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The Wor(l)d of the Law: Legal Texts and World Creation

Brigitta Gyimesi
gyimesi.brigitta@btk.elte.hu

Given that they are fundamentally linguistic phenomena, legal texts allow for hermeneutical and ontological uncertainty in their interpretation. Utilising the framework of speech act theory, Derrida's "Declarations of Independence" provides a good example of how linguistic performativity works on the legal-political level. A set of legal texts create a legal discourse which we deem binding, but which can equally be regarded as an "autonomous" or "possible world." In possible worlds theory, the discourse and worldview created by legal texts is only one of the many ways to interpret and make sense of reality.

Keywords: speech act theory, law, possible worlds theory, performativity, revolution.

This essay ventures to examine how the performative power of language is used to create and maintain the seamless functioning of our social reality. These language uses might be termed "concord-fictions" or "discourses of illusion," that is, socially-verbally constructed worldviews that do not reflect reality as such, yet are indispensable for providing meaning to everyday life. For my analysis, I will rely on speech act theory and possible worlds theory, both of which showcase the world-creating and world-shaping potential of language.

My particular example will be the law and the declaration of a nation's independence, which will be studied in more detail with a view to understanding how such a deep change in our social-collective reality can be created only with the help of language. Jacques Derrida's "Declarations of Independence" provides a good example of how linguistic performativity and constructivity, these two pillars of speech act theory, work on the legal-political level. The crux of Derrida's presentation is that political legitimisation (in this case, the establishment of the United States of America) can be traced back to uneasy linguistic grounds or, more radically, fictions. A set of legal texts thus create a legal discourse which we deem binding, but which can equally be regarded as a kind of world view, an "autonomous world."

This is where possible worlds theory, which advocates the plurality of worlds or even realities, enters the picture. In this theory, the discourse and worldview created by legal texts (among others) is only one of the many ways to interpret and make

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sense of reality, following its own rules on how to differentiate between certain values. Thus, although an integral part of our experiences, legal discourse alone is not sufficient to comprehend and regulate reality. In short, speech act theory and possible worlds theory can be helpful in calling into question the undisputed objectivity and legitimacy of not only legal texts but any discourse.

Although human and social sciences in the 20th century were largely concerned with linguistics, language is still often regarded as carrying merely instrumental value instead of the agency it actually represents. Language, in its guise as performative, plays an active role in shaping, maintaining and creating our social-collective reality: as one example, Sandy Petrey notes that "ideology's capacity to constitute its own validation is among the most striking examples of how a collectivity does things with words" (1990, 35). Most institutions owe their existence to performative acts, and these institutions in turn influence the community's everyday experiences; in short, "performative language not only derives from but also establishes communal reality and institutional solidity" (Petrey 1990, 21).

Several taxonomies of performatives have been compiled over the decades, the most often quoted being John Searle's. One category in his system comprises so-called "institutional facts," i.e. those instances of performative speech acts that initiate some kind of change in the world, such as a marriage certificate, a death sentence or the election of a new president. A group of related performatives—like those pertaining to chemistry, to business or to literary studies—establishes a discourse which promotes a specific way of perceiving, categorising, prioritising and ultimately shaping and creating reality. These discourses, in turn, evolve into institutions: "a discipline delimits a field of objects, defines legitimate perspectives, and fixes norms for the production of conceptual elements […eventually progressing] from dawning individualization and autonomy to mature institutionalization" (Leitch 1982, 146).

All of the changes resulting from performative language use derive their binding force from prevalent legal institutions and customs. But there is a contradiction: on the one hand, for institutional performatives to function as intended, there has to be a specialised community that authorises and confirms the validity of the performatives used (Petrey 1990, 7). On the other hand, it should also be noted that all these discursive communities have essentially created themselves and retrospectively sanctioned their own existence in order that all the subsequent performatives they use would be perceived by the general public as legitimate (Miller 2002, 127). Hillis Miller plainly calls the foundation of such autonomous communities "illusion," "fable" and "fiction," echoing Derrida's juxtaposition of man-made rules with fictional works: Derrida claims to "consider laws, constitutions, the declaration of the rights of man, grammar, or the penal code the same as novels. I only want to recall that they are not 'natural realities' and that they depend upon

the same structural power that allows novelesque fictions or mendacious inventions and the like to take place" (1988, 134).

Performatives, discourses and institutions create what might be termed *possible worlds*. Possible worlds theory is a relatively new, transdisciplinary field of study: originally developed for logical semantics as "interpretive models providing the domain of reference necessary for the semantic interpretation of counterfactual statements, modal formulas, intensional contexts, and so on," possible worlds theory has been adopted and adapted by countless other disciplines, such as philosophy ("coherent cosmologies derived from some axioms or presuppositions"), natural sciences ("alternative designs of the universe constructed by varying the basic physical constants") and fiction studies ("artifacts produced by aesthetic activities"), among others (Doležel 2000, 14–15). Possible worlds posit worldviews or coherent explanatory systems of given aspects of reality; whatever their field of application, the general role of possible worlds is to find suitable representative models for the workings of reality. 'Models' is a key word, as it should not be forgotten that possible worlds do not equal empirical reality: regardless of how satisfactory their explanatory powers may be, they remain imaginary constructions of the human mind, based on a certain perception of reality.

Each institution represents and promotes a specific worldview, providing an explanatory system of a specific slice of empirical reality. But participants or stakeholders later strive to deny the "fictionality" of their discourse, and the nonspecialised public eventually takes the existence of the discourse of history or law for granted, believing them to be something natural and commonsensical, a legitimate and objective way of describing the workings of reality. In this sense, institutions and the specialised professionals affiliated with them may be regarded as advocates for a given possible world: they are "instances of the way in which humankind organizes and institutionalizes the world; they constitute pre-defined patterns of conduct which are perceived as possessing a reality of their own; a reality that confronts the individual as an external and intrinsically coercive fact" (Ángeles Orts and Breeze 2017, 9–10). Through language as performative, these institutions also constantly shape and create the discourses responsible for the maintenance of these worldviews. Language turns out to be a double-edged sword: it both creates institutions and is used by these institutions (Ángeles Orts and Breeze 2017, 10–11). Language is also the means by which institutions lend their discourses the illusion of factuality and objectivity:

> the acquisition or exhibition of supremacy by specialized communities is achieved through the technicality, precision and complexity of its written texts. […] Such relationship is wielded ideologically by the expert community as a dominant bloc which treats social hierarchies as natural and reifies human phenomena − professional discourses, professional

> genres and their constructs – as non-human, non-humanizable inert facticities, an extreme step in the process of objectivation, whereby the constructs deployed by the issuers of the specialized discourse become incomprehensible and detached from laypeople. (Ángeles Orts and Breeze 2017, 12–13)

This process of self-legitimisation is what my particular focus, the discourse of law, has undergone as well. Only members of the legal community can successfully use legal performatives, whose authority and legitimacy the affected multitudes tend not to question. Borrowing from Lubomír Doležel's work *Heterocosmica*, we might say that one of the reasons why the public regards the discourse of law as reality and not just a point of view on reality is that legal texts disguise themselves as "world-imaging" texts instead of the "world-constructing" texts they actually are. World-imaging texts are "representations of the actual world," i.e. they make statements of a reality that "exists prior to, and independently of, textual activity." World-constructing texts, on the other hand, create their respective worlds: "it is textual activity that calls worlds into existence and determines their structures" (Doležel 2000, 24). More often than not, legal texts belong to the world-constructing category, since their subjects are not natural entities *per se* that can be discovered and described, yet the institution of law has established its legitimacy and overriding authority so successfully that legal texts are automatically assumed to merely record what there is. However, the entire legal discourse, its originary creation included, depends on performatives: speech act theory is the prerequisite and foundation without which law could not operate as intended.

A major instrument in persuading the public of the legitimacy of legal discourse thus lies in the texts it produces. They almost invariably employ highly specialised language, interspersed with terminology that a layman can find rather difficult to comprehend without special training—and, indeed, the point is that they are not expected to understand it. The convoluted language of legal texts, furthermore, is often complemented by linguistic choices that aim at subliminally influencing the audience. Regarding criminal trials, Robin Conley notes that "individuals are made into certain kinds of persons through legal language": defendants often "undergo a form of linguistic violence as a result of their movement through the criminal justice system," and the practice of habitually referring to criminals as monsters, for instance, "excludes them from categories of normal social beings" (2016, 6–7). This act of linguistic dehumanisation, by lessening the psychological burden of robbing a human being of their freedom or life, may subconsciously influence the jury's verdict and entice them into giving out a harsher sentence.

Apart from the world-shaping powers of performatives, this example also highlights that they are, at times, applied in violent situations. Derrida examined extensively the relationship between language and force, most notably in his article "Force of

Law" and his speech "Declarations of Independence." The title of the former already implies the violence inherent in law, and this is where Derrida actually pinpoints the origins of law: since law is not a natural phenomenon, it needed to be forcefully implemented. He highlights the "internal" and "complex" relationship between law and force by calling attention to the paradox of the birth of law:

> The very emergence of justice and law, the founding and justifying moment that institutes law, implies a performative force, which is always an interpretative force […] Its very moment of foundation or institution […] would consist of a coup de force, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust and that no justice and no previous law with its founding anterior moment could guarantee or contradict or invalidate. (1992, 13)

Although the concepts of violence and power are used in the analysis of the "very emergence of justice and law," Derrida does not necessarily mean actual physical force, but rather a kind of verbal-linguistic force, a set of overpowering performatives which legitimised the very existence of law itself, dispersed all doubts as to its authority and paved the way for its eventual institutionalisation. But Derrida is quick to formulate the unsettling question governing the entire existence of law: "How are we to distinguish between the force of law of a legitimate power and the supposedly originary violence that must have established this authority and that could not itself have been authorised by any anterior legitimacy, so that, in this initial moment, it is neither legal nor illegal…?" (1992, 6).

The answer to this question might be revolution. It may be said that the establishment of the legal discourse was a revolutionary act; a "genuine revolution," after all,

> one that makes a decisive break in history, cannot depend on pre-existing conventions, laws, rights, justifications and formulations, however much it characteristically attempts to claim that it does. A revolution is a performative act of a particular 'nonstandard' kind, namely the anomalous kind that creates the circumstances or conventions that validate it, while masking as a constative statement. A revolution is groundless, or rather, by a metaleptic future anterior, it creates the grounds that justify it. (Miller 2002, 27)

Although without using the word "revolution," Derrida comes to similar conclusions:

> Since the origin of authority, the foundation or ground, the position of the law can't by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground. Which is not to say that they are in themselves unjust, in the sense of "illegal." They are neither legal nor illegal in their founding moment. They exceed the opposition between founded and unfounded, or between any foundationalism or anti-foundationalism. Even if the success of performatives that found law or right (for example, and this is more than an

> example, of a state as guarantor of a right) presupposes earlier conditional conventions (for example in the national or international arena), the same "mystical" limit will reappear at the supposed origin of said conditions, rules or conventions, and at the origin of their dominant interpretation. (1992, 14)

A revolution, thus, is an event which is, strictly speaking, illegal at its eruption, but upon successful completion, the revolutionary act retrospectively makes itself legal by issuing proclamations, statements, documents, explanations—in short, verbal authorisations. Every revolution needs legal documents to ensure the recognition of its achievements, and these texts invariably function as performatives because they are responsible for transforming the volatile revolution into a cemented fact.

One of the more extreme revolutionary legal performatives is the declaration of a new nation's independence. My chosen example is the Declaration of Independence of the United States, which is not a legal text in the strictest sense of the word insofar as it is not a binding document, yet the Declaration can still be argued to belong to the discourse of and around law. In an extensive essay on the origins of the Declaration, John Phillip Reid notes that the language and terminology used in the Declaration was heavily influenced by *The Law of Nations* (1758), an influential treatise on international law, written by Swissman Emer de Vattel. Reid argues that the Declaration adopted several key ideas from de Vattel's work, such as national freedom and independence as well as the natural right for happiness and peace—such basic human rights were already successfully evoked in legal settings by French and Spanish colonists (1981, 87). The Declaration explicitly lists these natural human laws and rights, which later evolved into the Bill of Rights of the Constitution (Armitage 2007, 38–41). In a powerful linguistic gesture, the text of the Declaration habitually uses the present tense to indicate that the American independence is as good as done: the colonies *are* already free, they "*are* absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown" and they "*have* full power [...] to do all other acts and things which independent states may of right do" (Jefferson 1776). Another, equally relevant part of the Declaration is dedicated to enumerating the reasons why the colonists were dissatisfied with King George III's governance. This list of "grievances" was meant to explain why the subsequent revolution for independence was both inevitable and entirely lawful as regards the natural human laws and rights: in other words, the Declaration legitimised the revolution (which in itself is a political event with profound and widespread legal repercussions). The Declaration expressed the intention of the newly-called Americans to remove King George III as the law-enforcing sovereign over the colonies. Since legal systems function under the surveillance and governance of a lawful sovereign, the removal of King George III as sovereign meant a break from the prevalent legal system, allowing for the colonists to leave the jurisdiction of Great Britain and to legitimise the foundation

of a new legal-political entity, the United States of America, as the Declaration already refers to it. For this reason, John Phillip Reid even argues for considering the Declaration a legal document *per se*, more precisely an indictment against King George III, similar in both style and content to the Bill of Rights of 1689 against James II (1981, 84), which *is* an Act of Parliament. David Armitage claims as well that the "primary purpose of the American Declaration, like that of most declarations of independence that have been issued since 1776, was to express the international legal sovereignty of the United States" (2007, 21), which it purportedly did by overtly enumerating the powers and activities (such as declaring war and establishing commerce) they would independently engage in henceforward. Even if its legal status is contested, the Declaration of Independence was instrumental in the formation of an independent legal system and originated a new legal discourse, that of the United States. As such, the Declaration should be allowed a prime spot in all discussions of and around legal texts.

Nowadays, the existence of a founding legal document is "fairly self-evident," forming the basis of "legal certainty" in the sense that what is written in the document is "traditionally viewed as an instrument that is used consciously, intentionally or purposively to express certain natural or self-evident ideas, such as the sovereignty of a people or a nation [or] the existence of a state […] These ideas or principles are regarded as existing beforehand and must simply be expressed or communicated in the most appropriate way" (de Ville 2008, 89–90). In this interpretation, language is just an instrument for recording the natural state of affairs, but, as we have discussed above, language is rarely used constatively in legal contexts. Derrida explicitly draws a parallel between a "successful revolution," a "successful foundation of a state" and a "felicitous performative speech act," which create "proper interpretative models […] to give sense, necessity and above all legitimacy to the violence that has produced, among others, the interpretative model in question, that is, the discourse of its self-legitimation" (1992, 36). However, this situation gives rise to a paradox: although a nation cannot exist without a written legal document stating its independence, this document can only be written when the given community is still not a nation. Derrida called attention to this issue in a presentation analysing the Declaration of Independence of the United States, and since then it has been extensively researched. The crux of the problem is that when the founding fathers declared that "[w]e, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America in General Congress assembled, do in the name and by the authority of the good people of these [...] free and independent States," actually "there was no United States of America, no General Congress assembled, no free and independent states, no good people in whose name and by whose authority the General Congress could act. It was through speaking in the name of the American people that the delegates

produced a people to name; it was by invoking an authority that they established an authority to invoke" (Petrey 1990, 159). In other words, the delegates writing the declaration were supposedly chosen as representatives by the American people who only came into existence after writing the declaration; at the moment of writing, the text of the declaration does not match the actual truth of external reality. Perhaps this situation of retrospective creation and justification inspired Hillis Miller to state that the Declaration is "fabulous both in the sense that it is fictive or invented and in the sense that it is like those fables of origin that often are projected back to some mythical preoriginary time." But he crucially continues with the assertion that "[s]uch fables are invented as necessary fictions in order to account for the founding moment of a new nation" (2002, 124).

What is interesting is that according to Austin's original theory of speech acts, which placed a great emphasis on following laws and conventions, the Declaration of Independence—or any other similar document, for that matter—should not have been successful because, breaking with conventions, it was an infelicitous speech act. Possible worlds theory, on the contrary, tells us that the construction of worlds is "language-dependent and unimpeded by the absence of a corresponding state of affairs 'out there'" (Ronen 1994, 34). Philosophy and history characterise possible worlds as contingent states of affairs, i.e. they recognise the possibility of counterfactual states of affairs. According to this theory, other possible worlds, including some in which the American revolution was unsuccessful, could just as easily have obtained as our actual world, in which the US is a sovereign nation. Inexistent as such beforehand, the actual possible world that we know as the American nation "becomes an enormous complexity created and continually recreated by the law" (Fitzpatrick 2001, 82), the authority and legitimacy of which law was (and still is) guaranteed by the originary performative speech act, the Declaration.

It would be far-fetched to claim that the Declaration and, by extension, the US are based on merely fictional grounds. But it would be equally naïve to believe that fiction and reality are neatly separated domains bearing no influence upon one another. The theory of possible worlds can be instrumental in interpreting and comprehending empirical reality; as Eco puts it, "[w]e explore the plurality of possibilia to find out a suitable model for realia" (Eco 1989, 57). Possible worlds theory calls attention to the fact that the borderline between fiction and reality is a dynamic concept that is permeable from both sides. It embraces the new possibilities that the weakening of the boundary between actual and fictional spheres would bring. These new areas of interest include "relaxing philosophical notions of truth, existence and world-language relations" (Ronen 1994, 6), and shed a new light on long-standing epistemological and ontological questions such as "whether

possible worlds say something about the features of our language in its relation to the world" and "whether possible worlds say something about the structure of reality itself" (Ronen 1994, 73).

Wolfgang Iser built his theory of concord-fiction on these principles. In his view, fiction "constitutes discourse to such a degree that the only reality one can talk about is that of discourse-related real entities", and this idea might be stretched to the extent that "the assumed presence of physical objects is on the way to becoming a type of discourse itself, which comes close to liquidating its factual independence" (1993, 119–20). The concepts of nationhood and democracy are examples of what Iser termed "concord-fictions" (1993, 88–89), i.e. widespread social-collective interpretations of reality that disguise themselves as reality *per se*, instead of the collective fabrications that they actually are. Concord-fictions are not faithful descriptions of the workings of reality, yet they are not hollow lies either: they "spring into being because of the inaccessibilities of life" (1993, 88), meaning that a community creates these concord-fictions to fulfil their compulsion of comprehending and explaining the world, and of providing meaning and purpose to their lives. One concord-fiction, however, is neither enough nor can it provide adequate explanations forever. Flexibility instead of permanence is a defining feature of concord-fictions, which need to be able to meet the explanatory needs of a given period. If "they prove to be inadequate, the substitution of others for them testifies to their indispensability. What counts is success, and not truth, and the former will always be endowed with the latter when it has been telling" (1993, 89). The content of concord-fictions may be changing and reflecting prevalent issues, but the need for them remains permanent, since whenever one such fiction is "discredited," its place will not remain empty but will be "filled by another fiction that seems more trustworthy" at present (1993, 88).

Although a concord-fiction might be revealed as such retrospectively, in their originating and sustaining circumstances concord-fictions are heralded as *truth*: "we simply do not realize that they may be fictions, because they provide the conditions under which we establish meaning and orient actions" (Iser 1993, 89). In spite of the name, since concord-fictions "embodied collective certainties, they could hardly be viewed as fictions" (1993, 88). Iser explains that "concord-fictions turn into forms of make-believe only when our attitudes toward them change [… and t]he discrediting of such a fiction indicates that an erstwhile collective experience is no longer shared" (1993, 89). Religion is one of Iser's examples: a thousand years ago, people were satisfied with the answers provided by the discourse of and around religion, but as time went on, religion lost its supreme explanatory status and was revealed as a concord-fiction. But the questions, old and new alike, that thus opened up, could not be left unanswered, so new concord-fictions evolved

(alongside religion), like that of nationhood, which serves our purposes in the present day, but by the end of the century it may perhaps have become obsolete and supplanted by a new concord-fiction.

A more recent iteration of Iser's concord-fictions is what Aditi Bhatia calls "discourses of illusion." Without disregarding Iser's pragmatic considerations, Bhatia's methodology relies instead on discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. Discourses of illusion are very similar to concord-fictions but with an added layer of agency: they constitute "various forms of public discourses, in particular those associated with politics and religion, [which] can be viewed as an attempt by writers or speakers to convince their audiences that the representation of reality that they are putting forward is the correct and objective one. […] Examples may include the constructs of globalisation, diversity, democracy, freedom, change, climate change, and catastrophe" (Bhatia 2015, 17). Bhatia's concept supposes the existence of several competing (potentially mutually exclusive) worldviews or perspectives on reality, each of which are advocated for by dedicated discursive communities. These communities wish to hide the contingent nature of their discourses and elevate them to the level of objectivity and factuality, maintaining an illusion of the natural order of reality (Bhatia 2015, 7). A primary means of achieving the naturalisation of illusions is textual-linguistic persuasion. Bhatia notes that "the creators of such illusions have at their disposal access to a relevant communicative medium (e.g. mass media) in order to convey their subjective representations," and their enterprise may be deemed successful when "the proliferated representations of reality go on to be recognised as the dominant framework within which understanding of that reality operates" (2015, 13).

When it comes to convincing the public to believe in the objectivity of a given worldview, linguistic subtlety is more efficient than forceful propaganda. By projecting the image of a homogeneous discursive community but (apparently) allowing dissenting opinions, the propagators of illusions seem a trustworthy source of knowledge (Ángeles Orts and Breeze 2017, 14), and the public is always "more likely to accept truths they feel are not being forced upon them and, more importantly, truths they feel they have chosen to accept on their own, thereby subscribing to dominant ideology, or in this case the dominant representation of reality, without realising it" (Bhatia 2015, 13). It certainly helps the building of both trust and dependence that the general public is excluded from participating in these specialised discursive communities; only qualified authority figures are allowed to shape discourses, whose contributions, in turn, are usually concealed to promote the idea of factuality and naturality. It is important to emphasise that these discourses and the persuasion of the general public to believe in an illusion is not inherently good or bad, similarly to Derrida's legal-linguistic violence which is not negative *per se*. The concept of democracy is a discourse of illusion (or a concord-fiction), but this fact should not imply that democracy should be discarded

simply because it is not a natural state of affairs. What the discussion on law and concord-fictions shows is, rather, the true power of language: how a simple verbal act has the potential to solidify into an unquestionable axiom of how reality works. Possible worlds theory highlights the very existence of a multitude of worldviews that shape our conception of "reality" even without us being aware of it, whereas speech act theory uncovers how these worldviews and new states of affairs are created through language. The Declaration of Independence of the United States is a prime example of such a world-creating performative text, and an especially powerful one at that. It managed to successfully perform a set of speech acts on a perhaps unprecedented scale, and this change in the world both brought forth a change in the *perception* of the world (that the political *status quo* could be challenged and overturned, paving the way for the nationalist revolutions of the following century) and exchanged the political concord-fiction of the period—monarchy—for that of democracy.

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Introduction: on the Rebellious Marys

Éva Antal and Antonella Braida
antal.eva@uni-eszterhazy.hu and antonella.braida-laplace@univ-lorraine.fr

Éva Antal (Eszterházy Károly Catholic University, Hungary) and Antonella Braida (IDEA, Université de Lorraine, Nancy-Metz, France) were the convenors of a seminar session at the 16th ESSE Conference at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (from 29th of August to 2nd September 2022), titled "Rebellious Marys: Women on Self-Development in Late 18th-and Early 19th-Century Fiction and Prose Writings." The seminar comprised two sessions, organized thematically and chronologically.

