specific model of behaviour, that of the romantic heroine, can become aware of the artificiality of this façade and develop a form of political awareness, thus becoming a revolutionary subject. This social and political transformation is not the result of external influences, on the contrary the conditions necessary for this development are already contained in the state of things as they are (p. 105).

As such, Hays grapples with the formal issues that were intrinsic in the Jacobin novel, its purpose being to convey to its readers the process through which a revolutionary consciousness is formed and develops in a pre-revolutionary environment. However, this depiction requires a commitment to psychological realism, which will eventually conflict with the final aim of the Jacobin novel, that being of constructing a general model from their depiction of individual consciousness. To overcome these obstacles, Hays exploits several narrative devices. Firstly, she presents her novel as first-person confession. Then, she weakens this plot of the life story by representing a failed courtship. This effect is achieved by having

the heroine assume the responsibility of carrying out the act of courtship, and by the shift in the middle of the novel to the circular and repetitive structure of the offended lover's complaints through the numerous letters written to Augustus by Emma (Kelly 1993, p. 106). Lastly, the subjective power displayed in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is further reinforced and emphasised by Hays adding scenes with elements of social commentary and of satire, such as the depiction of Mr. Pemberton during the dinner in Mr. Melmoth's house, which serve to provide a diverse characterisation for Emma which will reinforce the subjective power of her confessions (p. 107).

2.4. Summary

Memoirs of Emma Courtney constitutes Hays's more ambitious project. Written in a dialogue with her mentor William Godwin and her fellow Jacobins, Hays appropriates their own theories and ideas to advance her own brand of unique feminine philosophy. Starting from the theory of necessity, she justifies her advocacy for the importance of passions and emotions within rational philosophy. An abstract and detached approach as the one promoted by Godwin will necessarily prove fallible in tackling the issues which plague the lives of women in eighteenth-century society. The permanence of political institutions is problematic, yet the lives of women are made actively worse by the conflation of sexual chastity and virtue, which is responsible for the suppression of their passions. Passions are the true motor of rationality, and their neglect is an unnatural act. True philosophy does not conform to the purely rational model adopted by her male peers, as passions and reason need to be properly balanced. There are some issues of course when considering passions, as it is impossible to portray them objectively during the time one is experiencing them, as exemplified by Emma's story. In this dilemma, the novel comes as a support to philosophy, allowing the readers to bridge the gap created by the subjectivity of experienced passions and granting them the required hindsight to judge them objectively. This conception of sensibility has been missing from the Jacobin novel,

and this is where Hays contribution to this school of thought is especially relevant when confronted with her peers, proving her originality and value as writer. Lastly, Hays had to contend in her advocacy of passions with the problematic aspect in the process of portraying subjectivity intrinsic in the Jacobin novel, which hindered its purpose of transforming the birth of a revolutionary subject in a general model for the population. She successfully tackled these issues through her adoption of the epistolary memoir form. In conclusion, in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is without a doubt worthy of consideration in the British canon of the 1790s. Despite its scandalous reception at the time of his publication, it survived the passage of time and its rediscovery in the 1960s by feminist scholars is another proof of its value related to the groundbreaking and innovative approach adopted by its author.

3. The Victim of Prejudice

3.1. Introduction

Published in 1799, Mary Hays's second novel *The Victim of Prejudice* reflects the changes to the British social and literary scene, and to its author's life, which were happening at the closure of the decade of the 1790s. Whereas the Jacobin revolutionary ideology was supported in the early years of this period, at the end of the century the violent turn taken by the French revolution sparked a conservative backlash in England aimed to suppress and censor any form of social and political criticism perceived as endangering the status quo. William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Hays had to face the blunt of this new cultural movement. Their works were heavily condemned for being immoral and French sympathising, while their public images were subjected to a systemic assassination of character. The influence of this dire situation manifests in the content of Hays's second work. Presented as a memoir of its protagonist Mary Raymond, who recounts her unfortunate and tragic life from within the boundaries of a prison cell, *The Victim of Prejudice* is the tale of how her dreams and future happiness are crushed by the prejudices and injustices intrinsic in eighteenth-century England. Victim of a terrible rape and daughter of a sexually compromised woman, Mary finds herself excluded from polite society, rejected from any valuable social relation, and barred from having access to any means of sustaining herself. Condemned by the imprisoning confines of chastity and social propriety, Mary's story ends in a tragedy as she reaches the end of her life without having achieved anything or having made any significant impact upon the world.

This chapter aims to demonstrate how *The Victim of Prejudice* constitutes an even harsher criticism of British society and attitude to gender than Hays's previous work, a result of the direction that her life had taken following the publication of *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. This analysis is divided in two parts. The first part focuses on contrasting the heroines of the

two novels to show how, despite not possessing any of Emma's flaws in education and of character, Mary still cannot succeed in a society where women are not granted the same rights and opportunities as men. The second part constitutes a study of Hays's representation of the effects that the concept chastity has on the life of middle-class women, a theme already introduced in her first novel which is then further explored in its more visceral and down to earth aspects.

3.2. Education and the Female Condition

In *The Victim of Prejudice*, Hays explores the theme of education through a different approach than the one adopted in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. She expresses a strong criticism of the unsatisfactory state of female education through the struggles of Mary Raymond, after the loss of her inheritance and then of her guardian Mr. Raymond force her fend off on her own in the grim reality of London. Raised under the guidance and tutorage of the enlightened Mr. Raymond, Mary does not possess the same flaws which plagued Hays's previous protagonist Emma. Her knowledge is rounded and all encompassing, she is as versed in the sciences as she is in the humanities, and her attitude to learning is serious and dedicated. Mary proves herself to be as capable and proficient as her male peers, able to keep up with them in their studies and in their playful activities, while being free of that lack of restraints which was at the core of Emma's character. Mary has fully internalised the lessons that Mr. Francis had tried to inculcate in Emma. Her passions are still lively experienced, yet they are mediated through reason, she is not the dupe of her sensibility. Moreover, Mary is stronger willed and more autonomous since her desire for respect and appreciation is not as extreme as Emma's. On the contrary, once she realises that her social standing has been forever compromised after her rape, Mary does not passively fall to despair and melancholy, her combative spirit shines through in this awful situation as she concludes that the loss of her chastity should not have an impact on her character and her virtues. If society cannot accept her, then she will disregard its

opinions and will nevertheless attempt to walk her own path. As long as she is still in possession of her self-respect and of her virtuous character, then she is in no need of reassurance from others, and the power of her mind will help her overcome all the troubles and setbacks that she will encounter.

Mary is the perfect example of the independent individual so central to William Godwin's philosophy, yet as Mary's tragic fate demonstrates, this condition of autonomy holds no value within the context of eighteenth-century British society. Unable to procure any form of work due to an education which has taught her to be rational and sensitive, and yet has not imparted her any sort of knowledge necessary to let her gain access to a profession, Mary has to contend with the prejudices of society against middle-class ladies who wish to work, coupled with those against sexually compromised women. Her condition as an orphan born a child of infamy, as a victim of rape, and as a young lady raised in a middle-class environment places Mary in an unfavourable position. Barred from any form of social relation, she is powerless as the force of her mind cannot overcome the needs of her body, one cannot survive without shelter and food to sustain oneself. Godwin's philosophy is once more portrayed as far too abstract and impractical. Even when the protagonist of the novel is a keen believer of the importance of reason and autonomy, she is nevertheless crushed by the steep dictates of society. Forced to abandon her hopes and ambitions, Mary is doomed to die young fully aware that her life has been purposeless, a grim conclusion to her story which reflects the destiny of the Jacobin movement and of its ambitions for social change, which by the end of the century were being eroded and silenced by the British counter-revolutionary conservative movement.

3.2.1. A Godwinian Heroine

The Victim of Prejudice dedicates a significant part of its first chapters to explore and depict the process of Mary's education, following the traditional structure of the *Bildungsroman* in tracing the birth of the protagonist's mind through its early influences and

teachings, thus justifying the choices and mistakes made by her in her adult life. While Emma suffered from the absence of a guiding and corrective authority in her youth, the same does not apply to Mary. Raised in the idyllic county of Monmouthshire, from her childhood Mary was guided in the development of her mind by the teachings of her guardian and mentor Mr. Raymond. Blessed with a healthy frame and an active and adventurous mind, Mary learned to follow the instructions of reason and to stoically bear hardship and suffering, with self-regulation and discipline as her guiding principles. Moreover, Mr. Raymond's notions of female education were unique and unusual, granting her an education not limited by gendered prejudices; thus, Mr. Raymond taught Mary both the rudiments of languages and those of the sciences, and directed her studies with a kind and encouraging attitude which contributed to transform learning itself in a source of pleasure and amusement (Hays 1994, pp. 5-6). Raymond also adopts this enlightened approach during the formative years of Mr. Pehlam's children William and Edmund, as a matter of fact the two boys are taught the same subjects as Mary, and the cooperation and mutual support of the three children proves to be beneficial to their growth as individuals. Eventually, Mary surpasses her companions through her intellectual achievements, as her perseverance and good health make her a better scholar than the feeble Edmund and the rash William (pp. 24-25).

It is apparent that, through this brief excursus on the protagonist's formative years, Mary Hays is advancing an argument in favour of the adoption of an equal education between young boys and girls. The latter are not intellectually inferior to the former, in fact if given the proper chances they will prove to be equal if not even superior to men in the pursuit of various fields of learning. If one compares the progress of Mary and of her love interest William in this period of their lives, it is evident that Mary has internalised the teachings of Mr. Raymond, whereas William proves to be a poor learner not only in his studies, but especially in his conduct of behaviour. Mary and William manifest a rather sensible and passionate disposition from

their childhood, yet Mary can regulate her impulses and instincts through the aid of reason. On the other hand, William is reminiscent of Mr. Montague in his complete incapacity to control the impulse of satisfying his passions even at the expense of others, a trait which characterises him as selfish and self-centred. The accident of the stolen grapes is an exemplificative representation of the difference between the two.

William proposes the theft of the grapes from Sir Osborne's orchard on a whim, justifying his intention to defy Mr. Raymond's imposition not to trespass on those ground by claiming that he feels a "strange fancy" to eat those grapes. Furthermore, he attempts to drag Mary along with him on this enterprise, firstly by arguing that Mary should not be concerned about Mr. Raymond discovering their crime, since her guardian's affection for her is so strong that he would not be upset at her for such a trifling matter. Once Mary rebukes this argument, he resorts to manipulation by exploiting her affection for him to persuade her. He claims that since she is not willing to support him in this theft, then he must have underestimated the depth of their friendship and of her courage (Hays 1994, pp. 12-13). This last accusation is effective, and William convinces Mary to ignore the dictates of her conscience and to steal Osborne's grapes. Whereas William's motivation is purely selfish, and he takes advantage of Mary's good will to turn her into an accomplice, Mary takes this risk at the cost of angering her mentor and of being publicly defamed in order appease her friend. Moreover, she is motivated by the fact that, in case of failure, the responsibility for the act will entirely befall on her person, and William will be spared from any sort of punishment. It is undeniable that Mary was misled by her passions, yet this mistake can be imputed to her young age and gullibility, and, despite her questionable means, her end was overall altruistic and selfless, thus characterising her as a sensible and sympathetic young woman in the same vein as Emma Courtney.

This trait unites the female protagonists of the two novels, their capacity for sympathy is developed and advanced, making them empathetic to the suffering of others. As a matter of

fact, both girls are protective towards those they care about to the extent that they are willing to incur personal harm to ease their sufferings, as Emma does when she saves Augustus's life after his head injury. In Mary's case, there are multiple instances in the novel where she must pay a steep price after protecting someone she loves. Her second encounter with Sir Peter Osborne exemplifies this virtuous disposition of her. When she and William stumble upon a wounded hare chased by a group of hunters, Mary's first instinct is to shield the poor suffering animal with her own body, displaying a courageous lack of care for her safety even when faced by a pack of hunting dogs and their masters. Once Osborne decides to take out his anger on William over his hunt being interrupted, Mary shields him from the blows of his whip, taking in the process several hits which leave marks on her neck and shoulders. After their escape, upon Mr. Raymond inspecting her wounds, she states that she does not mind them as they were incurred while protecting William, a statement that moves her guardian to tears (Hays 1994, pp. 20-23). Physical harm is no deterrent for Mary's sympathetic impulses, which push her to disregard her own well-being to defend those who are being abused and downtrodden by someone in a position of power, as in the case of William and the hare.

Whereas she managed to escape with minor injuries this time, her next act of benevolence is accomplished by paying a steep price. When Sir Osborne forces the Neville family to leave their rectory, a place which has been their home and source of sustenance for years, she undergoes an act of self-sacrifice which proves her to be a virtuous and heroic woman. The only hope for Mr. Neville is an offer of a curacy abroad, however in order to undergo this journey with his whole family he would have to pay around from three to five hundred pounds of expenses, a sum which he could never afford by relying solely on his savings. Upon hearing about this tragedy, Mary immediately forgets about the heartache that she was suffering due to William's departure and is stirred to action. With the reluctant approval of Mr. Raymond, she decides without a second thought to donate anonymously her

inheritance of five hundred pounds, which her guardian had saved throughout the years for her future, to save her friends from bankruptcy and poverty (Hays 1994, pp. 88-93).

The worthiness of this decision is not to be underestimated, as Mary renounces for the sake of others the only possible source of stability and safety available to her apart from marriage, and condemns herself to a life of labour and possible dependency, despite being raised as a middle class lady whose station as such should be above these degrading circumstances, with the added risk that being an orphan born of infamy would preclude her access to numerous occupations. Therefore, Mary is not concerned about risking her future for her friends; her sensibility and empathy are admirable in the context of eighteenth-century British society, which has as its cardinal principle the accumulation of wealth through profit. Such acts of kindness and selflessness are then alien in a reality where even marriages are incurred not out of love, but out of profit and convenience. The last episode serving as a final confirmation of Mary's boundless empathy occurs when her saviour James falls ill. In order not to add further strains to his already fragile state of health, Mary hides from him the difficulties and debts she was incurring to manage their farm without his assistance, even keeping secret from him her unexpected encounter with Sir Osborne, whose reappearance caused her to have a nervous breakdown. Mary renounces her only form of comfort and compassion to safeguard the health of her only friend. This decision proves to be right, since James passes away from the shock of indignation once she tells him that Osborne's men through vicious rumours started her prosecution and social shunning within the village (Hays 1994, pp. 160-61).

As can be seen, Mary's education under Mr. Raymond has fostered her sympathy and sensibility, turning her into an example of active virtue and benevolence, in a similar fashion to Emma Courtney. Nevertheless, the two ladies are not the same type of protagonist, since latter's boundless sensibility, despite having an undeniable positive aspect, also constitutes a

fatal flaw of her character, causing her to fall in love with Augustus to an obsessive degree and pushing her to blatantly break all social boundaries of acceptable behaviour in her pursuit of love. On the contrary, Mary's passions are nowhere as overwhelming and all absorbing, and she makes her decisions according to the dictates of reason and not according to those of a passion which knows no reins. Her relationship with William reflects this trait with clarity. On the one hand, William is rash and impulsive, and lets himself be guided by his passions and instincts. For this reason, Mary must fill the role of the voice of reason in their interactions, constantly stopping William's rashness and fighting against her passionate love for him in order to not to disregard Raymond's teachings. As a matter of fact, Raymond himself states that his purpose in raising Mary has been to teach her to subdue her feelings, to direct her passions to objects worthy of consideration, and to follow only the guidance of reason, so to assure that she will become an active and useful member of society (Hays 1994, p. 29).

When Raymond's revelation that she can never become William's wife due to their different social stations throws her passions in a disarray, Mary still agrees after a careful reflection to follow his plan and to leave her childhood home on the conviction that Raymond must have a valid motivation for requiring this sacrifice from her. Her guardian praises her for following this hard decision, and openly states his satisfaction in seeing that his pupil has internalised his lessons about freeing oneself from the tyranny of the passions (Hays 1994, pp. 36-38). Mary never forgets this valuable advice, and when William unexpectedly visits during her permanence in Mr. Neville's rectory, she lets herself be guided by Mr. Raymond's words in a moment of doubt and stress. As William confesses his love for her, Mary is torn on how to act, her passions weaken her conduct, and she begins to doubt on what she should do to follow the proper path of duty. Nevertheless, she sets on asking Mr. Raymond for guidance, stressing that even if at the moment she is confounded by the sudden outburst of her emotions, she is not weak and will not allow herself to be the slave of her own passions, promising him

that she is ready to renounce William's love at any moment as soon as she is provided with a rational motivation for not pursuing this relationship (p. 54).