The seminar was inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft's, Mary Robinson's, Mary Hays's, and Mary Shelley's work and by their revolutionary novels, *Mary* (1788), *Maria* (1798), *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799) and *Mathilda* (1820), among others. In all these works, the female protagonist struggles to find her own way in life, aiming to fulfil her self-development and to escape the constraints imposed on women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the two sessions of the seminar, the eight scholars intended to give voice to those courageous women—writers, journalists and fictional characters—who dared to question, criticise and/or transgress the boundaries of their social roles, emphasising the importance of (self-)education, self-knowledge and self-reliance. The papers discussed both fiction and non-fiction written by "the rebellious Marys" not only in the Pre-Romantic and Romantic periods, but also in the early Victorian times. In addition to novels and life writing, some of the papers focussed on other genres, such as treatises, journalistic pieces, or fables, while keeping the main concern of contextualised female self-development in mind. The two sessions were extremely stimulating thanks to their sharp focus on women writers' presence in the public sphere, as well as on their exploration of (self-)education and the importance of reading.

In lieu of conference proceedings, the journal section here consists of six articles edited by Éva Antal and Antonella Braida.

María José Álvarez Faedo (University of Oviedo, Spain) discusses the rhetorical strategies in an early eighteenth-century women's journal, Eliza Haywood's *The Female Spectator*, presenting the novelties of her instructive narratives. Dragoş Ivana (University of Bucharest, Romania) studies Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* in terms of the contemporary notions on rationality and sensibility in women's conduct. Dóra Janczer Csikós (Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary) analyses the understanding of motherhood and its images in Mary Hays's scandalous

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novel, *The Victim of Prejudice*. Maria Parrino (Independent Scholar, Italy) examines the mother-daughter relationships in Mary Robinson's Gothic novel, *Vancenza*, while Éva Antal presents two rebellious Marys' life paths and development in two late eighteenth-century *Bildungsromane* authored by Mary Wollstonecraft. Antonella Braida explores the fictional representation of female protagonists' self-education and their transculturalism in Mary Margaret Busk's short stories.

The guest editors, Éva Antal and Antonella Braida have been working together in their shared field of research since 2019 as members of the research centre IDEA, Interdisciplinarity in English Studies at the Université de Lorraine. In 2022, with the French publishing house PUFC (Besançon: Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté), they brought out the edited volume *Female Voices: Forms of Women's Reading, Self-Education and Writing in Britain (1770-1830)*, which also covered the literary period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with particular interest in the versatile self-expression of women writers.

Rebellious Eliza: The Ingenious Schemer's Veiled Subversion of Passions and Emotions in *The Female Spectator*

María José Álvarez Faedo
mjfaedo@uniovi.es

Eliza Haywood was an acclaimed eighteenth-century writer, actress, translator, publisher, bookseller, journalist and the editor of *The Female Spectator* (1744–1746). Being aware of the difficulties females had to endure at the time, she challenged them, exploring other alternatives in her newspaper. This article will explore the different literary techniques Eliza Haywood employs in her periodical to be able to offer her own common-sense and astute moral instruction to her readers, teaching them to turn the hardly appealing fates that their families had arranged for them into ones they could benefit from.

Keywords: Eliza Haywood, passions, emotions, rebellious, *The Female Spectator*, instruction.

1 Introduction[1]

Little is known about Eliza Haywood's private life[2], mainly because she made sure those who had been close to her would not reveal "the least circumstance relating to her" (Baker 1782, 216).[3] Patricia Meyer Spacks states that she "acted in numerous plays and wrote plays of her own. She wrote novels, political pamphlets, periodicals,

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[2] See Backscheider 2010, Schofield 1985, Saxton and Bocchicchio 2000, as well as King 2007 and 2016.

[3] Several contemporary authors, especially Alexander Pope, accused her of sexual promiscuity during her life, which probably contributed to her not wishing any information about her life to be revealed after her death. Haywood was certainly no ordinary woman, and that is why this article is included in this section of the *Eger Journal of English Studies* devoted to "Rebellious Marys." In Spain, a "mari" (Spanish version of "Mary"), according to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, is a "woman who is only engaged in domestic chores" (my translation); accordingly, Eliza Haywood is a "rebellious Mary" because she refused to be limited to that role. Instead, she pursued the career of a woman of letters and she was also an actress.

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conduct books (addressed variously to servants, wives, and husbands), and poetry and made translations from French" (1999, x). The fact that some of her works reached a popularity comparable to those of the great contemporary writers was probably the reason for the slandering she suffered, perhaps provoked by jealousy.

Her first novel, *Love in Excess*, was published in 1719, and it quickly became "one of the great best-sellers of the eighteenth century" (Spacks 1999, x). From then on, she had a prolific and successful output.[4] A quarter of a century later, in 1744, she started publishing her periodical *The Female Spectator*, continued until 1746. Although since 1693 in England there had already been periodicals specifically addressed to women, such as the *Ladies' Mercury*, published by John Dunton, one of the outstanding features of *The Female Spectator* was that it was a periodical for women which was written by a woman.[5] However, Sara Penn explains that "Haywood never acknowledged authorship of her *Spectator* during her lifetime" (2021, 1). Actually, "Haywood's association with her *Spectator* was only made known in her obituary (in 1756, a decade after its publication), and [it] was widely accepted to have been her work throughout the eighteenth century" (Penn 2021, 3).[6]

In the same fashion as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's *The Tatler* (1709–1711) and *The Spectator* (1711–1712), each issue of *The Female Spectator* consisted of a single long essay, in which the author, pretending to be replying to one of the correspondents who supposedly had written to her periodical seeking advice, discussed matters related to the ways of overcoming the difficulties women encountered within the English patriarchal system of the time. What she offered them was a mixture of information, fiction, passion, emotions with didacticism,[7] which would provide a believable portrayal of women's lives and, at the same time, would reveal ways of turning those

[4] For further information about her position and strategies in the print trade and literary marketplace, see Spedding 2006 and Luhning 2008.

[5] Joyce Horner (1973), Patricia Meyer Spacks (1999, xii), Lashea Stuart (2006, 11) and Kelly Plante (2018, 1) erroneously claim that it was the first periodical for women and edited by a woman. In fact, that merit is rather for Delarivier Manley and her *Female Tatler* (1709). See Anderson (1931, 354–60) and Milford (1932, 350).

[6] It was not until the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century that Haywood's work garnered serious scholarly attention. See, for example, Koon 1978, Doane 1982, Spender 1992, Merrit 1997, and Collins 2002. The scholarly publications about Haywood were so prolific at that time that in 2004, Patrick Spedding published *A Bibliography of Eliza Haywood*.

[7] In this respect, Rakhi Ghosh states that "Thus Haywood emerges as a radical writer when she urges women to recognise the merits and advantages of cultivating an ideal education. Through her periodical, she inverts the position of power that traditionally belonged to men. With women usurping the role of spectators, Haywood accrued power to them, depriving men the advantage of making women the objects of their gaze. Her text thus issues a bold challenge to women to configure their own destiny" (2019, 95).

lives into something interesting and appealing, since Haywood also gave her readers inspiration to challenge social conventions. Earla Wilputte in *Passion and Language in Eighteenth-Century Literature* suggests that Haywood attempted to "develop a language for the passions that clearly conveys the deepest-felt emotions;" that is, her characters' "innermost feelings" (2014, 4). Stephen Ahern in *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text* affirms that at the time "still dominant was a vision of the passions as forces often outside one's control" (2019, 4). Accordingly, the stories told by the *Female Spectator*'s correspondents usually deal with young ladies who have succumbed to passion and the consequences it entails. That was probably one of the reasons why *The Female Spectator* "was Haywood's most popular work during her lifetime" (Plante 2018, 1).[8]

This article will explore the different literary techniques Haywood employs in *The Female Spectator* in order to offer, based on her own common-sense, astute moral instruction to her readers. It is an attempt to teach them that, if they are witty, her readers (ladies) will be able to rebel against the strict eighteenth-century society, and thus, they will manage to carve out unattractive destinies for themselves aimed solely at fulfilling their families' expectations, by subversively veiling their passions and emotions.[9]

2 Haywood's Literary Techniques in *The Female Spectator*

Haywood employs unusual literary techniques in her journal. She establishes her authorial persona (the Female Spectator) at the beginning, confessing that although her life "for some years, was a continued round of what I then called Pleasure, and my whole Time engrossed by a Hurry of promiscuous Diversions," she thinks that her readers "may reap some Benefit from it" (Haywood 1771, 2). From her words, we may infer that she is not very proud of the licentious life she led and that she has changed, submitting to the demands of society. But Haywood was far from being submissive: she had just created a convenient writing persona. According to Jane Todd, "there was a need for a writing persona. […] Eliza Haywood in *The Female Spectator* constructed a wise older woman reformed after a youth of 'vanity and Folly'" (1989, 133).[10]

[8] Spedding (2006, 193-211) offers a thorough analysis of the print and sales history of *The Female Spectator* in the eighteenth century. Blouch, on her part, reveals that "issued in at least eight English editions over the next ten years, *The Female Spectator* was published as *La Nouvelle Spectratice* in France in 1751, and reissued in English as late as 1771" (1998, 641). See also King 2017.

[9] See Lubey 2006 and Pahl 2021.

[10] Amy Thomas Campion points out that "both Spencer and Todd couple the term 'reform' with

Nevertheless, she soon admits her experience is not enough, and resolves to complement it with that of three female friends:[11] Mira, a happily married woman of great wit;[12] a wise widow of high rank, and the cheerful, sweet and virtuous unmarried daughter of a wealthy merchant, whom Eliza will call "Euphrosine" (Haywood 1771, 4). They will satisfy the reader's curiosity as regards different matters, with the exception of war and politics.[13]

It is worth pointing out that Haywood, a female author, appropriates the critical gaze of the spectator,[14] making the persona she creates in her periodical exchange "her former position as an object—a coquette who seeks opportunities for 'shewing' herself—for that of subject when she becomes a spectator in her new role as writer and educator" (Merritt 1997, 133). However, as Juliette Merritt adds, "in employing curiosity for her own discursive ends, the Female Spectator makes no gender distinctions; the reader assumes that as a universal appetite, curiosity resides equally with men and women" (1997, 135).[15] Another device Haywood employs to maintain the curiosity and interest of the readers is the aforementioned use of "letters from correspondents who report their personal problems or complain about social ills" (Spacks 1999, xvi).

'Eliza Haywood' in their tables of contents: Todd writes 'Re-formers: Eliza Haywood and Charlotte Lennox' and Spencer follows 'Seduced Heroines' by 'Reformed Heroines" (2010, 57). With "Spencer" she refers to Jane Spencer (1986).

[11] See Girten 2009.

[12] Plante explains that "consistent with the cultural preoccupation, especially in literature by and for women, with the marriage market, Haywood dedicated *The Female Spectator* to [the Duchess of Leeds, Juliana] Colyear, citing her discretion in her marriage(s) as the reason she wished to place *The Female Spectator* under Colyear's 'protection'" (2018, 1). She also states that Haywood's didactic approach can be detected already in that very dedication, since she describes Colyear as a woman "of an unblemished conduct, but also of an exalted virtue, whose example may enforce the precepts they contain, and is herself a shining pattern for others to copy after." For Plante, this reveals Haywood's wish that her "intended audience […] might learn from the duchess's example" (2018, 2)."

[13] Emily Joan Dowd affirms that "*The Female Spectator* is rich with the longing for a salon society, in which women are the participants and agents of intelligent, conversational rhetoric. The periodical itself certainly replicates this experience, including more contributions from, discussions of, and philosophical engagements with or for women and women's welfare than any of its contemporaries. Mrs. Spectator and her many female contributors make no secret of their reverence for the French notion of female education and intellectual life, identical to that outlined in de Scudéry's depiction of salon rhetoric" (2010, 18).

[14] Nancy Miller explains that "because the gaze is not simply an act of vision, but a site of crisscrossing meanings in which the effects of power relations are boldly (and baldly) deployed, it is not surprising that feminist theorists and writers should take it up as a central scene in their critique of patriarchal authority" (1988, 164). Other feminist analyses of the gaze in literature can be found in Straub 1988, Newman 1990, Swenson 2010, Mowry 2012, and Malone 2018.

[15] See also Merritt 2004.

Although any of the stories narrated by the correspondents of *The Female Spectator* would be suitable to study the structure that Haywood follows, in this article I have focused on four of them. The first case exemplified in Book I of the periodical is that of fourteen-year-old Martesia, who "destroyed at once all her own exalted Ideas of Honour and Reputation" (Haywood 1771, 12) by being unfaithful to her devoted husband—in a marriage prearranged by her parents—with the first young man who flirted with her, Clitander. Ahern states that in Haywood's works, "seduction begins with a process of unconscious influence that bypasses the rational mind; the transmission of affect happens without warning or intent, as characters are drawn involuntarily to one another" (2019, 4). That is why, when her distressed husband enquired what he had done to offend her and lose her affection, she replied that "as she had accused him with nothing, he had no reason to think she was dissatisfied" (1771, 13). The more she craved for her lover's company, the more distant she became with her husband, to the point of making the latter wish to divorce her without providing him with a real reason for her coldness: until getting pregnant, she had managed to hide her unfaithful passion from him. Then she realised that, although she would like to be separated from her husband, she would not endure "to be totally deprived of all reputation in the world" (1771, 15). She tried but failed to have an abortion. Then she hid her pregnancy by feigning indisposition and by wearing loose gowns. At the end, she gave birth to a daughter who died at birth. Finally, she received her punishment: in order to escape gossip and unrequited love—because her beloved Clitander had ended up marrying another girl—she left England, after having agreed with her husband that he would pay her an annual sum, as long as she resided as far away as possible.

As a moral, Eliza explains to her readers that she ended up in such a lamentable situation because she had not valued what she had: a loving husband, status and a good and easy life. She fell into temptation, thus losing everything for the sake of passion. She also blames parents because they often prearrange marriages for their young daughters to older gentlemen and then the former end up falling desperately in love with a younger suitor and succumbing to that new passion, regardless of the terrible consequences. The solution she suggests is instruction, which makes London ladies generally more aware of the dangers of succumbing to temptation than innocent country girls, who are prone to be misled: "the country-bred ladies […] become an easier prey to the artifices of mankind, than those who have had an education more at large" (1771, 18). Therefore, the structure Haywood employs in her periodical essays is as follows: the narration of the story of the lady in question, the climax of her trespass, the consequences of that trespass (punishment), the moral and a piece of advice for ladies to avoid committing the same mistake.

The second case appears in the second volume, which starts with Book 7, where a correspondent, Amintor, narrates his story with his—in his view—ungrateful beloved, Arpasia. He seems to have been infatuated with her from the moment he made her acquaintance, since he calls her "a young lady, who has everything in her worthy of universal adoration" (Haywood 1755, 6), and concludes her detailed description thus:

> […] her hair, her hands, her neck, her fine turned shape would singly charm the ravished gazer, but there is something in her air which the most extensive fancy cannot form any figure of, without having seen the divine original: if she but plays her fan, takes snuff, on the least motion of a hand or finger, a sparkling dignity flies from her, filling all the place. (1755, 7)

Close to her, he felt so nervous that he felt useless when he "had to lead her up a minuet" (1755, 7). Unfortunately for him, she noticed his inability to dance and never danced with him again. Amintor was not only overwhelmed by Arpasia's beauty, but also impressed by her prudence and modesty. As he ends up admitting, in fact, he fell desperately in love with her when he had set eyes on her for the first time ever. However, he dared not reveal his feelings to his beloved, no matter how much his friends tried to encourage him on the grounds that he was a deserving man. Finally, he plucked up courage and opened his heart to her. But his passion was received with coldness, and

> […] the cold civility, the unmoved reserve with which she heard me, struck like a bolt of ice through all my soul, and gave a mortal damp to all the fires of hope:—I grew pale,—I trembled,—I was ready to fall down in a swoon at her feet; and fearing I should be guilty of something unbecoming my sex, took such a hasty and confused leave, that had the least spark of compassion harboured in her breast, it must have prevailed in her to have called me back:—but, alas! She suffered me to depart, without seeming even to observe my disorder.—Unequalled cruelty! (1755, 9)

One can clearly observe the contrast between the young man's reaction of pain and shame after his disappointment, and the lady's indifference after her rejection, since she did not really like that suitor, probably and partly due to his shortcomings in dancing and to his having been stalking her—something he does not seem to be aware of. Instead, he proceeds to describe his anguish and how he suffered that night, which he "passed in agonies too terrible for repetition" (1755, 9). The following morning, he sent the lady a "pity-moving" letter but, to his dismay, all he received from her was a courteous reply:

> I am very much obliged for the high opinion you have of my merit; but as it seems to have given birth to an inclination, which I am certain will never be in my power to encourage,

> must beg you will desist your visits, till you have ceased to think in the manner you now profess to do. (1755, 10)

One of his friends, pitying Amintor's suffering caused by, in his own words, "fate and the ingratitude of my charmer" (1755, 9), spoke to her father on his behalf. The reply, after consultation with Arpasia, was "that he had founded his daughter's inclinations, and found they were not in my favour; so desired I would not give myself any farther trouble" (1755, 9).

Still, he did not give up, and started seeking her desperately, forcing her to stop going to the places she used to frequent in order to avoid him—and accusing her of ingratitude for behaving thus. Obsessed with her, he kept "haunting her" (1755, 12), to no avail. Then he resolved to have his misfortunes published in *The Female Spectator*, and he asks the editors to:

> […] Exert then all your eloquence to move the heart of my obdurate fair, to give her a lively sense of her ingratitude, and convince her how ill so foul a vice becomes so beauteous a form: she is a constant reader of your essays, a great admirer of them, has often said the world would be happy could it once be brought to follow the maxims you lay down;—who knows, therefore, but she may be wrought upon herself, when so favourite an advocate vouchsafes to plead? (1755, 12)

In this letter to *The Female Spectator* we find a different perspective, that of an unrequited male lover offering the narration of the story of his vicissitudes while courting his beloved lady. Nevertheless, from the correspondent's perspective, his beloved lady was the one who did not behave according to what was expected from her, and the climax of her trespass was refusing to requite the love her suitor had confessed to profess to her. Then the consequence of that trespass (punishment) was to have her unrequited lover's "unhappy story" published in *The Female Spectator*, in a last and desperate attempt, on his part, to make his beloved realise how unfair she had been to him.

However, his letter did not produce the effect he expected. Far from any support to his cause, "pity will be all the consolation he will ever be able to procure" (1755, 12). The Female Spectator explains to her correspondent that he cannot expect someone who does not like him to love him:

> She can no more love him, than he can forbear loving her:—the sentiments on each side are involuntary; and where the obligation is not of the will, there can be no ingratitude in refusing the reconpence [sic]: not, but it were to be wished, for the happiness of both, that Arpasia could meet so ardent and so sincere an affection as that of Amintor, with an equal warmth; but since it cannot be, and nature is refractory, he should endeavour rather to forget, and enable himself to live without her, than perpetuate his passion and anxieties by any idle hopes of living with her. (1755, 13)

She also states that it would be "more kind in us to advise him to quit the vain pursuit, than by pretending to plead in his favour flatter him with deceitful expectations which would only serve to add to his disquiet in the end" (1755, 14). Therefore, in this case, advice is provided for the male correspondent, not for the lady.

The Female Spectator adds, as the moral of this story, that it is very unfair of Amintor to deem Arpasia ungrateful, since "she has acted toward him with honour and discretion." She concludes that "I not only acquit her of ingratitude, but pronounce Amintor the person obliged," and warns him "to take care that in not acknowledging he is so, he does not draw upon himself that imputation he unjustly offers to fix on her" (1755, 15). A similar perspective would be offered just four years later, in 1759, by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where he would claim that "in the same manner to the selfish and original passions of human nature, the loss or gain of a very small interest of our own, appears to be of vastly more importance [...] than the greatest concern of another with whom we have no particular connexion" (2002, 156). Amintor was only concerned with his own feelings as an unrequited lover and, far from being sympathetic, he never considered the possibility that Arpasia might have felt persecuted and incommoded by him. And that is the reason why the periodical cannot satisfy his petition, since Haywood sought "to develop a language that ensures […] a sympathetic comprehension of the excessive emotions that we all undergo" (Wilputte 2014, 6).

In Book 14, included in the third volume of the *Female Spectator*, we can read a letter signed by a Claribella and addressed to "the authors" of the periodical (Haywood 1748, 53), which concerns one of the correspondent's acquaintances, to whom she refers as Aliena. That is, the correspondent narrates the story of Aliena, who, driven by her sullen emotions and her passionate love[16]—the climax of her trespass—for her former suitor on his mission, cross-dressed[17] as a sailor to go after a captain in the

[16] Ahern suggests that we should "understand the model of affective agency at work in early modern texts such as Haywood's as one not of interiority but of subjectivity, in the true sense of the word: the state of being subject to forces outside one's control" (2019, 4).

[17] Plante explains that "the book unites themes common to Haywood's oeuvre, early and late—including disguise and jilted love—with themes common to the 18th century, including the military and expanding middle class, and the marriage market." And she adds that it offers Haywood the chance to express her point of view "on a common literary trope in 18th-century popular culture—that of the woman warrior who disguises herself as a man in military uniform to pursue her soldier-or-sailor lover" (2018, 1). Finally, she offers further information about that trope, which introduces: "a woman dressing in a military uniform to pursue her military lover at sea, to varying degrees of success: sometimes she is punished for her foray into military/male culture when she and/or her lover dies; sometimes she is rewarded for her bravery, loyalty and military prowess through marriage and/or through a monetary reward (commission and/or dowry). All the time, though, the covering-up of her feminine characteristics with the 'male' uniform serves not to empower the woman for her full,

British Royal Navy, although she only managed to get as far as the city of Gravesend, off the Thames. In the end, Aliena does not marry the captain she was so passionately in love with, nor his friend and first lieutenant, who was a "man of honour" and ended up falling in love with the young lady—the consequences of her trespass (and her punishment). Instead, she goes back home and asks Claribella to defend her in a letter to the editor. However, her actions are going to be censured by the Female Spectator and set as an example of what a woman should not do. Haywood's editorial critiques, far from being a conservative reaction, just help women face the sad truth: Aliena's empowering behaviour is incompatible with the social norms women had to comply with on the English marriage market of the time. Accordingly, the moral of the story narrated in this letter is twofold: on the one hand, it calls attention to the dangers of cross-dressing and masquerading and, on the other, with regard to military gentlemen, it presents that "'love and glory are things incompatible' for young women on the marriage market" (Haywood quoted in Plante 2018, 1). This is a piece of advice that shows young ladies how they should not behave when courted and also instructs families of such passionate girls on how they should not behave if their daughters embark on a similar adventure, hurrying after a lover.

A different instance is also found in Book 14, where some Elismonda encloses to the Female Spectator the story of Barsina, a discrete young lady, who is led by Ziphranes, her libertine lover, into believing that he will be faithful to her. Thus, she accepts his marriage proposal, unaware of the fact that he has also asked her cousin to marry him. Suspicions arise in Barsina due to her beloved's procrastination, until a letter confirms that he is marrying another person. Allegedly, he had accepted the latter's proposal because he did not feel Barsina had too much affection for him. After reading such a letter, Barsina is devastated, but she soon turns her passion into a thirst for revenge, willing to inflict on her unfaithful lover a punishment proportionable to his crime. She pretends to come across him in a park by chance, and only reproaches him for not having taken leave of her. He is amazed at her lack of rancour and agrees to meet her for breakfast the following morning. At breakfast, they toast the happiness of the bride. However, after drinking up the content of their glasses, Barsina announces she has poisoned the wine and therefore, they will die together (this would be the climax of the story). Ziphranes goes home in haste and summons all the doctors and apothecaries in the area. He tries every purgative

integrated 'self' but to proclaim to women and society that women are valuable—marriageable—when they make themselves useful by embracing the colonial and military goals of the patriarchal structure at large, supporting king and country while pursuing the ultimate goal for a woman: marriage. Haywood's take on Aliena critiques this popular glorification" (Plante 2018, 4). See also Clark 2003, Hurl-Eamon 2014, and Plante 2020.

remedy they offer him until he thinks his life is out of danger. Meanwhile, he learns that Barsina is dead. He goes to the countryside to recuperate but, while he is standing outside one evening, he sees a woman who resembles her and, believing her to be a ghost, Ziphranes ends up going mad—hence the false wooer's punishment.

However, Barsina had not really poisoned the wine, nor died, but had instructed her household to carry out a coffin to be seen by witnesses—though the ghostly apparition was accidental. Once she felt her resentment against him had been gratified, she returned to town "with all her former serenity and good humour" (Haywood 1755, 108). Ziphranes recovered his sanity but lost his wife's affection, he was ridiculed by his acquaintances and remained uneasy. The correspondent of the Female Spectator approves Barsinas's revenge and sets it up as an example to be followed by other jilted ladies.

Even if this story does not portray, as the former ones, a woman who trespasses and is punished but rather one who is offended and takes revenge, the structure Haywood offers is still the same: the narrative, climax, and punishment. As regards the moral of this story, women should not allow men to mislead them into believing their false claims but, if they do, they must react and seek revenge. The advice Haywood offers her readers is that they should not weep after having lost in love but get even, because passive women will inevitably suffer, while active women, even if they may not achieve their goals, will at least escape the fate of a victim. In this respect, Rakhi Ghosh points out that Haywood rebels against patriarchal double standards:

> Haywood's open defiance of double standards practised by patriarchy is unusual for her time. She exhorts women to refrain from indulging in the crime of tolerating the infidelity of their husbands. Her insistence that women should free themselves from the prison of silence imposed by patriarchy is enormously iconoclastic indeed in the contemporary male-dominated world of printing and publishing. (2019, 95)

3 Conclusion

As Mary Anne Schofield states, Haywood knew how to "openly articulate her doctrine of quiet rebellion as she defines woman's role of seeming compliance but actual revolt" (1985, 110). She urged women to learn to become "intellectual and moral creatures" (Ghosh 2019, 94) in order to secure their success and position in an eighteenth-century society that was hostile to those who did not comply with its norms. Thus, she warned them against hurrying into marrying someone thoughtlessly, since she regarded marriage as "a kind of precipice, which, when once leap'd, there is no Possibility of reclimbing" (Haywood 1999, 97).

In order to reach her didactic goals, Haywood employed the different literary techniques explored in this article: the use of four different personae—the third letter is actually addressed to "the authors", whereas the other three are sent, specifically, to the Female Spectator—the form of a letter exchange between the Female Spectator and her readers, as well as a set structure for each of the stories sent by her fictitious correspondents, containing a story, a climax, a punishment. As for the moral message and a piece of advice to her readers, her rebellious common-sense teaches them to be witty, not to succumb to passion, to control their emotions, to make the most of their circumstances and, thus, to benefit themselves.

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Jacobin Enthusiasm and the Logic of Loss in Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*

Dragoş Ivana
dragos.ivana@lls.unibuc.ro

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

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

1 Introduction[1]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 From an Enthusiastic Reader to a Reflective Character

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

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

the happiness of my child" (MEC 26–7). This concern is perfectly justified as long as Emma, endowed with reading and recitation skills, cannot comprehend Pope's Homer and Thomson's *Seasons*, her uncle's favourite authors. Moreover, the perils of inexperienced reading become more evident when she "subscribed to a circulating library, and frequently read, or rather devoured—little careful in the reflection—from ten to fourteen novels in a week" (MEC 53). Emma J. Clery claims that in the late eighteenth century, circulating libraries were frowned upon because books were passed from one hand to another, becoming "soiled, marked and defaced," a state of decay which mirrored "a parallel fate for the (de jure) female readers who devour and internalise the stories" (1995, 97). Although Mr. Courtney attempts to dampen her enthusiasm with Plutarch and history, Emma gradually delves into ecclesiastical history and "polemic divinity" (59) to such an extent that "I reasoned freely, endeavoured to arrange and methodise my opinions […] I seemed to acquire new strength and dignity of character" (MEC 60). Emma turns into a female philosopher who, in the words of Adriana Crăciun, "by the end of the 1790s, had emerged as one particularly dangerous disciple of the Modern Philosophy, and was above all identified with Mary Wollstonecraft as a politicised avatar of Rousseau's scandalous Julie" (2005, 31). Above all, it is Rousseau's *Julie, or The New Heloise* that stirs the strongest emotions in the heroine's soul and that represents the most dangerous epistemological threat: "The pleasure I experienced approached the limits of pain—it was tumult—all the ardour of my character was excited" (MEC 60). In a nutshell, Rousseau's novel encapsulates the noxious effects of reading in solitude: "The perceptions of persons in retirement are very different from those of people in the great world: their passions, being differently modified, are differently expressed; their imaginations, constantly impressed by the same objects, are more violently affected" (1810, 7). It is ultimately dangerous because, of the two volumes, Emma only reads the first one, remaining ignorant of the moral lesson taught in the second. Once she has appropriated the conduct of Julie, Emma starts feeling a "mixture of radical liberation and sentimental endorsement" (Todd 1989, 244) and takes Augustus Harley[5] as a projection of her own sexual desire, as a lover who remains as ideal as her intellectual potential, which cannot be accepted by society.

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

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

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

Discussing the influence of the New Philosophy[6] in the 1790s in Britain, Jacqueline Pearson writes that the revolutionary agenda upheld by William Godwin

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

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

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

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

A telling example of determination and desire for intellectual recognition, Emma's story is a mixture of philosophical ideas, which is the result of "references to Helvétius, on the one hand, and on the other, the concomitant intertextual presence of Godwinian rationalism contesting with Rousseauvian sensibility" (Bergmann 2011, 28–29). It is worth mentioning that before she embarks on the doomed pursuit of Harley, Emma strives to put her virtue to work, to display her intelligence and, ultimately, to redress, however unsuccessfully, an unshakeable patriarchal society: "[…] women, who have too much delicacy, sense and spirit, to degrade themselves by the vilest of all interchanges, remain insulated beings, and must be content tamely to look on, without any taking part in the great, though often absurd and tragical, drama of life" (*MEC* 85). In a radical Jacobin vein, the heroine transgresses the boundaries of traditional norms of conduct recommended for young women. Her philosophical conversations with Mr. Francis are a case in point, as are the discussions with her uncle and her relatives' harsh criticism of her sophisticated dialogues with Francis, which she straightforwardly dismisses. According to Bergmann, "the problem with communication between men and women being sexualised to such a degree that it excluded anything but courtship as a possible basis for interaction and dialogue was a moot point for Mary Hays" (Bergmann 2011, 42). Although her mind "began to be emancipated" (*MEC* 59), Emma goes out into the adult world under the auspices of rationality and alleged independence which, more often than not, prove to be unsuccessful. In a socially and politically vulnerable context, her sensibility is only complemented by reason, since Emma's assertiveness and ferment of ideas are indicative of social disorder. She thus enacts Helvétius's philosophical principles: "But do you perceive, that my reason was the auxiliary of my passion, or rather passion the generative principle of my reason?" (*MEC* 172). Her short-lived rebelliousness is a characteristic of most of the Jacobin novels, whose conclusion "would have a logical truth and necessity which would make them simply the imaginative reenactment of a philosophical argument" (Kelly 1989, 216). Notwithstanding her sagacity, Emma ends up as a social outcast who actually echoes Hays's staunch belief that "society could be perfected, that changes could be brought about, if men and women would only consent to being educated and working together in compliance with a principle that was founded in a Jacobin vision of equality" (Bergmann 2011, 39). Nevertheless, apart from Mr. Francis, who, guiding her mind in a reflective manner, becomes "her friend and

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

3 What Price Independence?

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

with Emma, in stark contrast to Dr Montague, a man "with an impetuous temper and stubborn prejudices," whose "language of gallantry" (*MEC* 69), fortune and marriage proposal are at once dismissed by Emma, a daring resolution which sparks her relatives' discontent. Inculcated by Mr. Francis, independence as a guarantor of well-being is a view which runs contrary to Helvétius's[7] and gets closer to "the Stoic-Socratic notion that the true good can only be found *within*, making one's happiness beyond the reach of chance and external circumstances" (Norton 2013, 299; emphasis in the original). Under the influence of Godwin's philosophical ideas of character and necessity advanced in *Political Justice*,[8] Emma asks Mr. Francis in their correspondence: "To what purpose did you read my confessions, but to trace in them a character formed, like every other human character, by the result of unavoidable impressions, and the chain of necessary events?" (*MEC* 177) In contradistinction with Godwin's normative philosophical discourse, the subjective tone adopted by Emma reinforces the heroine's excessive sensibility, which is only temporarily amended by Mr. Francis's rational remarks meant to support Emma's self-analysis in a Stoic manner. Similarly, echoing Wollstonecraft's key principles posited in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792),[9] Emma's aunt suggests

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 Conclusions

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

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

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"O wretched and ill-fated mother!": Motherhood in Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice*

Dóra Janczer Csikós
csikos.dora@btk.elte.hu

By the end of the eighteenth century, motherhood had come to be seen as the ultimate source of female identity. The maternal body was invested with different meanings; it was simultaneously glorified and demonised, depending on whether it was submitted to patriarchal control or not. The cult of motherhood constructed women as naturally submissive and nurturing; any unconventional expressions of maternity were branded as monstrous. The re-assessment of the sanctity of motherhood is one of the key features of Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice*. The novel challenges prevailing ideas of domesticity as represented in the idealised mother figure. The lack of the cult(ivation) of motherhood, the re-assessment of the trope of the monstrous mother, and the creation of a heroine who defiantly refuses to become a wife and ends up mothering a disruptive text, make Hays one of the formidable rebellious Marys.

Keywords: maternity, cult of motherhood, daughters, social criticism, domesticity.

1 Introduction

Soon after the publication of Mary Hays's novel, *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), the conservative *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* launched a vitriolic attack on the author. The novel was called filthy and disgusting; "a dagger […] [in] the hand of an assassin" ("*The Victim*" 1799, 58). It features three rebellious Marys: besides the author of the novel Mary Hays, the heroine and her mother are also called Mary. No wonder the critic viciously exclaims, "we are sick of Mary" ("*The Victim*" 1799, 57). Through its three female figures, the novel contests a number of debilitating prejudices and ideological constructs, of which the scope of this paper will only tackle one: motherhood.

The re-assessment of the sanctity of motherhood is one of the key features of the novel. *The Victim of Prejudice* disrupted prevailing ideas of domesticity as represented in the idealised mother figure. Throughout the book, "mother" is modified with an epithet: "wretched" (seven times out of the fifteen appearances of the word "mother:" Hays [1799] 1998, 69, 72, 123, 128, 136, 168, 174), "unfortunate" (three times: Hays [1799] 1998, 96, 102, 140) or "ill-fated" (twice: Hays [1799] 1998, 69, 136).

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The lack of the cult(ivation) of motherhood evidently provoked some early reviewers of the novel, whose criticism was levelled as much at the author as the novel itself. Mary Hays, unlike the other rebellious Marys, such as Mary Wollstonecraft or Mary Robinson, never had a child, nor did she ever marry. In a highly offensive, gendered language intimating failed motherhood, the reviewer in *The Critical Review, or Annals of Literature* called the novel "the *offspring* of the novelist's imagination" and claimed that it appears to be "an *abortion* of improbabilities *issuing* from the *frigid* brain of a paradoxical sophist" ("Miss Hays'" 1799, 452, 450, emphases added).[1]

Although the reviewer claims that the novel is the offspring of the author's distorted imagination, in her essay, "On Novel Writing" (published in *The Monthly Magazine*, two years before *The Victim of Prejudice*), Hays explicitly asserted her contention that novels must be rooted in reality and paint life "as it really exists, mingled with imperfection, and discoloured by passion […] [rather] than in painting chimerical perfection and visionary excellence, which rarely, if ever, existed" (1797, 181). The "improbabilities" that the reviewer finds fault with are the Gothic elements of the novel, but the unreal, Gothic-like quality of *The Victim of Prejudice* is, in fact, a powerful tool Hays deliberately employs. Gothic is a means through which she challenges the ideals promoted by prominent men of letters,[2] who, in Hays's mind, deceived readers with "illusive representations of life" and with creating "perfect models of virtues" (1797, 180). *The Victim of Prejudice*, on the other hand, presents complex female characters, whose lived experiences—stifled and circumscribed by social expectations and prejudices—could aptly be exposed through the Gothic.

One of the perplexities of the novel must have resulted from Hays's radical refusal to reduce her female characters to stereotypes. All three women disrupt the saint-or-sinner / mother-or-whore dichotomy ingrained in the fiction and non-fiction of the late eighteenth century.[3] Through Hays's giving voice to the prostitute as well as the model woman of conduct books, the readers can see how they establish their individual life stories and subvert prevailing paradigms of maternity.[4]

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[1] The reviewer may also allude to Wollstonecraft's Preface to *The Wrongs of Woman* where she identifies the creative process as hard labour and expresses her hope that her efforts will not prove to be "the abortion of a distempered fancy" (Wollstonecraft 1994, 5).

[2] In her essay on novel writing, Hays particularly refers to Samuel Johnson's highly influential article in *The Rambler* (31 March 1750), in which he proposes that, in works of fiction, "the best examples only should be exhibited" and the author's task is to "cull from the mass of mankind, those individuals upon which the attention ought most to be employ'd; as a diamond, though it cannot be made, may be polished by art, and placed in such a situation, as to display that lustre which before was buried among common stones" (1750, 31).

[3] Conduct books, moral tracts and pamphlets disseminated this ideology most prominently.

[4] On the historical controversy surrounding the institution of motherhood, see Vickery 2003, 87–127.

2 Depictions of Motherhood in the Late Eighteenth Century

By the end of the eighteenth century, motherhood had come to be seen as the ultimate source of female identity. The ideological pedestal on which mothers were put surpassed even that allotted to the virtuous wife, and the cult of motherhood constructed women as naturally submissive and nurturing. Maternal duty was an obligation towards the child and the husband, and by extension, it was also considered to be the basis for women's engagement in the moral care of the nation.[5] In his conduct book, *Strictures on Female Education: Chiefly as It Relates to the Culture of the Heart* (1787) with his rhetorical question, "Why indeed had woman her existence but to dignify and ennoble it by such superior employments?", John Bennett configures motherhood as the sole purpose of a woman's existence (95). In the ensuing bizarre tableau, the mother is lactating and educating simultaneously, and is relegated to the children's rather than the adults' sphere: "When does she appear to so much advantage, as when, surrounded, in her nursery, by a train of prattlers, she is holding forth the moral page for the instruction of one, and pouring out the milk of health to invigorate the frame and constitution of another?" (1787, 95). Tender and nursing, mothers were eulogised as the locus of national identity and health: "*Unimpaired* constitutions would produce a race of hardy and of healthy children, who, in time, might become the defenders of their country, and the pillars of a declining state" (1787, 95, emphasis in the original). What Bennett's metonymical reference to women as "constitutions" implies is corroborated by medical historians: women were increasingly identified with their body, their reproductive, biological function in particular. Londa Schiebinger's compelling analysis of the first drawings of the female skeleton in the eighteenth century demonstrates that representations of the human body at the time were culturally laden. When looking for a "perfect" skeleton to serve as a model, anatomists had distinct biases: "I have always observed that the female body which is the most beautiful and womanly in all its parts, is one in which the pelvis is the largest in relation to the rest of the body" (Wenzel qtd. in Schiebinger 1986, 62). Anatomists were propelled by preconceived ideas of femininity: the emphasis on the large pelvises and the correspondingly wide hips in the drawings reveal that a vital reproductive role was attributed to women.[6] Besides their aptitude for procreation, in these anatomical illustrations, women's bodies also conformed to certain norms of beauty; namely, "the harmony of her

[5] See Mellor 2002.

[6] The unusually small brain cavities, on the other hand, imply that women were supposed to have limited intellectual capacities (Schiebinger 1986, 42–82). See also Schiebinger 1989, and Laqueur 1990.

limbs, beauty, and elegance, of the kind that the ancients used to ascribe to Venus" (Soemmerring qtd. in Schiebinger 1986, 62).[7] Indeed, anatomists followed the example of painters who "draw a handsome face, and if there happens to be any blemish in it, they mend it in the picture" (Albinus qtd. in Schiebinger 1986, 62). Anatomists of the eighteenth century "mended" nature and idealised the maternal female body to fit emerging ideals of femininity and motherhood.

Unsurprisingly, the aestheticisation of maternity appears in paintings as well. As Kate Retford's fine study of the art of domestic portraiture has shown, whereas the mother was usually depicted among her siblings in the company of her husband and extended kin in early eighteenth-century portraits, she and her child had come to be isolated from the wider family unit and were placed close to the picture plane by the middle of the century. This enhanced the sense of intimacy and immediacy, and also intimated that the welfare of the children was increasingly seen as the mother's responsibility.[8] The rigidity of posture, self-consciousness of pose, and lack of communication that characterised earlier family portraits gave way to intimacy and interaction between mother and child (Retford 2006, 85). Mothers were depicted engrossed in cuddling their children and entirely unaware of the presence of the spectator. The physical and eye contacts, their intertwined forms showed their relationship as deep and instinctual. Most paintings captured the two figures "entirely absorbed in one another, united by a fundamental and natural bond, and seemingly unselfconscious" (Retford 2006, 87).[9] As Amanda Vickery notes, the notion that maternal instinct is a *natural*, biological state slowly replaced the earlier, biblical rationalisation of maternity, which nonetheless lived on in the pictorial depictions (2003, 93). Portraits of mothers drew on the conventions of devotional pictures of the Madonna and the child, and deliberately imitated the Old Masters, such as Michaelangelo or Raphael. The mother was thus ennobled through a religious frame of reference, and maternal instinct was elevated to a spiritual plane and depicted as timeless (Retford 2006, 92–93).

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[7] The most controversial ones among these models are known as the "anatomical Venuses." These life-size dissectible wax medical models were produced in Italy at the end of the eighteenth century. The use of wax to imitate the flesh resulted in eerily lifelike figures, many of which reclined on cushions and were adorned with flowing hair and jewellery. Their body was openable and was equipped with removable parts—often a foetus, to indicate their reproductive capacities. Also referred to as "The Demountable Venus," "The Slashed Beauty," and "The Dissected Graces" (Ebenstein 2012, 346), these recumbent wax women were "presented as objects rather than as subjects, as in the throes of experience rather than as active, as both pregnant and erotic" (Jordanova 1989, 55).

[8] There was, as Ludmilla Jordanova notes, a significant shift "away from associating children 'naturally' with their fathers and toward associating them 'naturally' with their mothers" (qtd. in Greenfield 1999, 8).

[9] Desmond Shawe-Taylor suggests that the intertwined form of mother and child resembles Renaissance sculptures of the Holy Family carved from one stone (1990, 192).

The changes that took place in the ideology of motherhood were unequivocally reflected in *The Lady's Magazine*. With a readership of 16,000 at its peak, it was one of the most influential publications in its day and the contributors commented on and evaluated all the changes that occurred at the time, whether about taste or configuration of gender.[10] In the 1770s, when the magazine was launched, there were hardly any stories about mothers; the main focus was on love and marriage, especially on how women could make themselves pleasing to men. By the 1790s, women's roles expanded to include giving birth to and nurturing their own children as well as the families of the less fortunate. All other roles—as wives and women—became peripheral (Fowkes Tobin 1990, 209–13). As the contributors and readers of the *Lady's Magazine* were mostly (though certainly not exclusively) females, the fact that it was instrumental in forging the ideology of tender, nursing and self-sacrificial motherhood made Beth Fowkes Tobin conclude that it "provided women with a sense of self-worth and the confidence to value themselves and their 'feminine' traits of tenderness, sensitivity, and compassion," and gave them "the opportunity to perform a task that was of equal or greater value than their husband's worldly and compensated work" (1990, 217). While it may have given women a sense of self-worth, the cult of motherhood was particularly restrictive. The new cultural dispensation defined mothers as self-sacrificing, docile, and deprived of control; any departure from this script was deemed heinous. To quote Bennett again, neglecting the maternal duty "is not only an unnatural indecency, but even the highest criminality" (1787, 95). Similarly, in Hugh Downman's immensely popular poem, *Infancy; or, The Management of Children, a Didactic Poem in Six Books,* which came out in at least seven editions between 1774 and 1809, the woman who refuses to comply with her maternal duties is "all deceit": she is a "fair Barbarian" who has the *form* of a woman but not the *heart* (1774, 1:9, 12). Any unconventional expression of the maternal self, let alone the refusal to become a mother, was branded as monstrous and unnatural: indeed, a threat to the social order.[11] As Ruth Perry so aptly notes, "[w]omen had never before been imagined with more personal significance and less social power" (2004, 340). The motherhood that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century was "a colonial form—the domestic, familial counterpart to land enclosure at home and imperialism abroad" (Perry 1991, 206). Unsurprisingly, women writers in the 1790s used maternity as a ground from which they launched an attack on patriarchy and domesticity.

[10] For more on this, see Batchelor and Powell, 2018. See also, in this issue, Álvarez Faedo 2023.

[11] For a discussion of monstrous motherhood, see especially Nussbaum 1995, Chapter 5 of Cody 2005, Burke 2007, and Francus 2013.

3 Mary Hays, *The Victim of Prejudice*

The prevalence of miscarriages and (symbolic) infanticides in the novels of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, Mary Hays, and Mary Shelley signals how the rebellious Marys withdrew from, and, thus, rebelled against the domestic economy (Rajan 2002, 212).[12] Mothers are notably absent from the narratives—they are dead, imprisoned, or otherwise missing and marginalised while their stories are mediated through letters, memoirs,[13] or recollections by other characters. At a time when the ideology of self-sacrificing and nurturing motherhood was becoming a cultural obsession, mothers were mainly present by their absence in fiction.[14] One practical reason why normative mothers are missing from (and in) novels may be that they do not have a narrative potential: self-effacing and pliant, the domestic mother is unable to sustain narrative attention. But more importantly, as Susan C. Greenfield points out, "the novel's attention to the mother's absence captures the fallacy of contemporary maternal ideals—that successful motherhood does not exist in women's novels because it does not exist in real life, and that the authors are self-consciously rejecting the proliferating images that suggest otherwise" (2003, 18).

Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* defies "the false and pernicious principles" and "the exaggerated eulogiums of enthusiasts" (Hays 1797, 180) which characterised the newly emerged ideals of maternity. Through the tragic lives of three women, the novel showcases three types of failed motherhood and by presenting three different kinds of trajectories, Hays refused to depict motherhood as a "monolith" (Bowers 1996, 30). To accentuate the non-homogeneity of her mother figures, Hays chose three different modes to relate their stories: the Gothic for the protagonist, Mary; the melodramatic for her mother; and the sentimental for Mary's maternal friend. These modes overlap at points, just as the lives of the female characters, who—irrespective of whether they are virtuous or fallen—eventually become victims of the same stifling ideology.

The two real mothers' stories are subsumed in the autobiography of the protagonist, Mary Raymond. Mary, despite having all the qualities of a model mother, remains single and will not have a biological offspring: instead, she mothers a *text* addressed to the future readers. Making Mary the narrator and focal character in the novel shows Hays's contention that there are alternative modes of reproduction, and

[12] More about this in Péter Ágnes's recent monograph, *A függetlenség ára* (2022).