Convinced by the revelation of her origins, Mary assumes the responsibility of rejecting William's advances and distances herself from him, even if it is painful and heart-breaking for her to play this part. When William confronts her for this sudden turn in their interactions, Mary tries to convince him that their union would only be harmful for him, since marrying a child of infamy would tarnish his reputation and cause him to be disowned by his own father. She does not intend to acquire her present happiness at the cost of ruining William's prospects, as she would not be able to bear the remorse and the regrets that would come along with this decision. Despite her love for William, she knows that, due to his upbringing by his father, he would not bear a life of modesty and depravation (Hays 1994, pp. 75-76). As such, she does not give in to her passions, which would push her to appease her immediate desires without any thought given to the future consequences of her actions. She is duty bound to her guardian and willing to submit to her tragic destiny if he deems it necessary to her, fully convinced that her strength of mind will allow her to overcome any future trial.

William's response to her reasoning is purely motivated by his passions. He suggests that they should hide the truth about Mary's birth from his father, since truth and virtue serve merely as means to happiness. He does not even consider that Mr. Raymond would not lie on his behalf, or that his father, being an honour-bound man, would likely conduct his own research before consenting to their union, he merely seeks to satisfy his desires by taking the most direct and immediate route available. Mary chastises him for believing this, warning him that using the dictates of our passions as an excuse to break moral boundaries constitutes a dangerous precedent, since then it becomes impossible to know when one will eventually stop in the pursuit of his desire. William does not even attempt to contradict this argument, instead resorts to accusing her of having never loved him and blames the pride and fickleness, which

he considers inherent in the female nature, for her resistance to his requests (Hays 1994, pp. 77-78).

3.2.2. Striving for Independence

Mary's enlightened mentor has successfully imparted to her the lesson of regulating one's passions through reason, thus providing her with one of the most valuable assets that she would need to survive in British society, which Emma Courtney was entirely lacking. Moreover, Mary distinguishes herself for her independence and self-reliance. Emma's immediate response to emotional distress is falling to melancholy, she does not attempt to fight back, on the contrary she resorts to being idle, thus wasting away her youth. On the contrary, Mary does not let her dire circumstances push her down without opposition. More importantly, she values above anything else her own self-respect, as an individual she follows truth as her guiding principle, therefore, even after losing her chastity due to Osborne's rape, she does not allow this awful violation to define her inherent value as a human being.

This attitude of the heroine of *The Victim of Prejudice* is evident in her numerous confrontations with Peter Osborne. Even when faced with the imbalance of power related to his standing as a member of the aristocracy, Mary never spares any sympathy or regard for Osborne, openly expressing her distaste for him and always bringing attention to his tyrannical and inhumane manners. For example, after he rescues her from the rising tide, Mary does not hesitate in stating how this gesture does not entitle Sir Osborne to insult her in any manner, and immediately demands to be released as she will not suffer to be constrained and threatened (Hays 1994, p. 50). Her straightforward and stern responses are effective, and Osborne is silenced and complies with her request. Mary's combative spirit surfaces once more when Osborne visits her after the death of Mr. Raymond. Once more, Mary rejects his courtship and condemns him for his offer of wealth and of access to his material possessions, as the way he treated her friends has further increased her disgust, and her current state of economic

destitution will never cause her to relinquish her principles to comply with his requests (pp. 106-07). Faced with her responses, Osborne never provides a rebuke to her arguments and has always to resort to a powerless retreat. As a matter of fact, Mary's rape only happened due to the unfortunate combination of inebriation on his part and of exhaustion on her part after being held prisoner for multiple days, since Mary never yields to his scandalous advances when fully in possession of her powers.

In fact, she goes as far as vehemently denying his wish to provide reparation through marriage for her violation. Osborne tries to present this outcome as the only possible option for her due to the loss of her virginity, which would preclude her access to any form of sustenance and labour, as her reputation as a fallen woman would precede and hinder her. Mary is not convinced by this reasoning and retorts that her honour is not tied merely to her virginity, and her spirit and person will not be debased and tarnished by his act. Rather than becoming his wife, she is content to be forever shunned by her fellow human beings, if what he claims proves to be true, and is willing to live a life of isolation and depravation, because she would never let herself be swayed by the riches of a man she deeply despises (Hays 1994, pp. 118-19). Poverty, dishonour, and death itself are calamities less severe than self-reproach for Mary, prosperity holds no value for her as she prioritises conscious rectitude and the dictates of her own reason over anything else (p. 129). The awareness that, by listening to her conscience and by following the guidance of reason, she will never debase herself pushes Mary forward even in the worst circumstances.

Furthermore, in a similar fashion to Emma Courtney, Mary displays a desire for independence which sets her apart from the female protagonists of the novels of Hays's peers. As soon as Mary recovers from the rape, she immediately sets on renting an apartment and engages on a job hunt to provide for herself. Firstly, she attempts to be admitted to the post that was suggested to her in Mr. Raymond's last letter, and after she is rejected due to her reputation,

she is not dispirited for long. She resumes her search and acquires a temporary occupation in a print shop as a copyist, a job in which she excels pushed by the sense of self-satisfaction connected to having finally acquired the means for an independent existence. Even after she abandons her only source of sustenance due to the sexual harassment from her employer, Mary is not swallowed by despair. She does not relinquish her fight, on the contrary, she states her right to live as a woman free of guilt for the loss of her chastity. Society is to be held responsible for her unfair treatment, and she resorts to live despite her prosecution pushed by a sense of pride which will not yield to her oppressors. Acquiring new strengths from her heroic resolve, she once more engages in the search of an occupation (Hays 1994, p. 141).

As can be seen, Mary requires no validation or approbation from external sources if she can count on herself. She embodies the Godwinian ideal of independence, and at the same time avoids its more self-serving and selfish aspects. The independent Godwinian hero is someone such as Mr. Francis, a man guided by pure reason, who has rid himself completely from the influence of passions and affections. He participates in society only on the ground of convenience and will sever the connection from his fellow men if the relationship does no longer prove beneficial to himself. This individual does not rely on others for his happiness yet does not provide any value to society as a whole. His existence is predicated solely on self-interest and self-sustenance as there is no room left for valuable social connections. On the other hand, Mary can detach herself and her self-worth from the opinions of society if they prove to be based on prejudices, yet affections are still an important part of her being. Mary's contribution to the social groups to which she belongs, such as the companions of her youth and the Neville family, are never motivated by selfishness or convenience, she is a positive influence in their lives and her happiness is directly dependent on her loved ones being happy themselves, while at the same time striving to be independent and to live on her own terms.

3.2.3. The Flaws of Philosophy

Given all these factors, the grim ending of Mary's tale would almost be nonsensical were it not wholly consistent with Hays's ideology. Despite Mary's faith in the power of her own reason and of her self-worth, these beliefs hold no value when confronted with the rules and attitudes of society. Her capacity to ignore the opinions and slander of other individuals serves no purpose if she is precluded the means of sustaining herself due to her tarnished reputation. The Godwinian hero cannot serve as a role model and as an inspiration for women, it is too abstract and it ignores the struggles and barriers that limit the lives of women in eighteenth-century British society, especially those deemed to have fallen to immorality and depravity. Barred from any form of social interaction, vexed from all sides by Sir Osborne's prosecution, and incapable of earning monetary income, Mary is jailed two times, and her last imprisonment permanently harms her health and severs all her future prospects. The magic circle of gendered prejudices is inescapable and there can be no hope for redemption once someone has fallen out of the good graces of the society. Mary herself provides from her prison cell a strict condemnation of rational philosophy in its detached and ideal form, which cannot possibly act as a source of salvation for women. While recounting all her misfortunes and her heroic struggles against them, she writes:

“Involved, as by a fatal mechanism, in the infamy of my wretched mother, thrown into similar circumstances, and looking to a catastrophe little less fearful, I have still the consolation of remembering that I suffered not despair to plunge my soul in crime, that I braved the shocks of fortune, eluded the snares of vice, and struggled in the trammels of prejudice with dauntless intrepidity. But *it avails me not!* I sink beneath a torrent, whose resistless waves overwhelm alike in a common ruin the guiltless and the guilty.”

(Hays 1994, p. 168)

As Mary experienced, independence, self-respect and the guidance of reason cannot in any way counter the harsh prejudices of society. She shares a destiny similar to that of Emma Courtney, doomed to pass on her story to the future generations in the hope that it will motivate them to change society, aware at the same time that her life and youth have been spent in vain.