[13] See, for instance, Maria Parrino's article on Mary Robinson's *Vancenza* (2023) and Eva Antal's study of Mary Wollstonecraft's novels (2023) in this issue.

[14] Scholars who discuss maternal absence in late eighteenth-century novels include Ruth Bienstock Anolik (2003), Ruth Perry (2004), Jane Spencer (2005), Susan Greenfield (2003), Meghan Lorraine Burke (2007), and Marilyn Francus (2013).

mothering a text is just as valuable as birthing a child. This notion is already there in Hays's first novel, *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) and although Emma has a daughter, the plot kills off her child almost unnoticeably, leaving Emma in the liminal position of mother and non-mother. Her memoirs are dedicated to her adopted child, Augustus (the child of a man she was in love with but could not marry). In both novels then, biological reproduction is replaced by an alternative type of maternal transmission: literary and ideological progeny. This is more radical in *The Victim of Prejudice*, where the childless protagonist is entirely taken out of the system of natural reproduction.

Characteristically, the first mention of the word, "mother,"—appearing in the memoirs of Mary's mother—is in the third conditional: "I might have enjoyed the endearing relations, and fulfilled the respectable duties, of mistress, wife, and mother" (Hays [1799] 1998, 63), and one of the major points of the novel is to interrogate the reasons of this third conditional. *The Victim of Prejudice* locates the faultlines of maternal ideology in social prejudice and sexual double standards, and radically refuses to show women dissenting from this ideology as guilty, or those abiding by it as happy. By refusing to essentialise these women to singular roles (Mary's mother is both a mother and a prostitute, and Mary is a nurturing and caring woman, although she is not a mother), Hays provides a more nuanced depiction of female lives than what emerged from conduct books, treatises, and paintings of the age.

4 Mothers (and Daughters) in *The Victim of Prejudice*

Mary's story begins with images of confinement. As we learn from the first sentence, she is writing her autobiography "cut off from human sympathy, immured in the gloomy walls of a prison" ([1799] 1998, 3). Clearly indebted to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, Hays's novel too literalises female experience of oppression as imprisonment. But whereas in the former novel, the physical aspects of motherhood are an overarching concern—the maternal body is metonymically represented through images of frustrated breastfeeding, "burning bosom—a bosom bursting with nutriment" (Wollstonecraft, 1994, 7)—, in Hays, the focus shifts from corporeal to political deprivation: "injustice", despotism" and "oppression" (Hays [1799] 1998, 3). Both authors use the trope of maternity to formulate social and ideological critique, but while in *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* biological maternity is mediated through Maria's memoirs being addressed to her own force-weaned daughter, *The Victim of Prejudice* begins with images of *cultural* (re) production: Mary writes her autobiography to all future readers. By calling them

"successor[s]" ([1799] 1998, 3), Hays clearly establishes the kinship between Mary and the readers. Mary's (narrative) maternity is textually substantiated and her address to the readers, "thou […] tenant of a dungeon, and successor to its present devoted inhabitant, should these sheets fall into thy possession" ([1799] 1998, 3) echoes her mother's letter: "my unfortunate offspring, into whose hands these sheets may hereafter fall" ([1799] 1998, 66).

Letters with advice and guidance from absent mothers to their daughters provide a staple element of conduct literature in the second half of the eighteenth century.[15] These texts uniformly advocated chastity, obedience and piety as virtues that would guarantee a daughter's happiness. A good example of this is Arabella Davies's *Letters from a Parent to Her Children* from 1788, a sequence of letters—published posthumously—addressed by the mother to her children who are away from home to study or work.

> Ever study an obliging behaviour, because it not only makes yourself happy, but compels every body [*sic*] else to love you. […] Let us not imagine we are born to live the life of butterflies: they may sport and play and die, and no injury done; but we are called to a more important task. […] Let us survey the character of a holy man,[16] who thus aims to glorify his God: how lovely is his moral character! he sweetly finds religion influential in all his actions, and therefore he is cheerful as well as grave; he is industrious as well as given to prayer: he is frugal that he may be generous to the poor; he not only is happy but endeavours to make every body [*sic*] around him happy. My dear love, while you read and hear of such lovely characters, pray earnestly for the same grace to animate you, and endeavour to imitate them in those attracting virtues, that so much distinguish them. (1788, 16–17; 19–21)

What this and similar maternal legacy narratives postulate is that through proper behaviour, decent education, hard work, charity, and piety, one can be a useful and beloved member of society. By creating a heroine who is a paragon of all these virtues yet ends up raped, ostracised, and incarcerated in debtor's prison, Hays turns the genre upside down and exposes the fallacies of these narratives. Unlike Arabella Davies, who urges her child to survey and imitate the attractive virtues of a moral character, Mary Raymond's legacy is to show that conduct-book perfection matters nothing in a society that judges the daughters by their mother's deed, and which identifies women primarily with their body.

In the novel, references to the body (and bodily appearance) are sparse; the word 'body' appears three times, whereas 'mind' ninety, and 'spirit' forty-five times. Mary

[15] As Jill Campbell notes, the trope of maternal transmission is: "an inheritance of experience from generation to generation, especially from mother to daughter—and especially as transmitted in the form of a text penned by a dead or missing mother—is a powerful and pervasive one in the late eighteenth-century" (2007, 163).

[16] The "holy man" is the example virtuous women need to follow.

describes her own body only at the beginning of her story, and even there, the body is never disconnected from the mind: "Tall, blooming, animated, my features were regular, my complexion a rich glowing brunette, my eyes vivacious and sparkling; dark chestnut hair shaded my face, and floated over my shoulders in luxuriant profusion; my figure was light and airy, my step firm, my aspect intelligent, and my mind inquisitive" ([1799] 1998, 5). With a "robust constitution, a cultivated understanding, and a vigorous intellect" ([1799] 1998, 5), Mary overwrites ideas of gender and places herself beyond the feminine/female body. Significantly, Mary Raymond's figure seems to be modelled on Mary Wollstonecraft. The description of the protagonist of *The Victim of Prejudice* echoes Hays's necrology on Wollstonecraft in terms of the body,[17] but more importantly, in terms of the mind: "More than feminine sensibility and tenderness, united with masculine strength and fortitude, a combination as admirable as rare, were the peculiar characteristics of her mind" (1800, 458). Indeed, Hays's unsigned obituary (published in the *Monthly Magazine* immediately after Wollstonecraft's death) is an early version of the quixotic fight and subsequent fate of Mary Raymond: "victim to the vices and prejudices of mankind, her ardent, ingenuous, unconquerable spirit, resisted their contagion[,] contemned their injustice, rose superior to injury, and rested firmly on its own resources and powers" (1797, 233).[18] Ironically, although unconquerable in their spirits, both the real-life Mary Wollstonecraft and the fictional Mary Raymond eventually fall prey to their bodies. Wollstonecraft's destiny was her *maternal* body, Mary Raymond's is her attractive *feminine body* she inherited from her mother. Hays clearly establishes the link between the fate of the protagonist and her physical body: "the graces, with which nature had so liberally endowed me, proved a material link in the chain of events, that led to the subsequent incidents of my life; a life embittered by unrelenting persecution, and marked by undeserved calamities" ([1799] 1998, 6).

The opening images, which show Mary in prison, are not simply a familiar Gothic plot device. Mary's circumscription is manyfold: she is immured *physically* within the literal walls of the debtor's prison, entrapped *biologically* in her once beautiful now violated body, confined *culturally* within debilitating assumptions about fallen femininity, constricted *socially* as an illegitimate daughter of a seduced woman, and also enmeshed *textually* in the narrative. Her story does not unfold linearly but in prolepses and analepses and it is further disrupted by her mother's

[17] "Her person was above the middle height and well-proportioned; her form full; her hair and eyes brown; her features pleasing; her countenance changing and impressive; her voice soft" (Hays 1800, 459).

[18] Some phrases of the obituary are literally repeated in *The Victim of Prejudice*. Mary is not only a victim of prejudice, but also explicitly referred to as "unconquerable spirit" rising "superior to […] injury" ([1799] 1998, 3, 119).

inset plot. The complicated narrative technique enhances the feeling of being lost and shows how Mary's own narrative is finally subsumed by her mother's. Aptly, the opening images of the dungeon—dark, damp and connected with torpor and inactivity ([1799] 1998, 3, 167–68)—are reminiscent of the womb.[19] As it turns out at a later point in the narrative, it is because of her mother (herself a victim of oppressive cultural scripts) that Mary is incarcerated and is dying, so the difference between womb, cell and tomb is blurred.

What makes the novel particularly chilling is the contrast between the suffocating claustrophobia of the "Introduction" (a short preface preceding Mary's autobiography) and the subsequent account of Mary's childhood. Raised and educated by a benevolent male guardian, Mr Raymond, the orphan Mary grows up unrestrained in a romantic village alongside two aristocratic boys in ignorance of the circumstances of her birth. Hays uses characteristic plot elements of a sentimental novel and, as Perry explains, such late eighteenth-century novels abound in

> stories of orphans who turn out to be well-born after all and who, by the end of the novel, are miraculously reunited with their missing mothers, fathers, sisters, or brothers; stories of illegally diverted fortunes set right by indisputable documents long hidden in inherited caskets and then corroborated […] and most dramatically in tearful tales of daughters long-separated from their fathers but recognized and lovingly claimed in the end. […] Justice invariably prevails in these fictions, and in the end the outcast daughters inherit what is due them and marry the men they love as fully endowed equals. (2009, 40–41)

Defiantly, Hays inverts the literary formulas of female orphans' anguished quests for their identity and living happily ever after in wealth (re)united with their lost family and with their beloved. What remains of all these in *The Victim of Prejudice* is the displacement of the daughter and a desperate quest, which is ultimately for survival: "surely, *I had the right to exist!*" ([1799] 1998, 50, emphases in the original). It is exactly this right to exist that Hays interrogates in the novel, and like Wollstonecraft before her in *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, she reconsiders prevailing assumptions about fallen women and the mother-daughter relationship.

Although Mary's guardian withholds information about her parents and raises Mary to be impeccably educated and virtuous, when she falls in love with one of the aristocratic boys she is growing up with, Mr Raymond reveals to her the disgraceful circumstances of her birth. Her mother, though born to a middle-class family, succumbed to a seducer who soon abandoned her; pregnant and forlorn, she was

[19] Claire Kahane and Suzan Wolstenholme argue that the dark spaces are emblematic of the maternal body, so the Gothic heroine's striving to escape this space implies her attempt to separate from the mother (qtd.in Anolik 2003, 30). Mary makes no such attempt in *The Victim of Prejudice*.

reduced to fend for herself as a prostitute, and finally ended up as an accomplice in a murder. Because of "barbarous prejudice" (Hays [1799] 1998, 174), Mary is trapped in an inherited social identity which, as Hays's novel exposes, completely disregards her personal merit. An illegitimate child of a criminal mother, Mary herself is automatically considered blemished. Virtuous and chaste as she is, she cannot marry the man she loves because she would disgrace him and jeopardise the purity of his family. As Lorraine M. Burke explains, "illegitimate children were often treated as inherently tainted beings whose very existence functioned to threaten the proper patrilineal transmission of power, and therefore were made outcasts of social communities before they even had the chance to enter one" (2007, 48–9). Worse still, Mary's fate is not just socially but also biologically predetermined. Mothers who did not conform to the cultural scripts of idealised maternity were seen to be "channeling potentially subversive maternal energies. […] [T]heir bodies were represented as potentially pathological, conduits of infectious diseases or unwholesome character traits" (Kipp 2003, 25). Children of fallen women were deemed polluted not only through breastfeeding, but also through their genetic inheritance. The mother's milk transmitting infectious diseases was a metonymy for the moral blemish and deviant character that the child was supposed to have inevitably contracted in the mother's womb. Exactly because of this biological determinism, in sentimental novels suspicion of illegitimacy had to be cleared up at the end, "since a lapse in chastity on her mother's part would, by hereditary influence, have blemished the flawless purity required in the heroine" (Rogers 1977, 67). Hays refuses to depict Mary as flawed, or even her mother as immoral. Mary falls not because of a fatal maternal transmission but because of cultural scripts which construct her and her mother's fall as inevitable.

Mary learns about her mother's tragic life from a letter her mother wrote in prison while awaiting her death sentence. Tellingly, her memoirs are framed by the narration of Mr Raymond, to whom the letter was originally addressed. As Burke insightfully notes, "[t]his structure, in which a woman's defining personal moments are encased in the observations of masculine eyes, is a fitting metaphor for most women's experiences in eighteenth-century England" (2007, 57). Circumscribed as it is, by allowing the mother to tell her own story, Hays gives voice to subjective female experience. With the first-person narration she reclaims to the mother herself the right to interpret the maternal body and feelings, and hurls back the blame for failed motherhood to society. Seduced and repentant, Mary's mother would like to return to virtue and is desperately imploring for help but neither the father of her child, nor her own parents listen to her pleas. "[B]randed with infamy, and a wretched outcast from social life" (Hays [1799] 1998, 63), she is completely abandoned. In her most desperate moment, motherhood gives her temporary relief, "I forgot for awhile its barbarous father, the world's scorn, and my blasted prospects: the sensations of the injured woman, of the

insulted wife, were absorbed for a time in the stronger sympathies of the delighted mother" ([1799] 1998, 65). But as she is unable to find decent work because of her tainted reputation, she is compelled to resort to prostitution and place her infant daughter with a hireling. As "the mother becomes stifled in [her] heart" (Hays [1799] 1998, 66), she grows more and more deprived. Deviating from the ideal of self-sacrificing, nurturing and tender maternity, Mary's mother is the epitome of what was considered monstrous motherhood. However, Hays makes it very explicit that it is the ruthlessness of society and not her sexual conduct that makes the degradation of Mary's mother inexorable. Although after giving up on her child she sees herself a "fiend" and a "monster" (Hays [1799] 1998, 66, 67), she eventually realises that she is "the victim of the injustice, of the prejudice, of society, which, by opposing to [her] return to virtue almost insuperable barriers, had plunged [her] into irremediable ruin" ([1799] 1998, 66). Wollstonecraft's famous maxim, "[i]t is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world!" (1993, 143), is further radicalised by Hays: there is no justice and no charity either. Nobody is helping Mary's mother in her struggle for survival.

Hays's criticism is particularly aimed at patriarchy and their cult of maternity. The novel exposes paternal inadequacy; both her child's and her own father abandon Mary's mother. The callousness and indifference of the fathers make them complicit in monstrous motherhood. Through the relentless father figures Hays contests two tropes which were widely used in eighteenth-century novels: the all-forgiving father, whose unconditional love saves and redeems his fallen daughter, as in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766) or in Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771); and the trope of the father doting over his breastfeeding spouse. Besides Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753) and Clara Reeves's *The Two Mentors* (1783), Hugh Downman's earlier quoted poem, *Infancy* (1774) is a representative example:

> To see thee in the loveliest Task employ'd
> Of female Duty, where thy Husband hangs
> Enamoured o'er thy fostering Breast; the Night
> Which gave thee to his Arms, gave not a Joy
> To this superior, piercing to the Soul,
> Sincere, and home-felt. (1774, 16)

In all these works, the sight of the nursing breast enraptures the husband and deepens his love for the mother. Downman's poem has an explicitly erotic overtone: the joy felt at the sight of the "fostering *Breast*" is as intense as the joy of the wedding night. Hays exposes these images of domestic bliss as fallacious:

> The despotism of man rendered me weak, his vices betrayed me into shame, a barbarous policy stifled returning dignity, prejudice robbed me of the means of independence. […] A sanguinary

> policy precludes reformation, defeating the dear-bought lessons of experience, and, by a legal process, assuming the arm of omnipotence, annihilates the being whom its negligence left destitute[.] ([1799] 1998, 68–69)

Extending her case beyond her own immediate plight, Mary's mother condemns patriarchy and traces her misery back to all men and the hypocritical double standards they had created: rather than being loving and cherishing, they "stifle," "rob," "defeat" and "annihilate" women. The overtly politicised language and the courtroom terminology ("betray," "rob," "reformation," and "legal process") connect the passage to Wollstoncraft's *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman*, since both novels indict patriarchy and find it guilty.

Poignantly, Mary's mother's last thoughts revolve around her daughter. At the end of her memoirs, she asks Mr Raymond to take the infant into his care:

> If, amidst the corruption of vaunted civilization, thy heart can yet throt responsive to the voice of nature, and yield to the claims of humanity […] shelter her infant purity from contagion, guard her helpless youth from a pitiless world, cultivate her reason, make her feel her nature's worth, strengthen her faculties, inure her to suffer hardship, rouse her to independence, inspire her with fortitude, with energy, with self-respect, and teach her to contemn the tyranny that would impose fetters of sex upon mind. ([1799] 1998, 69)

Her maternal legacy is to liberate her daughter from subordination to men (to reach "independence"), from the body ("fetters of sex"), and to elevate her mind to "feel her nature's worth." What the mother means by the daughter's nature's worth is her individual, moral worth; but as the novel so poignantly shows, Mary's worth is equated with what was seen as her maternal legacy: a social stigma and her assumedly tainted body. Even though after reading the mother's letter, Mary's description of herself shows how she increasingly disembodies and unsexes herself—the descriptions focus on loss and lack (cf. pale, cold, suffocated, unconscious, forlorn, wan and haggard, unsettled and frenzied, torpor, joyless, agony, wasted strength, sapped power)—she is still seen by society as a *body* made for male gratification. Identifying her with her mother's past, Mary is considered free prey for male sexual appetite. She is raped and harassed, and even in the jail she is molested and called "pretty a lass," "pretty maid" and "artful little b---ch" ([1799] 1998, 147, 148). She is simultaneously seen as an attractive sexualised body and as a contagion to be shunned "as one infected by pestilence" ([1799] 1998, 162).

Determined that she is more than just her mother's daughter, Mary refuses to identify herself with her body or her mother's deeds and keeps her faith in her mental integrity. An "unconquerable spirit, bowed but not broken," "[w]ounded, but not despairing," she defiantly claims that "wretched, but not guilty; my innocence and my integrity still remain to me" ([1799] 1998, 3, 138, 154).

What Hays's novel dissects is not only the idea of social and medical determinism according to which the mother's sins will necessarily be revisited on the daughter, but equally radically, the prejudice that the loss of virginity, through seduction or rape, inexorably brings about a moral decline.[20] Mary refuses to see herself as fallen:

> Reflections on the past are fruitless as painful: let us rather look forward; my mind, unviolated, exults in its purity; my spirit, uncorrupted, experiences, in conscious rectitude, a sweet compensation for its unmerited sufferings. The noble mind, superior to *accident*, is serene amidst the wreck of fortune and of fame. [...] I will not desert myself, though I perish in the toils that entangle my steps! ([1799] 1998, 156, emphasis added)

Rape is conceived of as an accident, temporary and transcendable, and as such, it should not inevitably lead to ruin. The novel challenges conventional identification of chastity with the hymen since though defiled, Mary remains steadfastly virtuous and continues to think of herself as chaste. As Marilyn Brooks compellingly argues, "[by] changing the terms of chastity, Hays transformed it into something which is liberating through its new, self-determined nature. Rather than just a precept or a habit learned, it became a matter of personal choice" (2008, 21).

Mary chooses to remain chaste throughout the novel and she learns from her mother not to submit herself to men: "It is not necessary that I should marry; I can exert my talents *for my support*, or procure a sustenance by the labour of my hands" ([1799] 1998, 99, emphasis added). Mary's sentiment is in conversation with Wollstonecraft's memorable passage in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, where marrying "for a support," Wollstonecraft claims, is "legal prostitution" (1993, 229). Mary refuses to prostitute herself— "I cannot, I ought not, to bestow on any man a reluctant hand with an alienated heart" ([1799] 1998, 99) —and she is determined to earn her own subsistence. What she needs to learn soon is that reputable employment is not available for women, let alone for women of her reputation.[21] Yet, even though she is starving and destitute, Mary refuses to get married (she rejects three proposals) or to become a mistress (a role offered by two wealthy men). By making her choose the debtor's prison over patriarchal confinement, Hays's novel rejects the literary and social convention of marriage for a resolution. Mary "withdraws from all forms of paternal economy, all symbolic compromise. Through her chastity, at once a choice and a traumatic protection, she abjects herself from the system of reproduction" (Rajan 2002, 224).

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[20] On Mary's indebtedness to St. Augustine's interpretation of rape, see Janczer Csikós 2022, 81.

[21] For a discussion of women looking for employment in fiction, see Gates 2015, Perry 2004, Chapter 1, and Copeland 1995.

As a contrast to Mary and her mother, the novel presents a third female figure, Mrs. Neville, the epitome of the domestic woman. The first glimpse we have of her is quite telling—she is described in the passive voice, deferentially sitting in the shadow:

> Mrs. Neville, the *wife* of the curate, *was seated* near a casement, *shaded* […]. *Two children*, blooming as cherubs, played at her feet. […] [T]he predominant passion of her soul, testified in every action, every expression, every glance, was, an *enthusiastic love for her husband*, a love at once *ineffably tender, chaste, and dignified*: *her children* were little less the *objects of her tender solicitude*. ([1799] 1998, 42, 44, emphases added)

Mrs. Neville is like a generalised maternal portrait. A scarcely individuated domestic woman, "a grammar really" (Armstrong 1987, 60), she is hardly any more than the reflection of her husband and children. Unsurprisingly, Mrs. Neville does not have her own narrative; as it was suggested above, normative mothers are unable to keep up narrative tension. Mrs. Neville's story is embedded in Mary's, it is just a short interlude to strike a contrast between her blissful domesticity and Mary's traumatised disinheritedness. Mrs. Neville is a maternal friend on whose bosom Mary can cry when she reads her mother's memoirs. As Perry, discussing the trope of the missing mother in late eighteenth-century novels has pointed out, "the yearning created by maternal absence in these fictions is sometimes supplied in the text by an older woman who is not the heroine's mother, but who guides and advises her, and stands in the place of a mother to her." And she adds, "[t]hese older women—these symbolic 'aunts'—have no narrative purpose except to give their support and appreciation to the poor, motherless heroine" (2004, 348). While applying the literary convention of symbolic aunts, Hays turns the trope upside down. Whereas fictional aunts are strong, independent and powerful women who shield the motherless heroine from the patriarchal world, Mrs. Neville herself is the ideal created by patriarchy: self-effacing, docile and pliant. In a striking plot twist, however, Mrs. Neville has a revelation. On her deathbed she sums up her painfully empty life: "I had no individual existence; my very being was absorbed in that of my husband. All the worth, all the talent, all the powers of my mind, were the product of my affection. […] I was the slave, and am at length become the victim, of my tenderness" ([1799] 1998, 173). Mrs. Neville's character (or rather, the lack thereof) is a powerful reminder that the cult of femininity and maternity is predicated upon self-effacement and the loss of autonomy. Mrs. Neville is "the inverse, indeed the underside, of the masculine" (Irigaray qtd. in Ty 1993, 70). When her husband passes away, she dies within a few days, leaving her small children orphaned.

What connects the three female characters of the novel is that they are all *victims* of proper womanhood: whether going against social and cultural expectations

as Mary and her mother do, or conform to them like Mrs. Neville, they all die in misery. Unlike in the concluding fragment of Wollstonecraft's *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman*, where motherhood is redemptive and co-maternity replaces the traditional family, in *The Victim of Prejudice* biological motherhood fails; it only leaves orphaned children behind. Hays (perhaps traumatised by Wollstonecraft's untimely and agonising death in childbirth) proposes an alternative regeneration. Mary's final declamation is Hays's own appeal addressed to future generations: "*I have lived in vain*! unless the story of my sorrows should kindle in the heart of man, in behalf of my oppressed sex, the sacred claims of humanity and justice" ([1799] 1998, 174). Hay's radical departure from orthodox domesticity is part of her life-long labour to mother texts on behalf of her "oppressed sex."