Mary's failure in her attempts at achieving a form of independence for herself have a further intent other than criticising William Godwin and the philosophical approach adopted by the members of the Jacobin circle. As Eleanor Ty elucidates in her study of the novel, *The Victim of Prejudice* was written as a response to another work central to the British literary canon (1993, p. 65). The character of Mary is a clear parallel of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748). The similarities between the two works are numerous, therefore a connection between the heroines is undeniable. Both belong to a middle-class background and are at a certain point kidnapped and consequently raped by a member of the aristocracy who previously had been courting them. Yet, Hays's work is not merely an homage to Richardson's masterpiece, it constitutes an act of rewriting of this source material from a new feminist perspective. Whereas *Clarissa's* life ends shortly after her violation by Lovelace, and Richardson overlooks in his writing the realistic consequence of such an act, Hays does not shy away from depicting the cruel fate in store for a lady burdened with a tarnished reputation, whose consequences are shown by prolonging Mary's life for two years after her rape (p. 66). Her role as 'virtue in distress' shows how the lives of women are shaped and controlled by the prejudices of class and gender, which are at the core of the materialistic and corrupt social system of England. In the end, Mary has no other option available to her other than falling to despair, unable to be anything more than a victim of this system (p. 67).

Moreover, Hays had already manifested a critical attitude towards *Clarissa* in a piece written for the *Monthly Magazine* titled 'On Novel Writing'. In her article, she does not deny the artistic merits of Richardson's work, yet she questions its claims to veracity, stating that its

protagonist Clarissa can in no manner serve as a role model for imitation, since she is nothing more than the portrait of an ideal being in ideal circumstances, and as such completely detached from reality (Hays 2000, pp. 284-85). Novel writing at its core should aim for an accurate representation of truth by depicting real and probable situations, via a thorough observation of mankind, of its struggles, of its passions, and of its powers. Chimerical perfections and visionary excellences offer no valuable lesson or moral to the readers, there is more to be gained by representing the numerous consequences originating from an erroneous judgment, from a mistaken action or from indulging a strong passion (pp. 286-87). Mary then functions as a more grounded and realistic counterpart to the perfect Clarissa, and her story serves as a monitor and a catalyst for actual changes, whereas *Clarissa* cannot possibly hope to exert any lasting influence in society due to its detachment from the real and from truth.

To sum up, *The Victim of Prejudice* provides an effective denunciation of the hopeless fate in store for women led to off the beaten path, even if they are a paragon of virtue. Educated from childhood by an enlightened teacher in the guise of Mr. Raymond, Mary is raised in an ideal environment where she can express freely her childish dispositions. Taught in the same subjects as her male schoolmates, Mary becomes an inquisitive and rational young lady and does not suffer from an unbounded sensibility, unlike Hays's previous protagonist. Since she had the chance of cultivating and enjoying social connections, Mary does not display that blockage of passions which pushed Emma to become obsessively and irrationally attached to Augustus. Her relationship with her lover William is the most poignant example of this stark difference. The latter is rash and extremely susceptible to his own passions and pursues his immediate desires without a thought given on how the consequences of his actions might affect himself and those around him. On the contrary, Mary lets reason guide her in her decisions, therefore her sensibility is moderated and regulated, so that William's passionate arguments do not sway her, and she avoids falling victim to the tyranny of her own passions. Her strength of

will is equally apparent whenever she is driven into a corner by Peter Osborne's machinations. Mary never complies with his requests and threats, and through the force of her arguments and her rectitude she can counter and reject this tyrant. One would expect this virtuous individual to succeed and to prosper once she sets forth in the wider world of London, yet Mary's destiny is bleak and grim. Subjected to a terrible violation, all her prospects are compromised by her being labelled a fallen woman due to the loss of her chastity. An independent and indomitable spirit cannot serve as a source of sustenance on its own, and once a woman has fallen there can be no hope for her of recovering, since gendered prejudices are too deeply rooted in eighteenth-century British society. Denied any available occupation and barred from all kinds of social connections, Mary eventually succumbs to the pressures of society and wastes away, with her memoir serving as her last source of comfort to give her life any meaning in the hope that it will serve as incentive for future generations to learn about the plights of women and to enact social changes.

3.3. Chastity and Prejudice

The Victim of Prejudices successfully delineates how even an exemplary protagonist such as Mary, a middle-class woman who has received an enlightened education capable of turning her into a female philosopher, is nevertheless at risk of being crushed by the strict rules of society regarding gender and sexuality in the eighteenth century. Mary Hays already explored the implications of these gendered norms in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. As a matter of fact, during her epistolary confrontation with Mr. Francis, Emma blames her suffering and the powerlessness of her condition on one particular aspect of these norms. Refuting the role played by the political institutions and their permanence in affecting the development and the fulfilment of the individual, Emma traces the source of origin of the female condition in the conflation of virtue with sexual chastity. This theme is further explored in *The Victim of*

Prejudice, as the novel shows the most brutal consequences derived from this problematic association.

Virtue has been irreparably transformed from an active process to be exercised, meant to empower the individual by signifying moral and ethical excellence, to a passive attribute. The concept of chastity in the eighteenth century was entirely linked with the feminine world and was conceived as extremely precious, something to be safeguarded and dearly protected. For this reason, women had to resist all temptations and attempts at flattering coming from the gentlemen and, in the eventuality that they yielded and compromised themselves, the blame would fall entirely on the victim and not on the seducer. Furthermore, even if a woman suffered a sexual assault, then she would be the one at fault and would have to bear with the consequences of becoming a fallen woman, a social pariah with no hope of being readmitted in polite society.

Hays in her second novel explores the extent of the influence that this belief has on the lives of her middle-class women through three of her female characters. Firstly, she depicts the process of moral degeneration that is experienced by someone who has been cast off from society through the story of Mary's mother. Seduced and the abandoned, Mary sr. is subjected to the social isolation which comes with having fallen to immorality in the eyes of society. Pushed over the edge by the shunning and discrimination, she develops a new awareness of her condition, realising that the blame for her errors does not fall upon her, on the contrary society itself has shaped the mechanism involved in her ruin. In addition, Hays employs the misfortunes and the sufferings of her protagonist to provide another example of how society is responsible for the fall of women. Despite her virtuous disposition, Mary cannot escape the haunting influence of the loss of her virginity coupled with the reputation of her mother. The importance given to chastity in society prevents her from becoming an active and useful citizen and is responsible for the sexual discrimination to which she is subjected by men throughout

her life. Lastly, the dying letter of Mrs. Neville serves to showcase how even proper and chaste ladies are still oppressed by the gendered rules of society, causing them to completely deny their personality and existence in favour of a man.

3.3.1. The Tragedy of the Fallen Woman

The concept of chastity was deeply ingrained in the cultural and social spheres of eighteenth-century Britain. Regarded as the ornament of women, its value fully depended on its retention, and punishment and shame followed its loss. Despite its confining nature, chastity was perceived as a natural barrier meant to protect women not only from outside threats under the form of men, but also from themselves (Brooks 2008, p. 14). As beings without carnal desires, women were thought as more apt at resisting temptations, whereas men could err and were relieved of responsibility for their actions on the grounds that women had to be righteous and lead the way. Chastity then became intertwined with the feminine and was responsible for relegating women in a position of weakness. In *The Victim of Prejudice*, Hays aims to demonstrate how chastity is not a natural attribute, on the contrary it is a socially constructed Godwinian prejudice (pp. 15-16). Completely detached from virtue, it signals the market value of women, as such Hays seeks to reedify this concept and transform it in an empowering attribute by openly challenging its necessitarian conception.

Through Mary's story, Hays argues that chastity is not invaluable, on the contrary it is nothing more than a choice. It is especially telling that Mary throughout the novel is never personally affected by the loss of her virginity, she regards it as a non-issue which holds no power or sway over herself. She may be a fallen woman in the eyes of society, yet she perceives herself as raising (Brooks 2008, p. 21). Moreover, Mary's character is itself a demonstration that reputation and virtue are not mutually dependent on one another. Whereas society would require Mary to act in the fashion of a fallen woman, she does not yield to societal pressures and never diverts from the guidance of truth and reason. For example, Mary's rejection of Sir

Osborne's proposals of becoming his mistress and then wife is a clear case of her defying and devaluing the approval of society. In Mary's case, chastity is self-determined, a matter of choice depending only on her own volition (pp. 21-22). Nevertheless, Mary in no way escapes the punishments for fallen women, as the determinism inherent in the social understanding of chastity still causes women to fall regardless of their actual virtues. This aspect is mirrored in the structure of the novel adopted by Hays. Her mother's past, delineated in the letters she had given to Mr. Raymond, constantly intrudes in Mary's life marring her interactions in the social world and her attempts at gaining a form of independence for herself (pp. 24-25). Therefore, her fall is presented as inevitable, Mary is doomed to fail, and her innocence bears no weight when compared with the sins of her mother.