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"[L]ines, evidently written by a female hand": Mothers and Daughters in Mary Robinson's *Vancenza*

Maria Parrino
mariaparrino7@gmail.com

A celebrated public figure who became an iconic woman, Mary Robinson was an actress and a member of a community of eighteenth-century intellectual women writers. This study discusses her first novel, *Vancenza* (1792), and focuses on the relationship between the young protagonist, the orphan Elvira and her dead mother. By analysing Elvira's explorations and discoveries in the castle and eliciting the features of the Gothic in the novel, I intend to show how the discourse of authorship is framed within the daughter's urge to find out about her origins and her mother's revelatory written texts.

Keywords: Mary Robinson, *Vancenza*, authorship, mother's written texts, manuscript-discovery narrative, Gothic.

1 Introduction

In January 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote a letter to Mary Hays, inviting her to a supper party: "I expect Mrs [Mary] Robinson and daughter, to drink tea with me, on Thursday, will you come to meet them. She has read your novel [*Emma Courtney*], and was *very much* pleased with the *main* story; but did not like the conclusion" (qtd. in Byrne 2005, 349, emphases in the original). Part of a larger community of women writers, these three Marys shared time, opinions and valuable critical remarks making their ways into the opportunities and difficulties of the intellectual women in this period.

Mary Robinson was born in Bristol in 1757.[1] This is how four decades and several fictional writings later she describes in her *Memoirs* the beginning of her life:

> In this awe-inspiring habitation, […], during a tempestuous night, on the 27th of November, 1758, I first opened my eyes to this world of duplicity and sorrow. I have often heard my mother say that a more stormy hour she never remembered. The wind whistled round the dark pinnacles of the minster tower, and the rain beat in torrents against the casements of her chamber. Through life the tempest has followed my footsteps, and I have in vain looked for a short interval of repose from the perseverance of sorrow. ([1801] 1895, 3)

[1] There is some ambiguity about the date of her birth. See Byrne (2005, 429–30).

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Placed within the Gothic setting of a dark and stormy night, the imagery of a woman whose life is marked by grief and pain will be a constant feature of Mary Robinson's writings. Mary's father, Nicholas Darby, was a merchant who left his family when Mary was a child, travelled to America and took a mistress. Her mother, Hester, brought up five children and managed to support her family by starting a school for young girls in London, where Mary herself taught. The school was run until her father ordered it to be closed, a right he was entitled to by the English law of the time. At an early age, Mary wrote poems, then took up an interest in drama and was cast for a few roles, yet soon her mother convinced her to enter a marriage that appeared to be a convenient match but turned out to be a troublesome relationship instead. Thus, at the age of 16, Mary gave up the stage and married Tom Robinson, who claimed an income he did not have and was put into prison for debts. In 1774, just after the birth of her first child, Maria, Mary accepted to accompany her husband to prison, a decision often made by women at the time. But before long, she decided to return to the stage, and after her debut in 1776, encouraged and appreciated by actor-manager David Garrick and playwright Richard Sheridan, Mary became a famous professional actress. In 1779, her performance in *Florizel and Perdita*, an adaptation of *The Winter's Tale*, caught the attention of young Prince George of Wales (later Prince Regent, then King George IV), who fell in love with Mary and offered her to become his mistress. Mary started an intense and troubled relationship with him, which ended within a year but affected her whole life: she was promised an annuity, which was rarely paid, gained notoriety and earned the nickname of "Perdita" forever.

2 The Notorious Eighteenth-Century Celebrity

Besides being an actress, Mary Robinson was famous for her numerous and much talked-of love affairs. Her husband's infidelity from the beginning of their marriage and the family's difficult economic conditions encouraged a wide range of men to flirt, support and seduce her throughout her life. Her strong sense of independence contributed to the creation of the image of a transgressive woman, both in her private and public life, one of the first women to be called a "celebrity" (a term gaining currency in the eighteenth century), her notoriety ranging from sexual indiscretions to questionable behaviours (Close 2004, 172). Mary was also well-known for being a fashion leader, and her dresses—labelled "Perdita" or "the Robinson"—became instances of proto-celebrity branding. Her most voguish outfit was the 1782 "Perdita Chemise" (a hoop-free muslin gown fastened with a silk sash), one of her signature designs which became both recognizable and reproducible (Wilson 2009, 158).

In addition to featuring in caricatures and satires, Mary Robinson was one of the most frequently portrayed women of her day: the list of her portrayers includes Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and George Romney. These visual representations have provoked varied interpretations: whereas Anne Mellor and Eleanor Ty understand Gainsborough's full-length study from 1781 and Reynolds's half-length portrait from 1782, respectively, as endorsements of the "actress as a whore" version of Mary Robinson's life (Mellor 2000, 278; Ty 1998, 28), Anca Munteanu believes, instead, that the portraits present this beautiful, albeit notorious woman in a most flattering light (2009, 127). Whatever the case, the portraits are reminders of her unquestionable celebrity.

In the course of her life, Mary Robinson successfully metamorphosed from a glamorous yet morally suspect actress and a mistress of the Prince of Wales into a prominent member of the Della Cruscan literary circle. The various pseudonyms she used in her life—such as Laura, Laura Maria, Sappho, Oberon, Tabita Bramble, Lesbia, Julia, Bridget and Portia—all express the multi-faceted aspects of her public "self." As Lisa Wilson writes, "throughout her career, shaped as it was by an excruciatingly public gaze, Mary Robinson remained intensely self-conscious about her relationship to the critical apparatus, and she took an active role in shaping her public identity" (2009, 156). Very much concerned about public approval and visibility in society, Mary embodied the celebrity who was not only an image but also made herself publicly visible (Arnold 2014, 741). Besides her extravaganza, Mary was well-known for her radical political sympathies and feminist philosophy. A friend of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, she was a supporter of human rights, and in 1799 she wrote, under the pseudonym of Anne Frances Randall, the prose tract "A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination," in which she exhorted women to write and publish their works.

In 1783, a rheumatic fever seriously damaged her health and left her partially paralysed for the rest of her life. Despite her precarious physical condition, at the age of twenty-five, Mary Robinson became a literary woman. She authored six collections of poems, two plays, seven novels, essays, political treatises and a memoir. Her reputation as a writer gained her the title of "The English Sappho." Coleridge, who thought of her as a "woman of undoubted Genius," wrote: "I never knew a human Being with so *full* a mind," […] bad, good, & indifferent, I grant you, but full, & overflowing" (Griggs 1956, 1: 562 emphasis in the original).

Mary died in 1800. At her death, she left a draft of her memoirs for her daughter to be continued. Maria, who was her mother's constant companion throughout her entire life, published the *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson, Written by Herself with Some Posthumous Pieces* in 1801. In the autobiography, which covered Mary

Robinson's childhood, marriage, early writing, and career in the theatre, the author combined fiction and truth, building a public image of herself to be passed down to posterity. Although she repeatedly invoked a "Gothic structure" to define the characteristics of her own contemplative mind and to prove that she had a propensity to melancholic meditation (Close 2004, 173; Setzer 2016, 34), she must have been well aware that her *Memoirs* were to be completed by the hands of another author.

Her first novel, *Vancenza* (1792), was a literary sensation soon to be translated into French, German and Dutch. In fact, the novel received a mixed critical reception, and even Mary Robinson's daughter, when putting together her memoirs, gave an unfavourable opinion of the text, attributing the immediate popularity of the novel to her mother's reputation:

> Encouraged by popular approbation beyond her most sanguine hopes, Mrs. Robinson now published her first essay in prose […], of which the whole edition was *sold in one day*, and of which five impressions have since followed. It must be confessed, this production owned its popularity to the celebrity of the author's name, and the favourable impression of her talents given to the public by her poetical compositions, rather than to its intrinsic merit. (Robinson [1801] 1895, 216, emphasis in the original)

Allegedly "the work of a few days," the book was a great success, which flattered Mary. She wrote a Dedication "To the public" for the book's fourth edition, encouraged by the repeated instances of the "public favour" with which she had been honoured. Dated to 1793, the fourth edition (used for this study) slightly differs from the first, since it includes a number of additions, a feature not unusual at the time of its publication. The added parts are of two types: some are narratives expanding the subplots, while others unfold a prose which clearly goes beyond fiction and reveals the narrator's theorisation on topics ranging from rank and power to virtue and vice.

Vancenza being a little known novel, its short synopsis might be useful at this point. The story is set in fifteenth-century Castile, at the eponymous castle of Vancenza, where the Count lives with his sister, the Marchioness de Vallorie, her daughter Carline, and Elvira, an orphan whose family is unknown. When Prince Almanza, the son of an old friend of Count Vancenza, is wounded and rescued near the castle, Elvira falls in love with him. Her love is reciprocated, but a few misunderstandings create obstacles to their happiness. Eventually, marriage is arranged, but the day before the wedding Elvira discovers a case in a hidden part of the castle which contains a letter from her mother. It reveals that Elvira is the illegitimate daughter of the Count's dead sister and Prince Almanza's father, thus she is the half-sister of her fiancé. Devastated by despair and horror at her incestuous love, Elvira dies. The novel features a number of subplots, such as the mischievous behaviour of the

Duke del Vero, who attempts to seduce Elvira, the intrigues within the high society of Madame Montalba in Madrid, the confession of the real identity of the impostor Marquis Petrozi, and the Pilgrim's love story.

The full title of the novel is *Vancenza; or the Dangers of Credulity. A Moral Tale*. Before discussing "the dangers of credulity," I would like to focus briefly on the term "moral tale," as it raises the issue of the eighteenth-century debate concerning the "novel" form and the moralists' warning against women's novel-reading, based on the assumption that it was dangerous due to its mechanisms of automatic replication and recapitulation. The major preoccupation was that a woman reading about the seduction and fall of fictitious female characters would repeat the fate of that character in real life (Campbell 2008, 161). Whether or not at this stage of her writing career Mary Robinson was concerned about the issue, the epigraph on the title page sounds like an explicit warning, taken from *Hamlet*: "Be wary then: best SAFETY lies in FEAR" (Shakespeare [1601] 2015, 1.3). Laertes's words to his sister Ophelia convey advice that is to prevent the reader's loss of control in matters of love; the emphasis on "safety" and "fear" was added by Mary Robinson.

The aim of this essay is to focus on the relationship between Elvira and her mother. By analysing Elvira's explorations and discoveries in the castle and eliciting the features of the Gothic in the novel, I intend to show how the discourse of authorship is framed within the daughter's urge to find out about her origins and her mother's revelatory writings.

3 In Search of One's Origins

In *Vancenza* the main character, Elvira, is described as a quiet young woman endowed with beauty, virtue and knowledge. Like other female characters in the novel—Carline and the Marchioness, who has a degree in classical knowledge—she receives a proper education: Elvira's studies in literature range from French to Italian authors, such as Petrarch and Ariosto. Unlike the settings of other Gothic novels, the castle in which Elvira lives is neither hostile nor haunted, but a place where the young woman feels most at ease. The friendliness of the place, however, does not prevent Elvira from exploring it in constant search for secrets she will eventually reveal. Her first discovery occurs early in the novel. While sitting in a "pensive" mood at one of the windows of the gallery overlooking the peaceful view of the nearby lakes, mountains and valleys, Elvira notices some words written on the casement: "The small panes of glass were alternately painted in a variety of

devices, which made it difficult to decipher the characters; each square containing a single stanza" (Robinson [1792] 1793, 1:88–89).[2]

Unexpectedly, the ordinary contemplation of her surrounding world leads Elvira to an extraordinary discovery. Despite her difficulties in detecting them—a Gothic literary device which will be used elsewhere in the novel—Elvira manages to read the words on the window panes, a poetic text of five stanzas in which the speaker laments the loss of happiness. Two of the stanzas read as follows:

> Perchance, when youth's delicious bloom
> Shall fade unheeded in the tomb,
> Fate may direct a daughter's eye
> To where my mould'ring reliques lie;
> And, touch'd by sacred sympathy,
> That eye may drop a tear for ME!
>
> Betray'ed by love; of hope bereft;
> No gentle gleam of comfort left;
> Bow'd by the hand of sorrow low;
> No pitying friend to weep my wo:
> Save her who spar'd by Heav'n's decree,
> Shall live to sigh, and think of ME! (*V* 1:89–90)

The author addresses a daughter whose "eye" might hopefully chance upon the lines written by a mother not only reporting her grief but also wishing for the remains of her body to receive the needed "sympathy" for having been betrayed by love. The impact of this mother's premonitory wish on Elvira is both psychological and physical: "Something unfelt before seemed to take possession of all her faculties: the tenderness of love, the sympathy of sorrow, suffused the azure heralds of her soul with tears of pity!" (*V* 1:90) The entrenched lines affect the young reader who *does* experience the "sympathy" wished for by the author. Moreover, by placing the written text on the window panes, the narrative seems to enhance the space of liminality in which Elvira is set at this point, on the threshold between the outside and the inside, the known and the unknown, in search of a connection between her present and past. Thus, animated by "something unfelt before," Elvira

> […] read the lines over and over with the most earnest solicitude; the throbbing of her heart told her that they were connected with some tale of wo [sic], in which she bore a part; she was transcribing them in her pocket book when the Count awakened her attention by informing her that he waited for her. (*V* 1:90–91)

[2] All further references are to this edition of *Vancenza*, from now on abbreviated as *V* in in-text references.

In a sort of rite of passage, Elvira crosses the threshold, the urge to read as strong as the pressure to write the words in her notebook, in an attempt to appropriate herself of the text. Her effort to make sense of the discovery, however, is not private, but also affects others in the castle, the finding of the written text being immediately shared with the Count, who admits to having seen the lines before, but not knowing who they belong to. The only help the confused Count provides to the puzzled Elvira is that "they were written by a lady" who had lived a tragic life and had died in the castle about a decade earlier (*V* 1:91).

Here the narrative may have included a flashback to unfold the life of this mysterious lady. Instead, in the midst of the crucial discovery of the embedded text, after moving Elvira reluctantly away from the window, the narrative retains the mystery and shifts the setting to the high society of Madrid. Elvira, the Marchioness, Carline and Count Vancenza are invited there to parties organised by Madame Montalba, a fashionable woman whose guests are a display of disreputable characters of high social rank. In the following seven chapters, the plot focuses on the visit to Madrid, which eventually turns out to be fatal for Count Vancenza, who suffers a mortal wound when one of Madame Moltalba's friends, the mischievous Marquis Petrozi, tries to abduct Carline.

After the death of Count Vancenza and the family's ensuing mourning, when Elvira, Carline and the Marchioness sadly return to the castle, the Marchioness "br[eaks] the melancholy silence" by providing the young girls with a comprehensive analysis of the condition of the female sex (*V* 2:21). The lengthy narrative unfolds issues such as women's vulnerability, men and love, and a warning on the delusion of human perfection. The Marchioness's picture of life also deals with the issue of virtue and points out its contrast with vanity, avarice, ambition, passion and frivolous pursuits, all vices responsible for contaminating its purity. In this part of the narrative, as elsewhere, by making the Marchioness speculate on rank and power, Mary Robinson shows her increasing radicalisation and delivers her political commentary on universal rights; her fiction becomes the platform on which the author displays to the reader her vision of life: for example, that "[i]gnorance only descends to bestow admiration upon […] rank" (*V* 2:26), or that the enlightened mind searches truth and reason (*V* 2:27).

Empowered by the Marchioness's sound reasoning, and convinced that she is eligible to know more, Elvira proceeds to explore the castle, in a premonitory search for some traces of her past, even if when she goes back to the window panes, the sight of the lines renews her sorrow: "That some sad history was enveloped in the oblivious shroud of time, there remained not a single doubt; and her prophetic soul informed her, that she alone must unveil the fatal secret" (*V* 2:37). The words on the window pane have agency in the narrative not only because of their content but

also due to their visual features; the handwriting, albeit difficult to read, remains so impressed in Elvira's mind that it will enable her to detect another text later in the novel. Convinced of the existence of a "mystery," Elvira painstakingly looks for clues which may help her overcome her fears and hopes, her ingenuity and curiosity playing a crucial role in her search. The discovery of the secret remains her constant aim throughout the narrative, which yet once again shifts to a subplot, the lengthy story of a pilgrim's reciprocated love for a nun and its tragic end.

It will take eight chapters into the second volume and the unfolding of Prince Almanza's love for Elvira to return to the discovery of another embedded text, which will determine the course of the story. While taking away the old ornaments of the walls in preparation for her wedding, Elvira accidentally finds a hidden board behind the frame of a female portrait. After carefully removing the panel, Elvira realises she has come across an "extraordinary appearance of some secret repository" (*V* 2:111). Despite being petrified with horror, she remembers she is in possession of a little key given to her previously by the Count (without a clear explanation), which may open the door of the recess. When she eventually finds the courage to use the key, the discovery is shocking: "Within the hollow space, evidently contrived for the purpose, stood a small casket of massy gold, fastened with three broad badges of wax, bearing the arms of Vancenza" (*V* 2:113). Finding a "hollow space" in the wall (a metaphorical womb) and the family name paralyses Elvira. The Marchioness, who keeps watch of Elvira, awakes her from her "reverie" and is made privy to the discovery. Afraid and aware of the importance of her discovery, Elvira "seizes" the hand of the Marchioness, takes her to the casket and asks *her* to open it (*V* 2: 114). With some hesitation and only after having called in her daughter, Carline, the Marchioness breaks the seal and the "awful ceremony of inspecting its contents" is performed:

> Thus far having accomplished the task of dreary inquiry, they discovered a small crimson-velvet case fastened with clasps of gold. Upon opening it, they found it contained several sheets of paper closely covered with lines, evidently written by a female hand. (*V* 2:116)

Once again, Elvira's discovery of a written text is not a private experience but an event shared with others, in this case with other women. In a crescendo of tension whereby the voices are tremulous, the cheeks pale and the gazes fixed, the three women support each other by holding hands, a physical and symbolic female empowering bond. Yet it is left to Elvira to inspect the papers carefully and recognise the handwriting therein:

> Elvira, bending her eyes towards the papers which lay on the table, exclaimed: "Gracious God! I have seen these characters before!" The sad complaint inscribed upon the gallery window, was imprinted on her brain: the exact similarity chilled her almost to instant annihilation. (*V* 2:117)

If the resemblance with the handwriting of the stanzas on the window pane is surprising, the authorship of the papers is shocking: "the manuscript was unfolded, and the last page presented the signature of MADELINE VANCENZA" (*V* 2:150). The "female hand" that authored the lines belongs to the Count and Marchioness's dead sister. Unaware of its content, Elvira asks the Marchioness to read out the manuscript aloud to her. By doing so, the Marchioness gives voice to Madeline Vancenza, Elvira's real mother, in an overlapping of female maternal roles. The lengthy first-person narrative reveals the domestic tyranny of Prince Almanza over Madeline Vancenza, who—a victim of credulity—at first thought the Prince was in love with her, only to be abandoned after the birth of her daughter, Elvira. As she herself writes, "I was the *credulous* victim of an illicit passion" (*V* 2:122). Madeline Vancenza found asylum at her brother's castle and soon died, leaving her daughter unaware of her mother's life story. At this point, truth is restored, but the eventual revelation of the ancient secret has a devastating effect on Elvira: unable to cope with it, she becomes ill and dies.[3]

Elvira discovers her mother's existence by reading her poem and her letter, written texts which not only give voice to a woman's suffering and victimhood, but also raise the issue of a daughter's maternal legacy, passed down in the form of a text penned by a dead or missing mother. As Jill Campbell writes, such mother-daughter plots not only "extend the implications of the novelistic narrative beyond the individual case, making it the bearer of rational, social or political critique," but also become the place of "intense, irrational, even uncanny emotional power" (2008, 164). Elvira cannot escape her mother's seduction plot and turns into a victim, despite her virtue. One may question whether the novel is a tale of a wronged woman (Madeline Vancenza) or of female transgression (Madeline's and Elvira's love for the wrong man). As Stephanie Russo claims, *Vancenza* seems to be a tale of female victimhood rather than transgression (2013, 594). It is a story in which the sins of the mothers fall on innocent daughters whose only fault is to have found out the truth. Moreover, the narrative fits well within the debate on the effects of fiction on women readers. The story of Madeline Vancenza is a warning against the "dangers of credulity," as the title of the novel reads. Indeed, credulity is a feature which also emerges in the novel's subplots: Elvira mistakes the Duke Del Vero for Prince Almanza, the Marchioness and Prince Almanza believe that Elvira is in love with Del Vero, the Marquis Petrozi is not an aristocrat but an impostor, and the Pilgrim pretends being a confessor in order to seduce the nun in the monastery.

[3] The first-person narrative of a long-dead mother *topos* resonates with Mary Hays's novel *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), in which the young protagonist Mary reads about the seduction and betrayal of her mother, Mary, in a letter.

4 A Gothic Novel

Vancenza unfolds a narrative filled with features of the late eighteenth-century Gothic genre: fifteenth-century Spain and Italy for a setting, a castle, a young orphan woman of unknown parentage, siblings unaware of their kinship falling in love with each other, attempted abductions, murders, villains and a mysterious casket that contains a secret letter relating the past of the heroine's mother. Yet, unlike most Gothic novels of the time, *Vancenza* is profoundly pessimistic in the representation of social codes and conventions, portraying the lack of available options for women, and especially for transgressive women (Russo 2018, 588). The lack of options is also due to the issue of rank, an evident class prejudice being expressed throughout the novel. Elvira's unknown family origins place her at a subordinate level in society, and despite her virtue and beauty, she is considered inferior. The only character who seems not to be worried about rank is the young Prince Almanza. Yet, the impossible union between the two lovers seems to underline that the radical protest against class- and gender-based prejudices provides no solutions.

Among the several Gothic elements in the novel, one focuses on the recurrent feature of the female writer's hand and handwriting. In one part of the letter, Madeline Vancenza pictures herself after her death thus:

> When the hand that writes, and the heart that dictates these lines, are freezing on the dreary pallet of the grave; when the faint traces of my sorrows shall fade before the obliterating wing of time; perchance some kindred eye may drop the last commiserating tear, and wash out the remembrance of my woes forever. (*V* 2:120)

The manuscript here resonates with the words on the window panes Elvira well remembers. In contrast to the opinion of the anonymous critic, who in a 1792 issue of *The Critical Review* decided that this very paragraph was a perfect example of Mary Robinson's "improperly" ornamented language of poetry ("*Critical*" [1792] 2016), I think that what emerges here is the author's ability to merge poetry and prose by making the characters of the words of the manuscript resemble the ones in the lines on the window pane. First surprised by the discovery, the daughter eventually sheds tears in commiseration of such a sad story. The same imagery of the writing hand resonates in the words of Mary Robinson's *Memoirs* picturing the "life" of her own writings after her death: "Probably these pages will be read, when the hand that writes them moulders in the grave" ([1801] 1895, 83).

By means of another typical feature of Gothic literature, the author makes the manuscript found in the casket difficult to decipher. "The second [page] was scarcely legible, being blotted by the marks of many drops of water; probably the tears of the unfortunate writer.—The following pages were, with some difficulty, deciphered

[…]" (*V* 2:120). Despite the difficulty, the three women succeed in decoding the text, their reading unearthing physically and metaphorically what had been buried. In contrast, the final part of the narrative informs the reader that the manuscript (after the erasure of the family name) is eventually deposited in the library of the University of Naples (*V* 2:150), evoking a sort of new burial. Drawing on the tradition of eighteenth-century Gothic novels, such a literary device not only proves that the story is "authentic" but also assures readers that the text is well preserved for posterity.

Despite its unquestionable Gothic features, the novel has been rarely mentioned among (women's) Gothic writings. The novel is neither referred to in *Women's Gothic* (Clery 2000) nor in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Hogle 2002). It is only briefly cited in the volume *Romantic Gothic. An Edinburgh Companion* as "an imitation of Ann Radcliffe" (Wright and Townsend 2016, 38), and in *Gothic Incest. Gender, Sexuality and Trangression*, where in a footnote to the chapter on queer mothers, the writer draws a similarity between *Vancenza* and Horace Walpole's *The Mysterious Mother* (1768) regarding the issue of the lovers who discover that they are siblings just before their wedding (DiPlacidi 2018, 273). Interestingly, it is the biographer Paula Byrne, who admits to *Vancenza* being the product of the vogue for Gothic fiction and a fascinating historical document, albeit a novel whose literary merit is "now overblown to the point of absurdity," and invites the reader to turn to Mary Robinson's later novels for something "still worth reading" (Byrne 2005, 299). Jerrold Hogle's recent publication *Mary Robinson and the Gothic* eventually gives credit to the novel by including it in the chapter "The Gothic Image of the Defining Other" (Hogle 2023, 20–22).

In conclusion, I would like to go back to the image of the three Marys meeting up for tea. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, these women had a straightforward way of relating to each other. In one of their exchanges of literary opinions, when reviewing her novel *Hubert de Sevrac* (1796), Mary Wollstonecraft sharply criticised Mary Robinson's style thus: "her sentences are often confused, entangled with superfluous words, half-expressed sentiments, and false ornaments" (qtd. in Byrne 2005, 348). It may be feasible to imagine Mary Robinson accepting such comments, as she herself in the final stage of her life admitted her regret over most of her works being "composed in too much haste" ([1801] 1895, 239).

The life of such a celebrated woman ended prematurely at the age of forty-four, and with as little public involvement as possible in her later years. Besides her daughter Maria, only two people, William Godwin and the satirist John Wolcot attended the funeral. Yet when we look back at Mary Robinson's insubordinate and multi-faceted personality, we know she has the right to claim a place among the many other rebellious Marys who made history.

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Rebellious Marys at the Crossroads: Self-development in Mary Wollstonecraft's Novels, *Mary* and *Maria*

Éva Antal
antal.eva@uni-eszterhazy.hu

The context of the present article is my research on philosophies of female education and the questions of female *Bildung* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England. Female writings seem to rely on the theoretical background provided by the well-known male authors in order to present a critical and ironical reading. In my study, I highlight the ways of development expressed in the open and closed spaces in Mary Wollstonecraft's novels. In the quite autobiographical *Mary* (1788), in accordance with the characteristic aversion to the house*hold*, the heroine feels at home in nature, or on the road (cf. homelessness). Meanwhile, having left the suffocating *milieu* of her home and her marriage, she finds her peace and partner in her own way. In the unfinished novel, *Maria* (1798), the prisonlike environment of the wife with her actual imprisonment in the Gothic asylum, physically represents the patriarchal restraints in women's lives. Maria is a rebel, she leaves her husband, and later her readings free her mind. In both novels the heroines struggle with the expectations of the age and their paths of life display the possibilities for development offered to a young woman in the second half of the eighteenth century—in the framework of Wollstonecraft's early *Bildungsromane*.

Keywords: reading, self-development, Bildungsroman, Mary Wollstonecraft, *Mary*, *Maria*.

"Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?"
(Mary Wollstonecraft)

1 Introduction: the Rebellious Marys

The last two decades of the eighteenth century were dominated by rebellious Marys in English fiction, the embodiments of courageous and "outcast" female characters in novels written by Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, and Mary Hays, among others. In an article published in the *Anti-Jacobean Review and Magazine* in 1799, the anonymous pugnacious critic sighs that the "old fashioned moralists […] are sick

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of Mary" ("*A Victim*" 1799, 57).[1] In the novels, the female protagonists struggle to find their own ways in life with the aim of fulfilling their self-realisation within the bonds of possibilities offered to women at the time. The writers and their fictional characters dared to question, criticise and/or transgress the boundaries of their social roles, emphasising the importance of (self-)education, self-knowledge and self-reliance. These "female *Bildungsromane*" introduce, as Anne K. Mellor claims, "the rational woman" who "can become as sensible and virtuous as men" (1993, 40). In the present article, I will analyse Wollstonecraft's novels *Mary* and *Maria*, focussing on the heroines' paths and the ways they leave behind their traditional contexts, their *homes*—where they are locked up—and then, moving beyond, how they map their possibilities in "the wild zone." In my approach, I am emphatically influenced by feminist criticism and I rely on such concepts as "fathers," "muted story," and "the wild zone," borrowed from and quoted in Elaine Showalter's seminal work, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" (1981). Having provided a short introduction on Wollstonecraft's ideas of self-education, I show that her philosophical tale, "The Cave of Fancy" marks a turning point in her early writings, in which she questions the closing and opening up of life-paths; thus, the story underlines the theme of development discussed in the two novels afterwards.

2 Mary Wollstonecraft, the (Self-)Educationalist

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797), the eighteenth-century novelist, essayist, and educationalist was an enlightened thinker. She was highly influenced by the notions of her radical contemporaries and was an ardent believer in reason, common sense and self-education. In her early works, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), she published educational stories and tales to instruct the female reader. In her edited collection, *The Female Reader*, she also propagated reading, while in the novels—*Mary: A Fiction* (1788) and *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798)—she discussed the possible ways of women's self-development. In her most well-known political debates, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), she demonstrated that critical thinking was essential to personal education, while in her reviews, translations and her travelogue, she also completed the process of her self-training.

[1] The critic refers to Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799) but we can also think of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary* (1788) and *Maria* (1798), along with the writers—all Marys. For more on this topic, see Janczer Csikós 2022 and 2023.

In addition to being a member of the Radicals, Wollstonecraft frequently attended the dissenters' meetings and lectures organised by the publisher Joseph Johnson (Tomalin 2012, Richardson 2002). She read the fashionable "conduct books" of her own time, for instance, Rev. James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766), John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), and John Bennett's *Strictures on Female Education* (1787) and she highly criticised their rigid notions concerning women's roles and possibilities. These works demonstrated the proper behaviour expected from women, such as following the rules of etiquette and manners, which was regarded as appropriate for women's social status. Even well-educated girls were not encouraged to read or know anything other than the Bible, and John Gregory, mentioned above, voices his utter despair when he writes about the theatre. In the chapter "Entertainment," he can scarcely offer his daughters a literary work in his own age "without a shock to delicacy"—one that does not evoke unnecessary, disturbing, or even inappropriate emotions (1808, 62, 68). The reading of novels was also discussed in conduct books and educational writings due to its effects on women's development. Wollstonecraft—who waged a battle against conduct books, based on "a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men"—was willing to confirm that novel-reading was dangerous for young women (Wollstonecraft 2004b, 11). The reading of fashionable romances would prevent girls' intellectual growth, increase their sensibility and their weakness, thus perpetrating their subjection to men.

In order to understand Wollstonecraft's life-work, I cannot avoid referring to the influential 'intellectual fathers'—John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Edmund Burke, among others—whose writings provided her with a framework of thinking in the textual debates she published. John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education* (1762; English translation 1763) had a great effect on her philosophy of education. While Locke mainly focussed on young gentlemen's training and Rousseau wrote about boys' natural education, Wollstonecraft tried to apply their notions to women's development. Her early *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* and *Original Stories* clearly show the impact of Lockean and Rousseauvian ideas, while she reacted to some infamous statements of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. In her masterpiece, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she overtly attacks Rousseau and his ideas. In Book 5 of *Emile*, entitled "Sophy, or Woman," addressing female education, Rousseau states that men's and women's education cannot be the same and the modest Sophy is to be brought up mainly to accompany the naturally educated man, to be a "companion […] given to him" (1979, 357). Moreover, according to Rousseau, girls "ought to be constrained very early," since it is "inseparable from their sex [...]. All their lives

they will be enslaved to the most continual and most severe of constraints—that of the proprieties" (1979, 369). In *A Vindication*, Mary Wollstonecraft critically reads Rousseau, and she does not only quote the 'mainstream' educational work, but, as she claims, "warp[ing] the author's reasoning" (2004b, 100), she also moves beyond the conventional ideas towards her own, new understanding of the 'fatherly' concepts.

3 "The Cave of Fancy" at the End of Her World

In addition to the early educational writings, Wollstonecraft left behind the fragment "The Cave of Fancy: A Tale" (1787, posthumously published in 1798). In the tale, an imagined sublime realm is presented, where the hermit, the old wise Sagestus (cf. sage) lives in sublime surroundings at the end of the world. In his cogitation, Sagestus's isolation and confinement are emphasised not only by his eyes, which turn inwards, but by the far away and ancient cavern through which he can enter the depth of the earth, where "the various spirits, which inhabit the different regions of nature, were here obedient to his potent word" (Wollstonecraft 1989, 191). The grave-like cave, being like a *limbo* between life and death, welcomes the ghosts of the dead; some of them are evil creatures waiting for their long purification, and some are good ones, like "the guardian angels," who are allowed to leave their prison.

In the depiction of the cavern, Wollstonecraft relies on the Platonic image of the cave and the idea that man should come out of "his" cave to light in order to re-discover the truth of human existence. The cave itself is associated with the body and the skull, and the narrative reflects on the workings of the human mind. In Wollstonecraft's understanding, "the cave" and "fancy" also stand for the secrets of the female heart, mind, and sexuality.[2] On the one hand, in her educational writings, her philosophically minded female characters (similarly to herself) strive to find their home, their partner and their role in the world, while at the same time they have to learn to tame their desire. On the other hand, as Sylvana Tomaselli says, Wollstonecraft—in a Platonic mode—presents "human love as an ephemeral delusion in an uneasy relation to virtue and esteem, which must not be allowed to usurp the rightful place of divine love in the soul" (2016, 30).

In Wollstonecraft's allegorical "Cave," the wise man, Sagestus is able to sense (imagine or fancy) the life-stories of the dead, studying their bodily features. Thus, when he finds a baby-girl who survives a shipwreck, he adopts the child and later

[2] Meena Alexander even says that "the cave itself, in a kind of imaginative extremity is both the womb of Mother Nature and the tomb of all mothers" (1989, 185).

educates the young girl named Sagesta (after himself) by allowing her to listen to the narratives of (dead) women. In the (promised) realistic narrative(s), the emotional, financial and bodily troubles of eighteenth-century women are revealed and this way Sagesta—through her fancy—is trained to become a wise and sensitive human being. One can wonder whether she will eventually assist or replace the aged Sagestus in coordinating the spirits in the cavern, but the conclusion can only be guessed, since the tale is unfinished.[3]

In the philosophical and spiritual setting of the tale, the reader is also invited to sense the movement from noticing the characters' outer features to the grasping of their inner thoughts. The study of physical features can also be ascribed to J. C. Lavater's theory of physiognomy, since when Wollstonecraft was working on the puzzling story, she was influenced by her debate with the Swiss thinker's stereotypical approach—especially, in the understanding of female character. Yet, the *inspirited* ghosts are individuals, not types, and highlighting female voices reveals a new direction in the writer's work. In Wollstonecraft's own lifework, "The Cave of Fancy" presents a new way (out) and her new readings of the 'fathers' works.' Through her liberating fantasy, or fancy, she moves towards her rebellious writings, where she starts to re-define the female body, sensibility, and consciousness. As she writes about her first novel, *Mary: A Fiction*: growing out of spiritual (in)fancy, "a new genius will educate itself" (2004a, 211).

4 *Mary*: "neither a Clarissa, not a Lady G-, nor a Sophie"

In the short "Advertisement" attached to *Mary: A Fiction*, the author highlights that in her "artless tale [...] the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers is displayed" (2004a, 3). The rather provoking opening also names three female characters—Samuel Richardson's two sentimental heroines in *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, and Rousseau's Sophie in *Emile*—who represent the conventionally accepted portrayal of women in the age: the docile and intimidated female. Thus, the first *Mary* novel is not only a critique of contemporary romances written for women, but it also presents the female mind and its thinking, although Wollstonecraft knows that many people consider this organ too feeble for intellectual work. As the already quoted statement goes, here she shows how "a genius will educate itself," where the term, genius, also means a "[h]uman endowed with superiour faculties,"

[3] In his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, William Godwin emphasises the fragmentary quality of the tale (2018, 21).

"mental power or faculties," or even "nature, disposition," as we can read in Samuel Johnson's first academic dictionary of the English language (1755). Dr. Johnson's representative examples and literary quotations which accompany the meanings of the words identify men as genii; the protagonist, Mary, has indeed a long way to go to become one.

Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft's earlier novels display women characters' emotions and, in a romanticised way, have an autobiographical inspiration: not only the author's own life story is filtered through, but also her own defining reading experiences, such as Rousseau's *Emile* and Johnson's *Rasselas*, in addition to the works already mentioned before. The portrayal of Mary's childhood and her parents is a fairly accurate picture of the conditions of her time: her mother Eliza was brought up to be a spoiled, stupid 'automaton' (cf. "a mere machine," Wollstonecraft 2004a, 5), and her husband was assigned to her by her parents. In the figure of the mother, the author offers a caricature of the eighteenth-century ladies for whom sentimental romances provided a reading experience, in their anti-*Bildung*. At that point Wollstonecraft tells the reader that she also could write such tear-jerking stories of sensibility, but she has no intention of doing so (2004a, 6). The mother does not care for her two children—the sickly, weak son and the heroine—and she does not love her husband either; she prefers to coddle her pet lapdog, and dies very early.

After her brother is sent to a boarding school—and since girls of her age have no chance of an institutional education—little Mary is left unattended, and she runs around the house mostly in a wild rampage. In her early childhood, she is described as a *romp* (cf. "ramp," Wollstonecraft 2004b, 57), experiencing freedom in nature, which brings to mind the Rousseauvian natural and physical education of man in *Emile* while, practically, the young girl's independence is due to her being neglected by the parents. Then the housekeeper teaches her to read, the governess teaches her French and the world *opens up* to her. During her walks and wanderings in the countryside, by the river and in the abandoned castles, Mary reflects on her reading: her mind is shaped by Thomson's and Young's melancholy poems and the works of Milton. As Barbara Taylor points out, Mary has a "naturally philosophic mind" and, in a rather manly way, she is preoccupied with metaphysical and theological ideas, which she records from an early age (2003, 35). She learns to appreciate the sublime quality of nature and, while her soul is filled with infinite beauty, she is able to feel the presence of the Creator in her outdoor experiences. Wollstonecraft details the process of young Mary combining the experience of her surroundings with her insight into the divine:

> [..] she would steal to this retirement, where human foot seldom trod—gaze on the sea, observe the grey clouds, or listen to the wind which struggled to free itself from the only thing that impeded its course. Many nights she sat up, [...] *conversing* with the Author of

> Nature, making verses, and singing hymns of her own composing. […] Often did she taste unmixed delight; her joys, her ecstacies arose from genius. (2004a, 11–12, emphasis in the original.)

When she is absorbed in her thoughts, being empowered and guided by her intellectual passions, she forgets her bodily needs; the display of genius is emphasised by the powerful emotional expression (passions, ecstasies, delight).

"Neglected in every respect, and left to the operations of her own mind, she considered everything"—Mary reads, thinks, that is, educates herself (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 7). She inherits her passionate disposition from her father, which may explain that "her understanding were [sic] strong and clear, when not clouded by her feelings; but she was too much the creature of impulse, and the slave of compassion" (2004a, 9). In addition to the *ingenious* and *genuine* experience of the divine-sublime, at quite a young age, she encounters death while visiting a dying farmer's house, and from childhood, she is attentive to the fallen, the suffering, and the poor; she is almost pathologically caring and empathetic in her helpfulness to others. She has a lifelong "intimate" friendship with Ann, the eldest daughter of a neighbouring widow, who, like her, is prone to melancholy. Mary learns how to write from her older friend and Ann has a beneficial influence on her irrepressible nature: Mary's "manners were softened" owing to her friend (2004a, 10). Mary adores her, but Ann is very indifferent to her adoration. Truly, Mary sees, they are not "congenial minds," but she feels that it is more than friendship, "a passion" that "occupie[s] her heart" (2004a, 16–18). It would be difficult to determine, in an age of wives regarded as lapdogs, the precise nature of Mary and Ann's relationship. Mary is the masculine, energetic active partner, while her friend is the passive, feeble-minded, feminine partner in the relationship, though homoeroticism is not thematised, only implied in the novel. Mary's husband also accepts his wife's "romantic friendship" with the other woman (2004a, 18).

Upon her brother's death, Mary becomes the heiress to the estate and at the age of seventeen she is forced to marry her neighbour's son, whom she does not know. Mary prefers intelligent men, with whom, however, she has had little luck. In fact, she is marrying to use her wealth to do good, to help and to continue supporting her ailing friend's family. The young heroine has to face several losses: the illness of her lover, the untimely death of her brother and mother, her unhappy marriage to a despicable man, followed by the death of her father. Ann's condition takes a turn for the worse, so the two women travel to a pleasant climate after Mary receives permission to do so from her husband, who is travelling in Europe. Escaping from her marriage and her home, on the ship to Lisbon, she is again fascinated by the stormy sea. Moreover, she meets a witty though weak man, Henry, and during their conversation "all the faculties of her soul unfolded themselves; genius animated her

expressive countenance" (2004a, 24). She meets Henry frequently and develops an emotional attachment to him, while Ann's health does not improve and she dies in Portugal. In Mary's life, there is no mentor, guide or advisor: the heroine is shaping her own personality, or rather her innate abilities are shaping her understanding and passion. The experiences she has gained give her a broader vision of the world, and her suffering teaches her empathy, taming her childish unruliness. Henry can be Mary's worthy companion with a promise of eternal friendship, and she is enraptured to think there is one man in the world who understands and loves her: she is lonely, but she is not alone. After her girlfriend's death, her place in Mary's life is taken by the equally ailing, effeminate Henry, and so the earlier "tale of forbidden and unnarratable passionate friendship becomes a tale of forbidden but narratable adulterous love," as Claudia L. Johnson remarks (2002, 195).

Returning to England, Mary visits her dead friend's mother and continues to support the family. Again, she finds solace looking at "the smiling face of nature," in the exuberant happiness of animals, while she sees that humanity in general is degraded (2004a, 39). She continues to help those in need, yet she receives neither respect nor thanks in return and she falls into apathy, being surrounded by unfriendly, ungrateful people. The reader can also follow her spiritual ups and downs as she begins to praise sensibility, for it is "the foundation of all our happiness" (2004a, 43). Henry turns up, sending a formal letter asking Mary to meet him, while her husband is still wandering on the continent. In fact, Henry is dying, so Mary can nurse him: "I cannot live without loving—and love leads to madness" (2004a, 49), she writes in her diary, and the man dies in her arms.

The ending of the short novel is far from conventional. Mary as a self-made woman lives alone in her own home and lives *on* her own household. However, the final melancholy passages do not celebrate her independence; instead, they shockingly question the institution of marriage:

> Mary visited the continent, and sought health in different climates; but her nerves were not to be restored to their former state. She then retired to her house in the country, established manufactories, threw the estate into small farms; […]. She visited the sick, supported the old, and educated the young. […] In moments of solitary sadness, a gleam of joy would dart across her mind—She thought she was hastening to that world *where there is neither marrying*, nor giving in marriage. (2004a, 53, emphasis in the original.)

We might ask whether this woman has found her happiness in her short life. Hers is not a domestic fulfilment: she has enjoyed intellectual pleasures, being lost in her own thoughts and engaged in meaningful conversations while she is taking care of her dying loved ones. Her health, shaken by adversity, does not give her a long life, but she does not regret it in her joyless marriage. Before the heroine's idea about

the abolition of marriage is considered revolutionary, we must notice the Biblical reference to eternity where man and woman will live as angels and therefore they will not have to marry: "For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven" (Matthew 22:30). To be more precise, angels are genderless beings, and in this way in the afterlife, the pious and good-hearted heroine may even be reunited with her beloved friend. Claudia L. Johnson, however, points out that formally, the questioning of marriage as a compulsory happy ending in the conclusion is a radical act, as Wollstonecraft's eighteenth-century women readers may have come to see that self-realisation was only possible by transcending boundaries (2002, 198). They could contemplate whether they wanted to live on as trapped 'lapdogs,' or as independent flesh-and-blood women, or, in the heat of mystical rapture, as angels.

5 "Abodes of horror": *Maria*

The heroine of the early novel, *Mary*, is both masculine and feminine: a married woman who wanders in the world as if she were single, recording profound thoughts about the meaning of life, while also motherly in her caring for others, in a hypersensitive way. There is no model for Mary to follow, she only tries to place and define herself, her genius in the wild zone presented by the outer and inner spaces of the novel. In the "Preface" to *Maria*, the author claims that her novel is about "the oppressed part of mankind" and Maria's life is a story of passion, rather than a novel of manners; the heroine is first "a woman of sensibility," then an individual (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 59–60). The subtitle ironically proclaims *The Wrongs of Woman*, and although the author portrays female upbringing in different social classes, the suffering of women is in fact universal. The second novel, *Maria*, was written after *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and in both works, Wollstonecraft attempts to demonstrate "the experience of *being* female" and how social frameworks oppress women emotionally and intellectually (Taylor 2003, 55–56, emphasis in the original). In this way, the non-existent rights of women—and the consequent wrongs—such as the freedom to love, to make one's own decisions, to live separately and to divorce, can be juxtaposed.[4]

[4] The novel, *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* is imbued by the author's own experiences: Wollstonecraft's love affair with the American Gilbert Imlay and her abandonment with a newborn child are commemorated in the representation of the disillusioned female characters. However, she was still working on her last work when she got pregnant and married William Godwin. The introduction to the novel was written by the author's husband, who also edited and published the unfinished work after Wollstonecraft's death in childbirth. See Tomalin 2012, 232–44 and 257–70.

The opening of the novel is revolutionary: Maria is seen in chains in an asylum, where she laments being torn away from her four-month-old daughter. The first words of the novel refer to the women's prison as "abodes of horrors", where the heroine regrets that her child is female and thus doomed to suffer (2004a, 61). The twenty-six-year-old Maria has been sent there by her husband and she writes her memoirs in the madhouse: her life story is intended for her daughter so that the girl should learn from her mother's "wrongs," because it is not easy to live a full life and be happy as a woman. "Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?", asks the heroine, her apt words providing the motto of the present paper (2004a, 64). The question is an excellent illustration of the rigidity of social expectations, and it is particularly ironic that it is asked in a madhouse where women who cannot fit in are locked up. Maria is not allowed to go out of her cell into the garden, but from her window she can see the ruins outside. Similarly, inside, the female wretches (cf. wrecks) are imprisoned and their narratives reflect the evils of the world outside. In addition to Maria, who has fled from her immoral husband, there are the adulteresses, the constantly singing "sweet maniac," who went mad when forced to marry a rich old man, or Maria's guard[ian], Jemima—all these characters offer Wollstonecraft's critique of her own times.