To better understand Hays's denunciation of chastity and of its degrading consequences for women, it will be necessary to focus on the tragedy of Mary's birth. Mary's mother is the most poignant example of how society and education shape and influence middle-class women's lives. Raised as the fairer and weaker sex, they are taught from an early age to cherish their chastity as their most precious adornment. Yet, it is exactly their innocence and vulnerability which make them desirable to the other sex, whose exponents freely follow their morally repulsive desires without facing any consequences for their transgressions. Mary sr.'s story is in this regard an exemplification of this social paradox. The only daughter of an affluent middle-class family, she received the standard education of those of her sex, from which she only learned self-indulgence, frivolousness, and vacuous ambitions. Her refusal of Mr. Raymond's courtship is a direct consequence of her upbringing, since due to her superficial and vain disposition she rejected a man who would have allowed her to expand her sphere of action and to follow virtue. On the contrary, an unnamed aristocrat seduced her with charming lies consisting of empty statements about honour and tenderness, which easily misled someone so unaccustomed to being guided by reason and by principles such as herself (Hays

1994, p. 63). She spends months indulging herself in profligate and voluptuous pleasures and extravagances in his company, only to be ruthlessly abandoned once she becomes pregnant with a child.

Destitute and desperate, Mary sr. resolves to beg for the help of her once dotting parents, only to discover that repenting and confessing her mistakes cannot in way save her from the fate of those women who have strayed from the socially approved path. Consequently, she is treated as unreclaimable and banished from her paternal home (Hays 1994, p. 64). While in this dire state, an acquaintance of her seducer accosts her and offers to provide her with shelter and protection under the guise of friendship and humanity. Exhausted by her helpless condition, unable to labour, denied sympathy and basic human relations, Mary sr. cannot stop herself from believing the lies of this man, as her habits of life and her education have not prepared her to endure these trials. Misled in a false sense of security, after the birth of her daughter she becomes increasingly more trusting of this man and makes him her counsellor (p. 65). This mistake proves to be her ruin, as he drops his mask and exploits her esteem to lead her in the same life of vices and libertine acquaintances from which she had escaped when she was abandoned by her seducer. Whereas she resisted the corrupting influence of her previous lover, this time Mary sr.'s morality and modesty are fully compromised, and she sinks in immorality and dissipation, therefore accepting and acting the part of the fallen woman which society has deemed fitting for her. Her career of crime and immodesty then culminates with being an accomplice in the murder of another human being.

Mary's mother apparently acts as the perfect demonstration of how the natural weakness inherent in female nature makes women more prone to error and corruption, thus proving the need for the protective barrier represented by chastity. In fact, Mr. Raymond endorses this view and presents her story to her daughter as a cautionary example, a gesture intended to dissuade her from wishing to marry William. Nevertheless, his well-meaning

attitude, meant to protect his protégé from the injustices of society, proves to be nothing more than detrimental. On the one hand, this newfound information of her origins brings Mary no benefit whatsoever, on the contrary she shares her tale with William, and this leads to her reputation being tarnished due to the knowledge about her mother being spread among polite society. In addition, Mary does not just learn from her mother's story the one lesson that he was hoping to inculcate in her. Despite her moral degradation, Mary sr. is not a typical fallen woman, as her ruinous fall awakens in her an outstanding awareness of the prejudices and issues related to the female condition in eighteenth-century British society. Suffering and deprivation grant her an enlightening insight on the social mechanism which shaped her life, leading her to the conclusion that her fall was not to be blamed entirely on herself, as it was the result of the chain of associations to which she had been subjected during her entire life. Her upbringing, education, social condition, and relations have played a role in her degradation, she was raised to be inherently weak and ignorant of the world, so she cannot be blamed for lacking the means to protect herself and to identify those men who approached her with further motifs.

More importantly, her fate serves as powerful argument about how women cannot recover from the loss of their reputation. As she states, her depravity caused her to perceive herself as a victim of society and, due the impregnable barriers which barred her from returning to virtue, she became a cynical embittered being bent upon repaying mankind with the same injuries and insults to which she was subjected (Hays 1994, p. 66). The despair of a man does not compare with that of a spurned woman, since in the former's case society does not preclude him from a chance at redemption, on the other hand the latter is barred from any form of pity and sympathy, doomed to succumb to the evil poison of prejudice which infects polite society (p. 67). The law itself is another aspect of the tyrannical control exerted over women, as it precludes them from attempting to return to society, not giving Mary's mother a

chance to repent for her actions and condemning her to being executed, while allowing those men responsible for her condition to continue in their wicked ways unrepented and unscathed (p. 68). Far from being an instrument to enforce justice and truth, in her case the law is completely at the service of the oppressors, ruthlessly punishing her for her crimes without taking in consideration the circumstances which led her to her downfall.

3.3.2. The Prosecution of the Daughter

Such a damning depiction of the law is not a singular instance, in fact the protagonist of the novel herself, similarly to her mother, has contend with the imbalance of power inherent in the justice system on multiple occasions. When confronting Sir Osborne after her rape, Mary threatens him by promising that she will seek protection and reparation for her violation from the tribunal of her country (Hays 1994, p. 117). Osborne responds with a grim summary of how her ruined reputation will from that point on impede her every attempt at improving her condition. The gossip spread by his servants about their relationship, coupled with the circumstances of her birth, will prevent her from receiving any sort of sympathy from the members of her sex, while she will attract the attentions of other men of his same ilk. Furthermore, no one will ever believe her, and she will never manage to present her story in a manner that it will not turn on herself. Her lack of financial means to sustain a lawsuit against him also puts her in a disadvantageous position, in fact his power and authority represent an overwhelming force which she cannot possibly hope to counter (pp. 118-19).

This last remark of Osborne proves to be true once Mary is arrested for a debt incurred to her landlady. The county sheriff, instead of taking her directly to debtor's prison, firstly detains her in his home. To her horror, this man reveals himself in the service of Osborne, as he claims that her imprisonment will entirely depend on her own volition, since there is a man willing to pay her bail for her and to spare her from rotting in a gaol if she does not reject his requests again (Hays 1994, p. 148). Osborne's subsequent entrance in the room shows how

the law is entirely under the command of those in possession of power and wealth, who can manipulate and exploit it to their advantage. This last point is reinforced by Osborne's comment to the county sheriff. He states that the law should follow its course in Mary's case for the present, so that the dire conditions of the prison might contribute to change her mind, thus stressing how the law for him is merely another tool in his attempt to seduce Mary. Unfortunate individuals in a condition such as that of Mary, an orphaned and destitute young lady, do not receive any protection or justice by relying on the help of the officers of the law. The last injustice suffered by Mary leads to her undoing, since she is imprisoned a second time for having forgotten to repay a debt to a neighbour of the village where she resided with James. Mary spends two years locked in a jail cell completely forgotten by the world, where the unsanitary and bleak conditions of living cause her to develop a rheumatic condition and spoil the vitality of her youth. What saves her from dying in a prison, just as her mother did, is the fortunate return of Mr. and Mrs. Neville, who pay her bail and grant her once again freedom. Nevertheless, the toll of this last imprisonment is too heavy to bear for Mary and she is doomed to live only for brief period of time, so that in the end she become a victim of the injustice propagated in eighteenth-century England by its system of laws and of criminal justice just as her mother.

The daughter then suffers the same destiny as her mother, despite her good intentions and righteous conduct she cannot in any way distance herself from the association with her infamous parent. As a matter of fact, the mother's story represents for the heroine of the novel a haunting presence which constantly manifests itself during the more traumatic experiences of her life. After discovering the circumstances of her birth, Mary rushes out of Mr. Neville's house into the woods in a distressed state of mind. Caught by a sudden storm, she has a vision which shakes her to her core, as she imagines her wretched mother on the scaffold, covered in her own blood, dying shunned and unloved (Hays 1994, p. 72). These visions manifest once

again when William finds her after her release from Sir Osborne's mansion. During the weeks that she spends recovering from the shock to her nerves, she is plagued by recurring nightmares about her mother. First, she beholds her in the arms of her lover abandoned in profligate pleasures, a scene then followed by a recreation of the night when she became accomplice in the murder of a man, and lastly Mary reimagines again her mother's execution in grim details, as she even believes to have heard her mother begging her with her dying last breath not to follow her example (p. 123).

According to Eva König, these recurring visions and Mary's relationship with her mother's past hold a particular significance in the narrative of *The Victim of Prejudice*. Advancing a psychoanalytical Lacanian interpretation of them, she argues that the visions represent an identification of Mary with her mother. This overlap has caused her to fall outside of the boundaries of the Symbolic order, a condition that can in no way be mended. Despite Mary's efforts to internalise and behave throughout the novel according to the rules of the Law-of-the-Father exemplified by Mr. Raymond, she is nevertheless permanently excluded from the Symbolic (2014, p. 147). König interprets Mary's first vision as the manifestation of her desire to escape from the maternal in favour of a return to the Symbolic, therefore her insistent and detailed description of the last moments of her mother's life can be interpreted as a death wish on Mary's part for her mother. Despite her attempts to differentiate herself from her mother, Mary cannot escape her sins, as her act of murdering a man in the tavern represent a symbolic parricide whose repercussions befall upon Mary due to their familial relation (pp. 148-49).

Moreover, Mary has also to contend with the double-faced nature of the patriarchal social system of eighteenth-century England. The system is personified in the novel by two apparently opposing characters, Mr. Raymond and Sir Osborne, who come to represent the two halves of the Law-of-the-Father responsible for leading Mary to her doom. On the one hand, Osmond is the omni-present and omni-potent villain of the story, whose aim is to thwart every

attempt of Mary at achieving self-realisation and independence (König 2014, p. 150) Mr. Raymond instead plays the role of the upholder of the status quo. His choice of revealing Mary's past is not the act of misguided benevolence that it initially appears to be, on the contrary by sharing her story he merely intends to reinforce the prejudices of the fallen woman, as a result trapping Mary in the sexed criminal identity of her mother, whereas he could have simply destroyed her letters and adopted Mary as his own daughter if he had really intended to grant her a better future (p. 151). The lives of the mother and the daughter then share some striking parallels. Both have had to suffer the label of fallen women and have had to contend with the prejudice of society and of the system of justice against them. Mary's story is in multiple ways a circular repetition of her mother's tragedy, sharing and further expanding on the themes of social criticism which in her mother's letter are presented briefly.

One last aspect of her mother's experience which is better developed in Mary's narrative is the investigation of the consequences on the interaction between the sexes fostered by the social conception of chastity. As previously argued, Hays's criticism of chastity also revolves around the fact that it causes an imbalance of power between men and women, entrapping the latter in a sheltering and limiting barrier while empowering the former in following their worst instincts without having to fear any consequences for their actions. Mary sr.'s seduction is but an example of this phenomenon, as she is educated from her childhood to assume the role of the victim only to be consequently punished for committing a transgression from which she had no way of protecting herself from. On the other hand, Mary is never convinced by the wiles of men to sway from the path of reason and truth, yet her life is plagued nevertheless by the prejudiced conception of the nature of women in eighteenth-century society. Her relationships with men during her life are never equal, they are always based on a perceived position of intellectual inferiority on her side.

The most poignant example of this phenomenon is exemplified by the actions and statements of her prosecutor Sir Osborne. Being a personification of the aristocratical and patriarchal power, Osborne's conception of women cannot but appear as repellent to the contemporary reader. Despite his alleged attraction to Mary, in their numerous exchanges he is unable to regard her as nothing more than a sexual object which must be conquered with strength, never granting her any sort of dignity or respect as a person. From the very beginning, as he is holding her in his grasp after her theft of the grapes, he addresses first as a "true daughter of Eve!" and calls her "a little beauty! a Hebe! a wood-nymph!" while demanding a kiss in exchange for his grapes (Hays 1994, p. 14). His interest in Mary is merely founded on his lusting after her charms and beauty, moreover he does not attempt in any way to have a dialogue with her as a human being. Instead, he settles on demanding an immediate form of sexual gratification from her in a manner reminiscent of an interaction with a prostitute. It is not surprising that Osborne, during the incident of the hunt of the hare, forces a kiss from Mary and then eventually becomes her rapist, as he manifests in his behaviour a superficial and misogynistic view of women. To him, they are nothing more than the weak and fair sex, to be conquered by appealing to their vanity and pride. He cannot conceive Mary's distaste for him as a possible consequence of his prosecutions, on the contrary he merely sees it as a manifestation of female pride and stubbornness which lacks any rational motivation (p. 113). Due to his class and to his privileged background, Osborne does not in any manner see Mary as a being endowed with reason and capable of making her own choices, she is another prideful woman who must be convinced through repeated attempts, as she cannot possibly know what is better for herself due to the ignorance and voluptuousness typical of her sex.

In *The Victim of Prejudice* Osborne plays the part of the gothic villain, so it is not unexpected that he would hold these opinions regarding women. Nevertheless, he is not the only male character to consider Mary as inherently irrational and illogical because of her sex.

In fact, her former lover William displays the same attitude in his courtship whenever Mary attempts to make him reflect on his intentions and to quell his passionate disposition. After her suggestion that their union might be impossible due to their class divide and his father's esteem for honour, William's first assumption is to conclude that Mary is being a victim of tyrannical control from her adoptive father, disregarding the possibility that she could have decided to renounce her chance at being happy of her own volition (Hays 1994, p. 52). Again, when Mary reminds him a second time that their different prospects, combined with her mother's past, are unsurpassable obstacles to their marriage, William pays no attention to her validity of her arguments, as he is convinced that on the ground of being a man, he clearly has a better understanding of these matters than her. He does not engage in a debate with her, he first accuses her of despising and distrusting him, then claims that her simple mind has been misled by sophistries and by the subtleties of Raymond, and lastly arrogantly blames her fickle and inconstant nature as a woman for her change of heart, stating with spite that she had never loved him to begin with (pp. 76-79). These statements cast a grim shadow of doubt on their relationship, which appears as one-sided, with Mary respecting and defending her lover, whereas William always disregards her intentions and gives no value to her judgement.

William has bought into the prejudiced conception of women characterising eighteenth-century society; therefore, he does not consider that her intellectual capabilities can be equal or even superior to his, their relationship does not correspond to the ideal marriage described by Mary Hays in her tale of Hortensius and Hortensia. After William leaves the tutorage of Mr. Raymond to embark on his continental tour, his actions serve as a validation of this last point. Freed from the correcting influence of his mentor, he sinks in a life of profligacy and expenses, forgetting completely his promise to Mary of being faithful to each other, and must incur in a marriage with another woman upon his return to England to safeguard the honour of his family. Having turned into the man of the world that Mary so much feared he would become away

from her, he has no qualms in advancing the proposal of being his mistress once he discovers that she has lost her chastity. Thus, William proves how much he truly values Mary as an individual by assuming that, since she has become a fallen woman, then her morality must have been compromised along with her reputation. His last interaction with her is reminiscent Sir Osborne's threats, as he responds to her rejection by reminding her of the way she will be treated by society due to her reputation and presenting himself as her only possible option to be safe (Hays 1994, pp. 127-28). The former lover then drops his mask and reveals himself for what he has always been, another predator acting in a society where women cannot possibly know any other role than that of the victim and men either that of the guardian or of the rake.

3.3.3. Deconstructing Middle-Class Propriety

Sir Peter Osborne and William Pelham are examples how sexual prejudices are responsible for the hypersexual and domineering attitude of men in eighteenth-century England, conceiving women as being incapable of reason and therefore naturally inferior, to be relegated to either the role of caretakers of the family or of prostitutes if they lose their chastity. Nevertheless, one could argue that Hays's approach to these themes is inherently biased, as she employs in her criticism of the social system an extreme example, consisting of two women who, after having been sexually compromised, are subjected to an almost melodramatic level of persecution. Therefore, this situation holds no bearing or relevance for the personal experiences of the average proper and chaste middle-class lady. In response, Hays provides the readers with the story of Mrs. Neville, meant to demonstrate how gendered prejudices can affect even those ladies whose reputation has always been immaculate and who have never strayed from the path of chastity.