The readers are first introduced to the prison guard Jemima's muted story. At the beginning, she treats Maria coldly, but when she learns that she has left behind a baby, she takes pity on her. She brings books for Maria and allows her to write: these activities keep the prisoner alive, and a sincere friendship develops between the two women. Jemima's life is also full of humiliation: her parents were servants, her father seduced and impregnated her mother; she, in turn, married him out of necessity. Her mother died immediately after Jemima's birth, the father remarried, and the new wife treated the little girl abusively. No one loved or respected the little "bastard," but "in spite of neglect, [she] continued to exist, to learn to curse existence, [...] and the treatment that rendered [her] miserable, seemed to sharpen [her] wits" (2004a, 80–82). In her teens, Jemima was seduced by her employer, who had a family, and when she got pregnant, she was forced to abort the foetus by means of the medicine the man gave her. The affair was revealed, as a result she ended up on the streets: begging, stealing, and selling her body. "I was still a slave, a bastard, a common property," she sums up her situation (2004a, 85). Fortunately, she met an educated gentleman, who took her in, and in her new home Jemima learnt manners and learnt how to read; she was blossoming in the educated men's (cf. 'the intellectual fathers') company mainly due to the discussion of her ample readings. After her master's death, she was thought by all the relatives to be the man's mistress, she became an object of scorn, and she was thrown out on the streets again. Jemima is also critical towards the reform-minded writers of her time, for when

they claim that if a talented person wants to work, he can find a job, they always think only of men—women must take the meanest jobs to support themselves, but they can lose the occupation easily if they are discredited and stigmatised by society (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 88). Jemima survives by manual work and the tiresome toil makes her listless and desperate: "I hated mankind [and] I despised myself," she says (2004a, 90). Then she is hospitalised with an injury and she finds herself in a workhouse, whose manager also runs the private shelter; he sees an opportunity in Jemima, thus, she starts to work in the asylum, looking after the mentally handicapped and outcasts.

Taylor (along with several other feminist authors) sees the lower-class Jemima as the real rebel of the novel, and a sharp critic of her time: in her "feminist rage," she lashes out against the status of men, the behaviour of rich women, and even against the "hypocritical social reformers" (Taylor 2003, 238–41). A valuable thread in the novel is the unfolding friendship between the two women, the prisoner and the prison guard. Jemima (with her Biblical name, meaning dove) lists all the suffering of women in that age, and Maria, with her own life experiences, regrets having a daughter. In one of the most passionate episodes, she asks Jemima to be the adoptive mother of her child:

> Let me but give her an education—let me but prepare her body and mind to encounter the ills which await her sex, and I will teach her to consider you as her second mother, and herself as the prop of your age. Yes, Jemima, look at me—observe me closely, and read my very soul; you merit a better fate; […] and I will procure it for you, as a testimony of my esteem, as well as of my gratitude. (2004a, 92)

The misanthropic, tough Jemima finally feels that she matters, that she is important to someone, which gives her a sense of belonging—this is a fine example of sisterhood and "feminist solidarity" (Johnson 2002, 206). In fact, Jemima saves Maria in her bedlam, shakes off her apathy, and together they run away and hide.

In the novel, Maria's own retrospective life story is written with an educational purpose. In prison, Maria, "a mother schooled in misery," writes her memoir for her daughter (2004a, 94). Laurie Langbauer also highlights the significance of this maternal memoir, but not due to its educational purpose; she claims that "apostrophizing her [daughter], [...] Maria may only be a mother *while* she is writing" (1988, 212, emphasis in the original).[5] Throughout her memoirs, she gives advice

[5] Certainly, this remark clearly alludes to Hélène Cixous's idea of "white ink"; namely that a female writer uses *her* natural ink, alluding to mother's milk, and pouring it on white pages, she composes an invisible narrative (qtd. Showalter 1981, 201). But my focus is still on tracing visible female development in the novels.

to her daughter, though she knows that there is no real room for manoeuvre for women in her own age. Similarly to Mary's, her childhood was only happy thanks to her love of nature, while her strict, retired army officer father and weak-willed mother indulged her brother and neglected her and her sisters. Only her uncle cared for her intellectual development and brought her books. After her mother's death, her father brings a new woman into the house and her stepmother scourges her for her laziness, blames her reading and confiscates her books. Maria escapes into a "romantic" marriage to a gentleman of the neighbourhood, which she later discovers having been made possible by her uncle's money. The husband, George Venables appears to be a good man at first, but later turns out to be a swindler, spending money on gambling and courtesans. "Why was I not born a man, or why was I born at all?" (2004a: 105), the young heroine asks the philosophical question, reflecting on her own past. During their years in London, the relationship between the spouses becomes strained, as the differences between their characters become apparent. The husband, after squandering the family fortune, spends her uncle's money while Maria tries to keep the household under control and look after her own siblings. She feels to be "the man's property," also a "housekeeper," her feelings are extinguished, and she does not love or respect her husband (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 117–18). She knows that so many of her fellow women live in the world disenfranchised, since in marriage all her properties belong to the husband; the wife has no rights at all. Upon discovering that she is pregnant, she becomes desperate; meanwhile, altruistically, she already cares for an illegitimate child delivered by a servant girl whom her husband seduced in the household. A friend of her husband approaches Maria and Venables turns out to have borrowed money from this man in exchange for the sexual services of his pregnant wife. When Maria reads her husband's letter, she reaches a turning point: she takes off her wedding ring and leaves their home after six years of hardship. She experiences a sublime vision of relief:

> Yes; free I termed myself, […]—liberty, that I would have purchased at any price, but that of my own esteem! I rose, and shook myself; opened the window, and methought the air never smelled so sweet. The face of heaven grew fairer as I viewed it, and the clouds seemed to flit away obedient to my wishes, to give my soul room to expand. *I was all soul,* and (wild as it may appear) felt as if I could have dissolved in the soft balmy gale that kissed my cheek, or have glided below the horizon on the glowing, descending beams. A seraphic satisfaction animated, without agitating my spirits […]. (2004a, 121, emphasis added)

Only when writing to her daughter, without thinking of social expectations, could she finally be herself, experiencing "true sensibility" and "the soul of genius" (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 130). Unfortunately, her freedom does not last long, since she has to flee, planning to go to a relative to Lisbon, but she gets sick and is forced to go into hiding

as a "villain," while her husband is searching for her. Eventually, the uncle dies, leaving his fortune to Maria's siblings and to her new-born baby, for whom Maria is the trustee until she comes of age. While trying to escape to France, she is drugged, her child is kidnapped by her husband and she is taken to the madhouse.

In addition to the friendship between the two women, Maria and Jemima, a romance is also woven in the madhouse. From an imprisoned man, Jemima brings Maria books written by Dryden, Milton, and Rousseau, and it is through the reading of the marginal notes that she gets to know her fellow prisoner. Her interest is aroused by his interpretation of *Julie, or The New Heloise*, and his affirmation of the legitimacy of passion (Wollstonecraft 2004a, 71). They begin to correspond, then meet with Jemima's help, and the man becomes the first reader of Maria's memoir. He is Henry Darnford, an ex-student from Eton, a member of a distinguished family, who had made his fortune as a young man, then was sent to America as a soldier. Once back in London, he lived a life of debauchery, and later he was kidnapped by his family. The acquaintance between Maria and Henry turns into an affair, as they fall passionately in love and Maria calls the man "husband" (2004a, 139). She is happy as a woman in this relationship and gives in to her desires for the first time, experiencing her sexuality (cf. "the best sex," Elfenbein 2002, 242).[6] But the couple is about to face new troubles. The second part of the novel, which remains in fragmentary notes, reveals that Darnford is sentenced for adultery, while Maria, telling her life story to the jury, saves herself but loses her alimony. At the trial, Maria describes her mistreatment by her husband and she declares that she cannot live with a man who has broken all his moral obligations. On this legally unjustified ground for women (only exceptionally cruel treatment being acceptable grounds for divorce, along with bigamy, impotence, and incest), she asks for divorce, while sharply criticising the laws that

> throw the whole weight of the yoke on the weaker shoulders, and force women, when they claim protectorship as mothers, to sign a contract, which renders them dependent on the caprice of the tyrant, whom choice or necessity has appointed to reign over them. (2004a, 143)

[6] Andrew Elfenbein sees Wollstonecraft's genius in the presentation of sexuality and he emphasises the protagonists' independence, "female masculinity" and their rejection of marriage in the Mary novels (2002, 237–38). I would not go that far but I do not agree with Cora Kaplan, either. In her view, due to the strong influence of Rousseau's *Emile*, Wollstonecraft does not thematise female sexuality, since the age focuses on men's desires, evoked by the 'sinful' beauty of women. Thus, Wollstonecraft does not liberate female pleasure; women's independence is presented in social, economic, moral and legal ways in both novels (1986, 43–46). The textual allusions show that Wollstonecraft took a more philosophical approach to the question of womanhood, using *genius* in terms of character and spirit, and the self-identical genius was meant to be superior to the distinction between social gender and biological gender— which did not exist in the eighteenth century anyway.

Maria manages to divorce her husband and she is pregnant again but Darnford cheats on her and she has a miscarriage. In fact, both men whom she had a relationship with were "libertines" and both men were idealised by her: she thought of her husband as kind-hearted and she first had seen Darnford as a hero, a freedom-fighter (Johnson 2002: 204). Her readings, having been sent by the man, misled her judgment and her sensibility, while her fancy overcame her common sense. In her frustration, Maria contemplates suicide when Jemima brings to her the daughter that she believed to have died. Two possible conclusions were drafted by Wollstonecraft in her notes: in one, Maria devotes her life to her child; in the other, she commits suicide (2004a, 147–48).

6 Conclusion: The Way Out

As has been pointed out, in Wollstonecraft's novels the women characters' life stories are written into a social pattern, and by adopting the conventional narrative form, she presents that their life paths meander within the constraints of the given framework. The heroines tend to question the legitimacy of those constraints and attempt to transgress them, but ultimately, they only end up in situations that force them to highlight the boundaries. Wollstonecraft's fancy about women's development is experimental, her characters rebel and try to break out, venturing into the wild zone. In the typical novels of upbringing, the male protagonists set out on a journey, with a series of adventures along the way, while supporting characters, mentors and lovers help them and shape their worldview. For the female travellers, *Bildung* is more of an internal and mental adventure, since the conditions for women's quests in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were quite different from men's: women could not aspire to the same education and they could not achieve the same social success. Moreover, the Mary novels, as precursors of the nineteenth-century female *Bildungsromane*, are marked by a transformative character and by the impassioned revolutionary rhetoric of a "spontaneous process of self-creation almost *ex nihilo*," instead of displaying the earlier "narrative of long-term evolutionary change" (Felski 1995, 165, emphasis in the original).

However, such an interpretation of the female development narrative goes against the process of male *Bildung*. While the male *Bildungsroman* complies with the generic constraints, the female version works against the framework almost from the start—it can only be an anti-*Bildungsroman* by definition. Eve Bannet also argues that by the end of the eighteenth century, "the ideals of women's conduct and of women's lives [...] bec[a]me 'ritual objects,'" and that women's narratives

revolutionised the way in which "a clearly defined strategy for bringing about social change, [...] social reeducation" was articulated (1991, 197–99). As she remarks,

> [w]riting in a genre that transgressed the fixed boundary between the ideal and the real in a way the conduct book did not, eighteenth-century lady-novelists nevertheless proceeded in a similar way, contrasting the real and the ideal, refashioning the latter, and presenting even their radical innovations in the language of conventional morality and *Bildung.* (1991, 200)

This may sound as if the heroines of these novels knew exactly the reasons for their actions and what they were doing. On the contrary, what is truly innovative in Wollstonecraft's early, 'fanciful' anti-*Bildungsromane* is that the female protagonist, seeking new paths, dares to act differently and in this way she subverts the genre, recasting its paradigms. In contrast to the expected conclusion of social integration, found in men's narratives, the principle of transformation comes to the fore, into the open: *transformation* of one's own self instead of it being formed with all the possibilities that can be fictionalised. The female novelist, coming from the periphery, from the outside, is able to shape her environment by questioning the *status quo* as a critical reader, while she performatively reinterprets the framework and (re)writes the narrative of self-development.

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Women Characters' Cross-Cultural (Self-)Development in Mary Margaret Busk's *Zeal and Experience: A Tale* and *Tales of Fault and Feeling*

Antonella Braida
antonella.braida-laplace@univ-lorraine.fr

This article focuses on the importance of women characters' education in Mary Margaret Busk's *Zeal and Experience: a Tale* (1819) and *Tales of Fault and Feeling* (1825). A translator and cultural mediator, Mary Margaret Busk (1779–1863) was one of the first women writers to publish review articles on European literatures in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, a high-brow, conservative journal with a large readership and, it has often been assumed, mostly written by male authors. This contribution intends to analyse the importance of women characters' education in her tales, which also foregrounds her interest in cross-cultural relations.

Keywords: cultural mediation, moral tales, transcultural studies, Romantic women writers.

This article focuses on the importance of women characters' education in Mary Margaret Busk's novella, *Zeal and Experience* (1819) and in the short story collection *Tales of Fault and Feeling* (1825). Moreover, the autobiographical inspiration and social realism of some of the tales will be foregrounded: it will be shown that in some of her tales women move across cultures, struggle to contribute to supporting their families and to counteract their husbands' economic and social inadequacy. Busk's tales focus on female characters' self-development in situations that highlight cultural clashes. My contribution intends to show that her interest in cross-cultural relations is evident also in her fiction, from *Zeal and Experience: A Tale* to her collection *Tales of Fault and Feeling*.

A translator and cultural mediator, Mary Margaret Busk (1779–1863) has attracted some attention within the study of literary reviewing (Prigmore 1952, Curran 1998), Anglo-Italian, Anglo-German relations (Saglia and Bandiera 2005, Howard 1993, Ashton 1980) and Anglo-Japanese reception (Williams 2017). She was one of the first women writers to publish review articles on European literatures in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, a high-brow, conservative periodical founded in 1817, with a large readership and, it has often been assumed, mostly written by male authors. In fact, the journal accepted few contributions by women and Alan

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Lang Strout's bibliography for the years 1817–1825 identifies only five other women contributors of articles and reviews: Caroline Bowles Southey (1786–1854), Amelia Gillespie Smyth (1788–1876), Lady Rosemary Clerk (1745–c.1832), Anne Grant (1755–1838), and Felicia Hemans (1793–1835). Busk's fiction and reviews show her interest in European languages and cultures, her support of women's cross-cultural lay education and their right to become published authors. Busk published 32 articles according to Eileen Curran's and the *Wellesley Index* identification (Curran 1998, 9) and her articles deal mostly with German and Italian works, with few articles dealing with French, Swedish, and Polish literatures. Busk's interest in European literatures is also evident in her short fiction.

A short biographical introduction will explain Busk's ability to become a published author and thus enter the public sphere. Busk [*née* Blair] grew up in a nonconformist family. Her father, Alexander Blair, was a soap manufacturer and timber trade merchant from Birmingham, as well as a proprietor of the Royal Institution and a close associate to the Lunar Society (Latané 2004, 102). He thus had connections with Sir Joshua Reynolds, James Watt, Joseph Priestley, among other prominent intellectuals of the time, and was on close terms with James Boswell. Concerning Mary Margaret Busk's education, Eileen Curran thinks that "whatever her schooling, Busk's writings show that she had read the standard authors, was taught composition and rhetoric by a demanding stylist, and learned French, Italian, Latin, and Dutch" (1998, 12). She had some knowledge of Dutch due to her mother's influence: Mary Johnson (1749–1827) was a society hostess and her father, Alexander Johnson, had lived in The Hague. The talk of scientific experiments must have reached Busk through her parents' coteries and traces of an interest in sciences can be gleaned from her articles. In 1796 Mary Margaret Blair married William Busk (1769–1849), a barrister of the Temple (London). He became MP winning a by-election in 1812 in Barnstaple, Devon, voting with the Whigs. During his time in Parliament, he was "a regular and consistent voter with opposition during the 1812 session" (Thorne and Fisher 1886), although he never spoke in the house. He later lost the next election, blaming his opponents' bribery and incurring large losses of about £10,000.[1] He sold the estate he had bought in Ponsbourne to become an MP, and the Busks moved to London. Mary Margaret Busk's first reviews were thus part of her effort to contribute to the family finances. The Busks travelled regularly to Germany and Europe and she must

[1] He thus contacted Lord Holland and Francis Horner for support, but never won again. According to Curran and Latané, a major blow to his finances was a loan to Mary Margaret Busk's father. According to Maria Edgeworth, in 1819 William Busk had lost most of his resources and was also accused of fraud. Edgeworth writes that Mr. Busk had won "30,000 by a bit of gambling insurance on 2 missing East India ships," but the ships' reappearance and the implication of foul play meant that "he could never show his face at Lloyds afterwards—has now lost all since—and in a poor way" (1971, 173–74).

therefore have improved her knowledge of German, French, Spanish, and Italian through her travels. Her first prose work is *Zeal and Experience: A Tale*, published in 1819 by the London publisher Hookham, Baldwin, Cradock and Joy. In 1822, Busk published her first article in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, in the section entitled "Horae Germanicæ." She started reviewing through family connections: her brother, Alexander Blair, introduced her to John Wilson, main writer of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine,* at a time when the family finances had become difficult in the 1820s, and her identified articles for the journal had reached a total of 32 by 1838. Busk's brother, Alexander Blair was a close collaborator of John Wilson, then professor of moral philosophy at Edinburgh University and author of a large number of articles for the magazine. His most famous publication was "Noctes Ambrosianæ," under the pseudonym of Christopher North. According to Wilson's biographer, Elsie Swann, Alexander Blair was working as what would be called today a ghost writer; indeed, Wilson acknowledged his need for Blair's help (Swann 1934, 166).

Mary Margaret Busk's *Zeal and Experience: A Tale* betrays her attempt at imitating Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, rather focussing on women's struggle after marriage and thus introducing a variation to the courtship and marriage plot. The definition of its genre, "tale," reflects her adoption of a prose form shorter than the novel, but in fact includes a significant plot and character development that is most commonly in line with the genre of the *novella*. As Tim Killick has cogently argued, Britain saw a significant success of short fiction in the first half of the nineteenth century. Killick further underlines not only the lack of a homogenous British tradition of tales, but also its debts to the European tradition and in particular to the recent German tradition of tales, inspired by oral narratives and legends, as pointed out by Robert F. Marler and Charles E. May (Marler 1974–76 and May 1994, qtd. in Killick 2008, 6). Killick also attributes the success of the form to the prominence it was given in periodical publications, in particular in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, with R. P. Gillies's significant contribution of articles to the section "Horae Germanicae," for which Busk also wrote (2008, 13). Busk's early association with the journal may have inspired her to write her first tale, which Killick classifies within the genre of the moral domestic tale (2008, 3). Although the editions I have consulted do not include a preface, the title page bears a quotation from Ovid: *Ex Ponto, Epistola* IX, III, verse 24, "corrigere at res est" (Ovid 1872, 347), that is, "correction is as much more arduous a thing" (2003), in which the poet praises Aristarchus' commentary of Homer. This epigraph highlights the moral aim of the tales, whose implied purpose is to educate its readers and to "amend" their behaviour.[2]

[2] According to James H. Horowitz, Ovid's epistles were popular in eighteenth-century England and gave rise to a tradition of epistolary complaints mainly written by women (2014).

The plot of *Zeal and Experience* focuses on Lord Frederic Bellamont and Caroline Moncrief's marriage and on Caroline's ability to find her position in society. The tale sets the trend for Busk's later writings, identifying women's unsatisfactory education as the cause of their later struggles in life. *Zeal and Experience* focuses on Caroline's inadequate education and her social isolation until her marriage at the age of 18. As the only daughter of Mr. and Mrs Moncrief, Caroline is described as spoilt by her parents, who nevertheless provide her with some "acquirements":

> The spoiling, however, did not go quite to the extent of depriving her of all education, for she was taught what young ladies usually learn: as her abilities were excellent, she learned readily; but, as her own inclination was her law, it will easily be believed that her acquirements were superficial. (1819, 1)

The narrator vaguely mentions some formal education suitable for young girls, without clarifying the form or content of the teaching Caroline received—maybe from a governess or in a private school, as was common practice in the first half of the nineteenth century. The absence of a set programme of schooling and her own ability to choose her subjects and occupations is identified as responsible for her "superficial acquirements." In fact, the tale focuses on parents' ability to prepare their daughters for their future role as wives and mothers. Caroline's stubbornness, resulting from her parents' unwillingness to refuse her anything, is thus identified as a possible obstacle to accompanying her husband in his social commitments and being welcomed into his family and circle. Caroline struggles to keep up with the active life in society and thus loses her husband's interest and affection. Busk portrays the stress the young woman suffers when introduced to society by her new family, and the narrator foregrounds her social inadequacy and shyness in public. Her husband thus becomes dissatisfied with her behaviour:

> The first impression, however, *was* favourable. Caroline's beauty surpassed the expectation her husband's praises had awakened […]. But the reserve and embarrassment with which she received that mother's gracious advances, and his father's studied compliments, equally surprised and mortified him. (1819, 14, emphasis in the original)

Busk portrays realistically the demands for women's presence in social gatherings and their expectations for frivolity and light conversation, thus showing her desire to introduce social commentary in her tale. Caroline becomes soon dissatisfied with the superficial attitude she is encouraged to adopt, as she relies on her parents' religious and moral example. Similarly, Lord Frederic relies on his mother's judgement and thus grows increasingly dissatisfied with Caroline's behaviour at social events:

> Caroline censured the indelicacy, the levity, the impropriety of fashionable dress and conduct; and her censures coming as home to her mother and sister-in-law, as to any members of the great world, a reciprocal coolness ensued, which, in Lady Selina, took the form of anger, in the Marchioness, of contempt, and in Lady Frederic, of condemnation. Lord Frederic, warmly attached to his mother, was vexed at his wife's behaviour at home; and, abroad, the unmerciful raillery, hoaxing, and pity with which he was assailed respecting her, formed too mortifying a contrast to the incessant flattery and admiration addressed to himself, to be endured without some degree of irritation. (1819, 46–47)

Caroline's refusal to follow commonly accepted norms for women's dress code and conduct in public is sanctioned by the women in Lord Frederic's family: her stubbornness leads Caroline to refuse to take part in dancing and to dress according to the fashion of the day and she is judged as "a Methodist parson in petticoats" (1819, 42). Caroline's parents' social isolation and their religiosity is responsible for her lack of experience in the rules of sociability: the narrator describes her as "graceful, though unfashioned" (1819, 2). Lady Selina, Lord Frederic's mother, instructs her on the conversation she can entertain when socialising and about the need to avoid any topic that may be deemed too personal: "When you know the people, you will be able to judge who are worthy of more amusing subjects: till you do, it will be safest for you to follow their lead" (1819, 31). Despite a certain success in her first public engagements, Caroline experiences the contrast between her early life and education and the new demands imposed on her: "how woefully had she, upon being transplanted to a larger theatre, fallen short of her mother's expectations and of her own ideas of propriety. She had wasted her days and nights, her time and health, in dissipation" (1819, 33).

Lady Selina soon refuses to help her in society as she finds that "her ideas of merit—female merit at least,—are confined to the qualities of a Methodist" (1819, 63). The tale describes Lord Frederic's progressive withdrawal from his newly wedded wife. She does not accept his offers of a singing master, and fails to learn horse-riding under her husband's tutoring. Her refusal to accept his suggestions for tutoring that could improve her social skills and to accompany him to social events is responsible for their progressive estrangement. Lord Frederic furthermore accepts the flirtatious company of a Mrs Harlowe, thus causing Caroline's sense of neglect and betrayal. Frederic's departure to take part in Wellington's Portuguese battles against general Massena leaves Caroline alone with her new-born son Charles. In Frederic's absence, Caroline's marriage and her social reputation is eventually redeemed thanks to her friendship with a new acquaintance, Mrs Orville: having learnt about her unstinting praise in society and of her irreprehensible conduct, Caroline is able to overcome her stubbornness and to adopt her as mentor and advisor. Mrs Orville provides her with some practical devices to win back Lord Frederic's interest and love, and to regain her social reputation. It appears that her solution is to accept her husband's "libertinism"

and to win over his female admirers' alliance by befriending them. Mrs Orville's stratagem seems thus in line with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's project of a separate education for boys and girls in *Émile, or On Education* (1762) and his advice that the young Sophie should be brought up mainly for Émile, as a "companion given to him" (Rousseau 357).

However, both Mrs Orville and Caroline share a passion for reading. Mrs Orville considers this interest a disadvantage for women and goes so far as to call her learning a "sin" to be hidden from her husband:

> I had not fashionable accomplishments; my education had been rather solid than ornamental, —rather a boy's than a girl's; and, though I might have gained celebrity for my learning, that was the only celebrity that would not have answered. I knew his contempt and dislike for female learning to be excessive; and blessed my father's cautions to conceal unusual acquirements— which had kept him ignorant of my sins of that nature. (1819, 2:39)

In fact, Mr. Orville grows to praise his wife's learning and her reading of Homer: women's learning is thus accepted as a private accomplishment, and its ostentation should be avoided as far as possible. Caroline's main "fault," as suggested by the title, is finally identified with her desire to reform the world, rather than focussing on herself and her love for Lord Frederic. Thanks to Mrs Orville's example and education, she is eventually able to win her husband back by cultivating her abilities, such as singing and riding, and by putting up with his liaisons. The tale concludes by narrating Caroline's ability to overcome the pain of her parents' death by focussing on her new-born child. When visiting her birthplace, she is finally able to understand her parents' unsatisfactory education, which she identifies as the origin of her blunders: "She wandered through the desolate rooms where she had received her mother's instructions, had been encouraged in her petulant rebellions by her father's laugh, and had listened to Lord Frederic's vows of endless love" (1819, 252).

Nevertheless, the tale does not adopt a moralising attitude, but rather celebrates women's abilities to occupy their lives by cultivating themselves, including practising sports such as riding, in line with Mary Wollstonecraft's teachings concerning women's need for physical exercise, as she explained in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: "Besides, by the exercise of their bodies and minds, women would acquire that mental activity so necessary in the maternal character, united with the fortitude that distinguishes steadiness of conduct from the obstinate perverseness of weakness" (1989, 250). Moreover, the extensive use of dialogue in Busk's tale creates a multiplicity of voices, or polyglossia in Mikhail Bakhtin's words (1981, 300), which provides the reader with contrasting readings of Caroline's situation: this use of dialogues and of internally focalised third-person narration furthers avoiding

a single moralising attitude and encourages the reader to understand Caroline's difficulties, her psychological state, and the choices she is faced with.

Busk pursued her interest in the tale with the collection *Tales of Fault and Feeling*, which comprises nine short stories divided into three volumes. The only critical assessment I have been able to identify so far is Killick's *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth-Century; The Rise of the Tale*. Killick regards Busk's tales as examples of the genre of the "moral tale," which became extremely popular alongside the novel in the Romantic period. According to Killick, these were short stories "which to a greater or lesser degree, sought to elevate the morals of its readers, or which presented a model of decorous behavior suitable for emulation" (2008, 74). Women sought this particular form of writing as a means to enter the public sphere by publication, but also as part of a trend identified by Patricia Comitini as "vocational philanthropy" (qtd. in Killick 2008, 75). When writing, female authors could embrace a radical agenda, as was the case with Mary Hays, an evangelical one, as did Hannah More with her illustrated *Cheap Repository Tracts* (1797), or aspire to educational objectives, as did Maria Edgeworth with the *Parent's Assistant* (1796–1800). Busk belongs to a group of writers including Mary Russell Mitford, or Marion and Margaret Corbett, who adopted a more conservative view and did not overtly express a desire for a change in gender relations. Nevertheless, as did Wollstonecraft, Busk believed in the need for women's education and defended women's aspiration to become published authors. For Killick, "they were women for whom a sense of authorial responsibility was the primary shaping force on their work, and who emerged briefly from 'the shelter of private life' precisely in order to proclaim their right to stay there: women who felt uncomfortable with the mantle of author and whose voices may have failed to echo down the years, but were nonetheless potent at the time" (Killick 2008, 77). Killick places Busk among the women writers who sought to keep art and religion apart, avoiding any explicit didacticism or sentimentality:

> *Tales of Fault and Feeling*, belying somewhat the sentimentality of its title, consciously distanced itself from collections that wallowed in emotion and while Busk was willing to draw on characters and situations derived from the sentimental novel, she was simultaneously careful to draw a line between her own tales and the excesses associated with that mode. (2008, 104)

An example of this achievement is "Arthur Errington," a tale that, I think, has an autobiographical inspiration. It narrates the financial struggles of two young aristocrats, Arthur and Lady Grace Raynhurst, the former of whom strives to maintain a standard of living in line with his political aspirations, only to face financial ruin. Lady Grace is portrayed as the best manager of the family finances

with her effort to "economize" (Busk 1825, 1:10). After a brief time in France and Flanders, the couple adopt a life without luxury, but they are eventually restored to their wealth by Mr Browell's admiration of Lady Grace's resilience and support of her husband. I suggest that an echo of William Busk's failed election campaign and of his debts could be identified in the short story. Similarly, travelling abroad is a temporary solution for the Raynhursts in order to avoid insolvency, which might have been inspired by the Busks' financial difficulties and their decision to reside abroad. Busk creates in Lady Grace the figure of the strong wife, thus demonstrating women's ability to adjust to complex financial situations when required, despite social expectations concerning husbands' responsibility for monetary matters.

Busk's tales portray situations of contrast between different cultural traditions, and religion is introduced as one aspect of them. Characters are often presented as facing a moral dilemma due to their cultural difference and their dislocation. In the introductory section of "The Unknown Champion," Busk claims her purpose to be to illustrate the conflicts and passions in the post-revolutionary era, as best displayed in the German context:

> In no part of Europe has this effect been more apparent, than in Germany; for no where, save in the parent state, has either the fraternizing or the conquering spirit generated by the conflict of all the best and worst passions and principles of humanity, passed with a more desolating, and also, perhaps, no where with a more beneficial influence. (1825, 1:31)

The short stories "Miriam," "The Unknown Champion," "The Young Cacique," and "Ida, Heiress of Unsponnen," differ in their setting and historical background, which range from England during the Civil War in "Miriam," through eighteenth-century Germany in "The Unknown Champion," to sixteenth-century Chile in "The Young Cacique," and Medieval Switzerland in "Ida, Heiress of Unsponnen." Nevertheless, these tales all depict strong female characters' ability to withstand their parents' or guardians' opposition to their love and to avoid religious extremism and feuds. Others, such as "The Merchant's Daughter," set in Medieval Sicily, foreground debasing male ideologies: when Pietro of Aragon refuses to comply with his promise to marry her, Camiola Turinga chooses to isolate herself in a convent despite the king's intervention in order to force his brother to respect his engagement.

Among the most successful examples is "Parental Guilt," a short story in the Gothic mode exploring the theme of incest and supernatural visitations in dreams. Juliet Villeroy has to overcome her parents' mysterious conflict and finds herself divided between her father's political ambitions and her uncle's decision to educate her in France and Italy, where, in contrast to her father's religiosity, she is brought up in the appreciation of arts and in the principles of the *encyclopédistes*:

> At Paris, Juliet's vivid imagination had been chiefly employed in the service of her wit; but at the age of fifteen, it received new energy, a new impulse, a new direction, from a visit to the fair land of Italy, an introduction to its harmonious language, to all the fruits of Ausonian genius in poetry, painting, and music, to all the wondrous monuments of classic ages, which still adorn that scene of classic recollections. Juliet left Italy an enthusiast,—but not in religion. (1825, 1:18–19)

Juliet's education prepares her to take an active part in choosing her husband, but her parents' "faults" will be the cause of her downfall. Having rejected the advances of Mr Rycroft, encouraged by her father, Juliet falls in love with Lord Glenmere, the son of a Jacobite exile in Ireland. Her affinities with him are identified as the result of their Irish descent and their common knowledge of French and of French culture; indeed, Lord Glenmere addresses Juliet in French and bi-culturalism is foregrounded as a source of their attraction. Having seen her deceased mother in frequent nightmares, Juliet fears for her mental sanity until Lord Glenmere confirms that he was the cause of her parents' separation because he had a relationship with her mother when she was travelling in Italy. He confirms, therefore, that Juliet is his illegitimate daughter. While the incest is averted by the supernatural intervention of her dead mother, Juliet takes upon herself the consequences of her mother's extra-marital relationship, and after a short residence in an austere Carmelitan convent in France, she dies young. Both in Juliet's mother's and in Juliet's own experience, clashes between different religious and cultural backgrounds, mainly identified in the Catholic and Protestant religions, and in the Irish, French and English cultures, are the cause of misunderstandings and of the couples' separation. However, the idea of parental guilt due to unsatisfactory education is often presented and it blurs the cultural differences. Moreover, the Gothic mode is introduced through the device of the ghost appearing in a dream. While the use of a ghost may suggest a Shakespearean influence, Juliet's mother does not seek vengeance but has the role of revealing a hidden secret. Moreover, the dream invites the character to interpret signs and search for hidden secrets. As Anne Rouhette points out, dreams are often present in women writers' literature in the long eighteenth century as a means to foreground the need for interpretation: "The critical attention devoted to the character's dream echoes that which the reader must pay to the work as a whole in the act of reading. In both cases, it is a narrative which he or she is invited to interpret" (2019, 3). Busk may thus be seen to find inspiration in the recent tradition of writing by women, including for example Anne Radcliffe's novels that use dreams as hermeneutical devices.[3] In the tale "Parental Guilt," the nightmare invites the reader to assess the origins of Juliet's suffering: religion is offered as her only source

[3] On this subject, see Sage 2021.

of consolation, as her mother's extramarital relationship causes her renunciation of love. Juliet's father is not completely exonerated from "parental guilt," as he does not hesitate to sacrifice his daughter for personal interests in encouraging her to accept Mr Rycroft's proposal.

Several of Busk's stories are set in medieval times or during the English Civil War (1642–1651). In those periods, Busk identifies a misogynistic male "chivalric" culture that accepts men's liaisons and their threat to their families' stability. As she states in "The Merchant's Daughter": "laxity of morals, with regards to the female sex, [was] prevalent in courts and camps, among princes, knights, and troubadours" (1825, 2:54). In these situations, Busk often celebrates women's resilience by introducing retribution in the form of social punishment for the lovers, regardless of their social origin. A case in point is "The Merchant's Daughter," in which Pietro of Aragon, brother to the king of Sicily, is banned by the king for not having respected the engagement he made when Camiola Turinga paid the ransom for his captivity. Moreover, these short stories reflect Busk's interest in European and world history.

Alongside her reviewing for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *The Athenaeum,* and *The Foreign Quarterly Review*, Busk developed an interest in European and world history, as well as women's place in historical narratives. Thus, her *Manners and Customs of the Japanese* (1841), inspired by Dutch travellers' accounts of their journey in Japan, was one of the first histories of the country before it opened to commerce with the West. As Williams claims, it is "a work of synthesis and scholarship, which blends information from travellers with original commentary" (2017, 22). Busk's work provides a unique introduction to Japanese women's lives, devoting a chapter to "Social and Domestic Life," in which she writes about traditions and habits concerning marriage, birth, childbearing, and divorce. Busk introduces frequent comparisons with the condition of women in Europe as a mark of the advancement of a civilisation, and situates Japan as being in an intermediary position between East and West, and, as Williams points out, finds "points of overlap between the status of women in both countries" (2017, 22). Her ambitious four-volume *Mediaeval Popes, Emperors, Kings, and Crusaders, or, Germany, Italy, and Palestine, from A.D. 1125 to A.D. 1268* (1854–1856) adopts a transcultural approach, as the volume reassesses German and Italian medieval history through the perspective of the crusades and of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, which reigned in both countries.

Busk's interest in history is in line with the findings by recent studies showing that historical writing became increasingly part of women's recommended reading, especially when its didactic aim was clearly pointed out. Moreover, British women were also successful writers of histories, with the notable examples of Catharine Macaulay's *The History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick*

Line (1763–1783) and Mary Hays's six-volume *Female Biography, or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of all Ages and Countries* (1803). According to Greg Kucich, women's involvement with history was due to a dissatisfaction with previous historical narratives, as several women writers found mainstream history much too curtailed in its explorations of affections and of society (2000, 200–201). Thus, Macaulay's search for greater "sympathizing tenderness" in her history and Hays's work both focus on women's sufferings and difficulties (Hays 1803, 1:vii). Busk addressed the originality of her subject matter in the "Preface" to her history: she situates her work in the context of German medievalism; moreover, her desire to instruct the British reader is paramount, by offering a synthesis and "a comprehensive but condensed portraiture of society in those ages, and especially in Germany" (1854–1856, 1:v). Busk finds in the period "the extremes of vice and virtue, of brutal ferocity and of chivalrous courtesy," but also identifies the emergence of women as historical subjects and cultural actors, due to the "chivalrous and troubadourish idolatry of woman" (1854–1856, 1:ix). In a review of Giustina Renier Michiel's *Origine delle Feste Veneziane* she also notes that some women became professors at universities, while education was being denied to women at large.[4]

Despite her medievalism, Busk invokes the primacy of present moral values over those held in the Middle Ages:

> For who does and can look at the past free from a bias impressed by the present? Not even the most philosophical appear to escape it. Secondly, these princes are variously appreciated according as the moral standard by which they are measured is taken from the opinions, habits, and sentiments of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, or of the more enlightened, refined and polished nineteenth? Need it be said which is the fair standard for comparison? (1854–1856, 1:ix)

Moreover, she tends to celebrate British superiority and, according to Judith Johnson, in Busk "the value of cultural exchange is once again heavily weighted against the Europeans and is valuable only for the light that it shines on the British themselves" (2013, 88).

[4] "Our readers are probably aware, that in Italy there is, or at least there was, no medium in female education, and whilst the great body of women, even of the higher classes, could hardly scrawl their names, and were destitute of such common information as may be acquired at a Sunday School, some of their compatriot sisters were Professors of Law, Mathematics, philosophy, and what not, at the most celebrated Universities of the Ausonian Peninsula". (Busk 1831, 498). She means Elena Cornaro Piscopia (1646–1684), who obtained a degree in Philosophy at the University of Padua in 1678, and Laura Maria Catarina Bassi (1711–1778), who became the first woman in Europe to teach philosophy at the University of Bologna after having defended her doctorate in Philosophy in 1732.

To conclude, Busk's historical narratives and her tales, often set in the past, in a British or European setting, reflect her interest in women's self-education, in European languages, and in women's history. In a review of an Italian history of literature, Busk reflected on the consequence of the tendency to confine women's literature to an appendix, and protested that "in our insular ignorance [we] should never have suspected that to speak of Sappho, for instance, was to digress from the history of Hellenic poetry" (1836, 433). As has been pointed out by recent studies, Victorian anthologies were responsible for excluding women writers from the canon and recovering their voice should be one of the main objectives in literary history.

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English Literature and its Hungarian Reception

Az angol irodalom története. Vols. III and IV. Az 1640-es évektől az 1830-as évekig. ['History of English Literature. Vols. III and IV. From the 1640s to the 1830s.'] 2 vols. Edited by Zsolt Komáromy, Bálint Gárdos and Miklós Péti. Editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay. Budapest: Kijárat, 2021. Pp. 516 and 412. ISBN: 978-615-5160-79-0, 978-615-5160-80-6.

Reviewed by Brigitta Gyimesi
gyimesi.brigitta@btk.elte.hu

With the recent publication of the first four volumes of *Az angol irodalom története* ('History of English Literature'[1]) and three more volumes coming soon, a long-overdue project—the brainchild of the late Géza Kállay—is nearing completion. The last endeavour that aimed at synthesising the long and variegated history of English literature into an informative and thorough yet manageably sized book for the Hungarian public was in 1972, when Miklós Szenczi, Tibor Szobotka and Anna Katona published *Az angol irodalom története*. This was a single-volume study of 700 pages—roughly the same length as the two volumes (volumes 3 and 4) under review here, which "only" cover the period between 1640 and 1830. (The first two volumes deal with the medieval and Renaissance periods, while the last three will address the literature of the past two centuries.)

Although seemingly excessive, the 800-page count sounds much more reasonable if we consider that the volumes cover nearly 200 years: they include the overview and analysis of such diverse literary works as *Samson Agonistes*, *The Rape of the Lock* and *Frankenstein*, all the while aiming at incorporating and introducing lesser-known figures from the period. The study encompasses the periods traditionally known as the Commonwealth, the Restoration, the Augustan Age, the Age of Johnson and Romanticism in their entirety, as well as including the end of the Renaissance and offering a few remarks on the early Victorian era.

Az angol irodalom története: Az 1640-es évektől az 1830-as évekig features an ensemble of 29 authors, all of them experts in the field of English studies. Despite the large number of authors and the careful coordination that a project of such magnitude requires, the tone of the books is smooth and homogeneous; there are no jarring stylistic jumps between chapters written by different authors. The sense

[1] For the purposes of this review, I have translated the title of the Hungarian series and all relevant quotations into English – Brigitta Gyimesi.

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of unity is also promoted by the extensive use of cross-references alongside the main body of the text to other chapters throughout the volumes of the series. This hypertextual quality, besides the detailed index at the end of each volume, facilitates nonlinear reading: interconnections between different chapters are explicitly pointed out to the reader, which amplifies the searchability and, by extension, the usefulness of the book. This approach, as acknowledged by the authors as well, inevitably breeds repetition, but their actual number throughout the study is kept to a bare minimum.

The combination of length, the amount of literary texts covered and the high number of authors has led to one disadvantage: there is a slight but perceptible bias towards the poetry of the period, with 270 pages comprising the "Poetry" section, as opposed to 180 pages of "Prose" (of which 100 pages deal explicitly with novels), and 100 pages of "Drama." Thus, for instance, while 14 pages are dedicated to the life and working environment of Wordsworth and Coleridge, with their numerous works analysed separately elsewhere, the biography and oeuvre of Richardson, Fielding and Sterne are discussed in six pages *in toto*, with a few cursory allusions elsewhere in the volumes. There is a separate section in the first volume for "authorial circles," which aims to show the context in which famous figureheads lived and created (Gárdos et al 1:140),[2] but all of these circles bear the names of poets. One explanation might be the prestigious status poetry enjoyed during these two centuries, whereas prose, and especially novels, were considered for a long time a middle- or even lowbrow form of literature. Since writing poetry was essentially the only means of attaining fame and prestige, talented authors chose to engage in poetic endeavours, resulting in a higher number of poetic works worthy of inspection. But given that the birth and rise of the novel occurred in the period under scrutiny—indeed, the publication and consumption of novels increased exponentially throughout the decades, as is mentioned several times by the various authors of the volume (Hartvig 2:188; Ruttkay 2:267 and 2:272)—more might have been said on the characteristics of individual novelistic approaches. Judging by the cross-references within the prose section, however, readers can hope for a more balanced treatment of poetry and fiction in the forthcoming volumes.

The structure of the study is based on a threefold chronology, with each successive run through the years becoming more and more detailed. First, there is a general overview of the canonical periods covered in the study, which contrasts them with the traditional Hungarian/European periods. The next subsection starts again from the beginning: it does not yet address specific authors or texts but gives an indispensable insight into the historical, religious, philosophical, social, artistic and

[2] All references to the various chapters of *Az angol irodalom története: Az 1640-es évektől az 1830-as évekig* include the author's name in an acknowledgement of their contribution.

scientific milieu of the period, contextualising the works that will be analysed in the later sections. The sections mentioned so far could be useful even for readers who do not specialise in English literature but wish to expand their general knowledge of the era without being bogged down by lengthy literary analyses. Next comes the section of the above-mentioned "authorial circles," which is followed by the "Poetry," "Drama" and "Prose" sections ("Drama" and "Prose" comprising the second volume), each of which starts again from the 17th century but now concentrates exclusively on literature.

One of the chief concepts governing the study is continuity, as opposed to segmentation and rigid categorisation, which many of the authors emphasise in their respective chapters. The study discards the idea that authors can be assigned to a single stylistic period with well-defined boundaries. This approach would risk placing contemporaneous authors within different literary periods, which in turn gives the illusion of total separation. The governing idea applied here, instead, is that of stylistic coexistence: authors living around the same time constantly influence each other, and periods that are traditionally considered incompatible (such as "Neoclassicism" and "Romanticism") are, in fact, developing side-by-side for decades on end. This approach also means the rejection of the "revolutionary event" principle, which has been governing Western periodisation, i.e. that one event, or a limited number of nearly contemporaneous events (e.g. the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*), marks out such a shift in history that the birth of a new period must be announced from that moment on (Komáromy 1:31–33).

Another key endeavour of the study is the revision and expansion of the artistic canon by employing "alternative and subversive reading methods that are, at least in Hungary, often met with strong resistance" (Gárdos et al 1:69). Apart from the well-known personages of the period, the volumes include numerous lesser-known or marginalised authors. Notwithstanding the word "English" in the title, there is a welcome effort to introduce Scottish and Irish authors and historical events,[3] and there is an even greater emphasis on incorporating female writers and thinkers into the mainstream, male-dominated history of literature. Women, both in terms of readership and authorship, had a considerable influence on the literary market of the 17th and 18th centuries: their reading habits governed publishing trends and they could, and indeed did, become celebrated authors. At the beginning of the 19th century, however, women were re-confined to the house and the private sphere; thus, their previous achievements as well as their relative liberty were practically

[3] For more information on the connotations of the word "English," see Tamás Bényei's clarification in the first volume of the series: *A középkor irodalma a kezdetektől a 15. század végéig*, edited by Tamás Káráth and Katalin Halácsy (Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2020), 20–23.

censored from later texts and remained forgotten until well into the 20th century (Komáromy 1:62; Pálinkás 1:225–26). The rediscovery of these female texts is still a work in progress, but the consequences of this process have already been reflected upon in the present study. It should not only bring about a re-assessment of the traditional period features (Pálinkás 1:229), but also provoke a reconsideration of the role women played in historical events (Séllei 2:227–28) and in the development of the novelistic genre (Séllei 2:229).

The quest for expanding the canon is discernible in terms of genres, as well. The prose section discusses texts that today fall outside the category of what we call "literature." Back then, however, they were not peripherical but integral to literature and culture *per se*—one should think here of genres like diaries, autobiographies, letters, pamphlets, treatises, ethical, religious and philosophical texts, and even scientific works. There is a separate chapter on musical dramatic genres, which are often mentioned only perfunctorily in drama anthologies, and two refreshing and illuminating chapters are dedicated to the history of painting and landscape gardening, both of which wielded a huge influence on the literature of the period.

Although circumstances have changed enormously since 1830, many aspects of our 21st-century life that today we take for granted came into existence during the period covered in the study. Besides being the cradle of the modern novel, this was a period of semantic shifts when many of our concepts acquired their modern meaning. Definitions of such fundamental concepts as "literature," "author and reader" and "text" underwent a slow but unstoppable change (for these changes in detail see Komáromy 1:36, 1:50 and 1:53). These two centuries were also the age of institutionalisation. The idea of the public library was born, facilitating the emergence of an ever-expanding readership (Hartvig 2:115); the publishing industry and the spread of periodicals and journals have their roots in this period; and the birth of the modern literary critic and the demand for critical pieces, without which this present review could not have been written, can also be dated back to this time. By the early 19th century, "modern science, with its peculiar system of institutions, forms of communication and publishing practices (e.g. peer-review) had evolved" (Zemplén 2:168).

The two-volume *Az angol irodalom története az 1640-es évektől az 1830-as évekig* is an accessible companion for university students and interested readers alike. It can be purchased from Kijárat Kiadó, with the last three volumes expected to come out in 2023.

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