From its first depiction, the Neville household appears idyllic and harmonious, and Mrs. Neville is introduced while reading a book under the cover of a vineyard with her two children blissfully playing at her feet (Hays 1994, p. 42). This impression is then confirmed and

expanded when Mary's gaze focuses on the masters of the house. Their union parallels the ideal marriage of Hortensius and Hortensia. Mr. Neville is a man of a stern character, with a healthy frame and a commanding disposition, moderated by a natural benevolence and by a vivid intelligence fruit of a familiarity with both men and books, which allows him to discuss serious topics with competence and candour. Mrs. Neville is instead endowed with a delicate frame and a sensible disposition and can capture the attention of her listeners due to her tender and empathetic tone of voice. With an active and knowledgeable mind, she possesses a serious character which sometimes sinks to melancholy due to her strong sensibility, yet she can correct these excesses in social situations. Overall, Mary can tell from the first glance that the main force guiding and fuelling her is her unbounded and unconditional love for her husband (pp. 43-44). This couple also exceeds in the management of their family and in the upbringing of their children. Rejecting idleness and unproductivity, they occupy their mornings by attending to the daily business of their farm, while the afternoons are dedicated to the education of their children, with their activities revolving around receiving instructions on music and literature. The bond which unites this family is wholly different from the relationships experienced by Mary in her life, Mr. Neville confides in and values without reserve the judgement of his wife, a confidence which is returned by Mrs. Neville's with an exquisite and tender devotion, while their children are worthy of the hopes and of the care their parents reserve for them (pp. 46-47).

This picture of an ideal union, where both partners possess equal intellectual capabilities and are moderate in their passions and affections, is ruthlessly deconstructed by Hays at the end of *The Victim of Prejudice*. When Mr. Neville passes away from a sudden illness, his wife's response to this loss comes as shocking to the readers. Contrary to the previous description of her, Mrs. Neville completely loses control of herself, and she undergoes an emotional breakdown characterised by piercing shrieks, pitiful appellations, anguish, and

despair. Unable to process the death of her husband, she becomes insane and spends the few remaining days of her life in a state of numb stupor, surviving her husband just for a short period of time. It appears that Mary's first impression was blatantly mistaken, since her passions are not moderate and regulated, following then the approach that Hays adopted for representing passions in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. When considering the passions of others from a subjective point of view, one cannot but perceive them as moderate, since it is not possible for us to experience them with the same intensity as we would with ours, yet their strength is fully felt by the other person who is experiencing them.

In fact, Mrs. Neville dying words during her last moment of sanity confirm that Mary had misunderstood her relationship to her husband. Rather than being a relationship based on an equal level of affection, Mrs. Neville was entirely subservient to Mr. Neville, as her love was so extreme as to reach almost a level of idolatry. This unhealthy attachment absorbed her entirely, to the point that her sensibility turned every small accident or inadvertent gesture on his part into a wound to her soul, compromising her very own personal happiness (Hays 1994, p. 172). Unable to confess this painful condition to her husband for fear of causing him distress, Mrs. Neville renounced her life and her individuality to model her character, temper, and actions after his own to grant him peace and happiness. In Mrs. Neville's life, the reader witnesses the conclusion of the issue of regulating emotion introduced through the character of Emma (p. 173). Mrs. Neville's affections have found a worthy man to attach themselves to, becoming the energy which fuels all her talents, actions, and feelings, similarly to what Emma had thought she could gain if she was together with Augustus. However, this attachment is too morbid and too all encompassing, leading to her being the slave of her passions and undergoing the death of her ego for her husband's sake. Despite never steering from the pact of propriety and rectitude, Mrs. Neville is another tragic victim of eighteenth-century gendered prejudices

which have denied her any sort of personal development and have relegated her to the inescapable role of a wife, doomed to follow her husband to the grave.

3.4. Summary

The Victim of Prejudice is a thorough exploration of the social ills of eighteenth-century England. Through the tragedies of its three main female characters, Hays denounces how the conflation of chastity with virtue does not function as the protective barrier which it was believed to be. On the contrary, the idea that chastity is an ornament meant to be safeguarded limits women in their endeavours and stunts their growth as individuals. Raised to be the weaker and inferior sex, according to the widespread belief that women lacked entirely the capacity to reason and to control their passions, ladies are expected to protect their reputation by rejecting the advances of men. Depending on their success at keeping their chastity, women are then supposed to follow two paths in their adult life, that of the immoral unsexed monster or of the angel of the house, roles which are filled respectively by Mary's mother and Mrs. Neville. These paths prove to be dead ends, as both women are led to their destruction. Mary sr. succumbs to the biased system of social and judicial laws which dominated Britain at the time, preventing those women fallen to infamy to be readmitted within the boundaries of polite society. On the other hand, Mrs. Neville is a bleak demonstration of how yielding to the social norms the time forced married women to completely erase their personality and existence in favour of their husbands. Lastly, Mary's fate is the most pessimistic outcome of the three. Her story revolves around a heroic failed attempt at breaking away from the prejudices of her gender. Despite her superior education, philosophical disposition, and independent character, Mary cannot succeed and survive in a society where all the cards are stacked against her. Unable to escape from the ghost of her infamous mother, swarmed on all sides by predatory men and corrupt officers, not allowed to labour, Mary succumbs to the unbearable pressures of society and wastes away. Similarly to *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, *The Victim of Prejudice*

ends with an appellation for the enactment of social changes in the future, yet it is a bleaker conclusion. In her first novel, Hays expressed a belief that these changes could be achieved by the next generation, whereas in *The Victim of Prejudice* she seems to have realised that she had been far too optimistic, and that it might be better to consign her hopes to a distant future.

Conclusion

This thesis has provided an in-depth analysis of Mary Hays's life and literary production to prove how her efforts to improve the condition of women within society have made a significant impact in the history of the British literary canon. As a woman and as an author in a male dominated world, Hays serves as a shining example of how a lady through perseverance and dedication can fulfil her aspirations and carve a place for herself in history with all the odds stacked against her. She did not give up in the face of adversity and managed to stay true to her beliefs, even when her character and actions were in direct contrast with the societal expectations of how women should behave and express themselves. Never abandoning her progressive stance, she showed no hesitation in promoting her radical ideas regarding female education, sexual oppression, and social equality. Moreover, she also fought and successfully earned a position among the major philosophers of the 1790s, an outstanding feat considering that she was self-taught unlike her male peers, who instead could access from an early age the entirety of the knowledge available to the British educational system. Hays was not afraid to clash with some of the most influential intellectual figures of her age, has as been demonstrated by her responses to Gilbert Wakefield and to William Godwin, if that meant staying true to herself and to everything she stood for. Despite the social isolation and discrimination she had to suffer, which eventually led to her retreat to private life at the closure of the eighteenth century, Hays is far from being someone who surrendered and let society crush her. On the contrary, surrounded by her friends and loved ones, she continued her literary production and kept advancing her battles for improvements, fully aware that even if the momentum sparked by the French revolution in British society had passed, this did not mean that meaningful changes could not be achieved by the next generations over time.

Hays's life was rife with struggles. She had to endure the loss of her father at an early age and had to contend with the limitations to personal and intellectual development targeting

women in the eighteenth century. During her formative years, her education was lacking and subpar, therefore Hays had to compensate for it through self-study and by seeking mentorship from more erudite men. Her first mentor was her lover John Eccles, with whom she experienced for the first time the joys of a relationship characterised by mutual respect and affection. After his death barred her from pursuing the traditional path of marriage, Hays was introduced to enlightenment values by her tutor George Robinson, and thanks to him she became acquainted with some of the most influential men of the British Dissenting community. Dissent taught her not to be ashamed of her status as an outsider, on the contrary her uniqueness and suffering are the marks of true genius; differences are natural, and for this reason they should be cherished. Moreover, she also learned that the alleged intellectual inferiority of women is not an innate trait, as it is the result of the external influences to which they are subjected during their development. Women are not weaker and dumber than men by nature, on the contrary they are taught by society to acquire and value these characteristics, as such these artificial differences between the sexes then can be tackled and solved through a correcting action. Her studies under John Priestley and her reading of David Hartley's *Observations on Man* (1791) further reinforced this belief by introducing her to the concept of materialism, which is at the centre of her unique brand of feminism.

The Jacobin community also played a major role in Hays's life. The Jacobins' efforts to radically challenge the founding principles of society deeply resonated with her. The Jacobins sought to empower their readers through their novels and treatises, in order to turn them into active agents of social change who would fight to gain the basic rights to property and to citizenship which had been denied to them until that point by the institutions of society. Their works were a site for political action, with the purpose of promoting the importance of rational and critical inquiry, as not to take the reality of everyday life for granted and to expose the tyrannical influence subtly exercised by society over individuals, starting from the domestic

sphere. Moreover, through the Jacobin community, Hays met William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, who as intimate friends and mentors provided an invaluable contribution to her works and beliefs. Unlike the Unitarian men to which Hays was accustomed, Godwin never treated her with excessive care and softness, as he required a rational and evidence-based debated from her even during their everyday interactions. Acting both as a teacher and as a pillar of support in time of crisis, Godwin is the reason behind the publication of both *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and *The Victim of Prejudice*, as he is the one who suggested novel writing to cope with her melancholy and acted as an editor by proofreading her novels and providing suggestions to improve them.

Likewise, Wollstonecraft helped Hays to improve herself as a critic and novelist and guided her in overcoming some of the shortcomings in her writing which she had acquired through her previous publications. Hays's style was plagued by the apologetic and humble tone required from women writers at the time. Wollstonecraft taught her how to express herself to a public of learned men in order to be respected and stressed the importance of writing clearly and concisely so that her message would get across to anyone. Moreover, she also advanced Hays's career by getting her acquainted with the editors who will publish her novels and treatises. Due to her tight relationship with Godwin and Wollstonecraft, Hays was regarded by her contemporaries as mere disciple of her two mentors, yet as both *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and *The Victim of Prejudice* clearly demonstrate, she differentiates herself from them as she walks her own unique path as a novelist and as a philosopher.

Published in 1796 and centred around the tragic life and unreciprocated love of its protagonist, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* explores the social issues that are a priority for Hays. By devoting its initial chapters to illustrate the formation of Emma, the novel explores the problems related with female education in the eighteenth century. Middle-class women are taught only the basic knowledge necessary to make them literate on the assumption that they

will be provided for by their families and by their husbands. Beauty and submission are all that is required from a lady, while attributes such as independence and an inquisitive mind are not only seen as superfluous, but are also regarded as negative and shunned upon. Due to this subpar education, women's possibilities are limited, their lives are entirely circumscribed within the confines of their households, and they are barred from having access to public life and to personal fulfilment outside of their maternal roles. Emma's condition of extreme sensibility is a consequence of this entrapping magic circle of gendered prejudices. Deprived of meaningful social connections and of intellectual stimulations, she loses control over her passions, because she cannot invest her energies and powers on a worthy person or on a valid source of stimulation. Passions are not harmful on their own according to Hays, on the contrary they are the motor behind our actions and our reasoning, and as such they must be valued and not suppressed. Nevertheless, they should still be reined and controlled through the corrective force of reason, since unrestrained passions can overwhelm an individual and push them to extreme actions, as demonstrated by Emma's obsessive courtship of Augustus and by Mr. Montague's descent into insanity.

This novel is not solely a scathing piece of social commentary, but also an amalgamation and a criticism of the philosophical influences of Hays's life. Firstly, it draws heavily on William Godwin's philosophy, in particular on his conception of necessity. Men are never truly in free, as our character is the result of the external impressions that are exerted upon us throughout our lives, and which shape us. Godwin believed that the dire state of British society was due to the permanence of the political institutions responsible for controlling men, and that the only way to bring us closer to truth and happiness was to improve our minds through education, thus leading to an eradication of passions and to reason becoming our only source of guidance. The Godwinian man therefore only relies on himself and on his reason, and does not actively participate in society, on the contrary he exploits it to his advantage and

can sever any link and connection to his fellow men as soon as their relationship no longer proves profitable to him. Hays disagrees heavily with Godwin's stance, as she imputes the cause of women's discrimination on the conflation of chastity and virtue at the centre of the value system of eighteenth-century British society. This overlap caused an imbalance of power between the sexes, relegating women in a position of inferiority and weakness, whereas men instead have been empowered and legitimised in following their worst instincts. Moreover, passions are at the core of Hays's philosophy, they are the most crucial part of our being, acting as the source of personal improvement, of the development of genius, and of reason. The proper female philosopher perfectly balances the rational and sensible elements and has overcome the extreme individualism of Godwin's liberalism. She is not withdrawn from society and from human affections, her passionate nature makes her sensible and empathetic toward others, thus making her an invaluable member of her community and of society. With her caring nature, Emma displays many of the characteristics of this new type of philosopher, yet she is unable to control her passions, and this flaw of her character condemns her to failure at the end of the novel.

Unlike Emma Courteney, the protagonist of *The Victim of Prejudice* represents the female philosopher as we have seen above. Subjected to an enlightened education under the guidance of Mr. Raymond, Mary displays from her childhood a capacity to utilise both her sensibility and her reason. Caring and affectionate to the point of willingly endangering herself to protect her loved ones, Mary does not let passions cloud her judgment, and whenever she must make a difficult choice, she always lets reason guide her. This trait is especially relevant if compared to her lover William, who is rash and selfish, as he constantly prioritises the immediate gratification of his desires over Mary's feelings and never stops to consider the consequences of his actions. On the other hand, Mary reflects before she acts, and on multiple occasions sacrifices her own happiness to protect William's future. Moreover, she displays an

amazingly independent nature, as she is not concerned about the opinions of other people, she relies solely on her self-respect and is not afraid to follow her own conscience under any circumstances, in accordance with the Godwinian ideal of man. Nevertheless, Mary is neither anti-social nor individualist, she cherishes affections and social connections, as proven by her tight relationship with the Neville family. Mary acts as a positive influence in their lives and helps them when they are about to lose their rectory, a favour which is repaid when Mr. and Mrs. Neville free her from prison at the end of the novel. Mary Raymond then lacks the flaws of character that plagued Emma Courtney, yet her life is more tragic than the latter's. Mary's future is spoiled by her violation at the hand of Sir Osborne and by the stigma of being the child of a sexually compromised woman, and despite all her efforts she cannot recover from these blows. Philosophy is powerless when faced with the deeply rooted gendered prejudices of eighteenth-century British society, and even someone as balanced as Mary succumbs to the bleak fate of fallen women such as her mother.

Hays's second novel explores to a deeper level the consequences of the conflation of chastity and virtue than her first novel. Emma denounces the effect that this unbearable weight has on the lives of women, but she never experiences it herself. In *The Victim of Prejudice*, the readers instead witness it through the vicissitudes of its three main female characters. Mary's mother serves as a clear denunciation of the preconditions that cause women to fall to infamy regardless of their character. Educated from a young age to be weak, superficial, and ignorant of the ways of the world, she cannot stop herself from being seduced and then abandoned by a debauched aristocrat. Even though her upbringing, education, and social condition are responsible for her degradation, she pays dearly for her mistakes, since once a woman has fallen there are no chances of recovering from this condition. Awakened by her suffering to the injustice inherent in the female condition, she decides to repay society with the same treatment she had been subjected to and sinks completely in immorality, to the point of going as far as

murdering another man. On the other hand, Mary's story displays how the relationship between the sexes is tarnished by gendered prejudices. Her interactions with men follow two opposite binaries, that of the predator or that of the guardian, which are represented respectively by the characters of Sir Osborne and of Mr. Raymond. Mary is never considered equal by men; she is always seen as weak and as prone to irrationality due to her sex, therefore she must be protected or sexually exploited. Moreover, romantic love itself is not spared from this imbalance of power, as William shifts from one role to the other in the course of the novel. Lastly, through Mrs. Neville, Hays shows to the readers how gendered prejudices do not spare even proper middle-class ladies. Her dying letter serves a grim deconstruction of the harmonious marriage Hays had imagined in her youth. Behind the façade of the perfect wife and mother, there is a complete vacuousness in Mrs. Neville's being, as she has nullified her character and identity for the sake of her husband. After his death, she succumbs to insanity and soon follows him to his grave, as she comes to the regretful conclusion that her life is irretrievably tied to his own and that she is left with nothing in the end.

In conclusion, in an age when rights such as proper education, owning private property, and fair treatment in the court of justice were not granted equally to all men, much less to women, Mary Hays's production stands out for its uniqueness. Her radical feminist stance is not to be taken for granted, as she braved the risks of censure and of social erasure to openly state her beliefs in social justice and in the equality between the sex. Women were not free to express themselves even in the literary world, as their works had to adhere to strict conventions to be published, and their reception was strictly tied to their reputations and public images, to the point that a negative review could ruin a lady's career and public life. Hays's choice to disregard conventional feminine rules of conduct in her life and in her writing testifies to her worth as a human being and as an author, who struggled with all her might to emancipate herself and other women from the limiting confines of their assigned gendered roles to enjoy

the same rights granted to men. Her novels and treatises teach us that our contemporary freedom to pursue autonomy, self-realisation, and love in the Western world is the result of a long and arduous process, carried out by extraordinary individuals who bravely risked everything to ensure that the following generations could have access to a better and more just world than the one they had to contend with during their lives.

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