

## Happiness and Ideological Reconfiguration in the Revolutionary Novels of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays (1788-1799)

Isabelle Bour (Université de Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle, France)

**Abstract** In the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays, the attack on patriarchy paradoxically does not leave much room for happiness, as it is combined with an inscription of femininity within the paradigm of sensibility. Sensibility, though reviled by Wollstonecraft in some of her works, functions as a plot matrix, which neutralizes the rational arguments of the female protagonist (in fiction) or the pamphleteer (in polemical essays). Furthermore, Wollstonecraft and Hays are more concerned with justice than with the search for happiness.

The Enlightenment was much concerned with happiness, already a major theme of ancient philosophy, which had established a connection between happiness and virtue. Although in the eighteenth century that connection was not broken, being in particular theorized by Shaftesbury at the beginning of the period,<sup>1</sup> the end or aim of human life was also seen from a different angle, with man's rights coming to the fore as an essential component, especially in the second half of the century.

Some English women writers, while they embraced Enlightenment ideas, and specifically the concern with human dignity and rights, also brought into the debate the question of the specific rights of *women*, as against those of human beings in general, outlining in what happiness might consist for them. This article studies the four revolutionary novels of two writers, Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) and Mary Hays (1760-1843), who were friends and moved in the same Radical circles. Some of their works were published by Joseph Johnson, who entertained them and other authors, such as Thomas Holcroft, Thomas Paine, and William Godwin. Indeed, Godwin was a close friend of Hays, and it is she who reintroduced him to Wollstonecraft in January 1796. Hays saw herself as a disciple of Wollstonecraft. Both writers

1 In *The Victim of Prejudice*, Mr Raymond says to his adopted daughter: «The first and most earnest of my cares and precepts has been, by forming you to virtue, to secure your *happiness*» (Ty 1994, p. 28. See also what Mr Francis declares in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*: «The growth of reason is slow, but not the less sure; the increase of knowledge must necessarily prepare the way for the increase of virtue and happiness» (Ty 1996, p. 48).

wrote essays on the condition of woman; Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* came first, in 1792, and provided part of the impetus for Hays's own *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793) and *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* (1798).

Their novels were written over what might be called the revolutionary decade, 1788 to 1799, this latter year seeing the fall of the French Directory and the beginning of the Consulate, with the continuing rise of Napoléon Bonaparte. They are Wollstonecraft's *Mary, A Fiction* (1788), Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), then Wollstonecraft's unfinished *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria. A Fragment*, published by William Godwin in 1798 after her death in childbirth, and finally Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799).<sup>2</sup> While the essays criticize the upbringing and education of women and argue that more professional avocations should be open to them, the novels (which touch on those matters too) dramatize in detail the fraught and lop-sided relations between men on the one hand and, on the other, women of character who will not meekly fit the model of womanhood encapsulated in the conduct books aimed at young females. These novels show the complex interaction of many different factors bearing on females once they reach marriageable age: those factors include the traditional conception of female subjection (as against the new ideology of rights and progress), male predatoriness (which clashed with the strong injunction for chastity and propriety in women), hostility to unconventionality and assertiveness in females. In other words, these novels dramatize various subject positions, which turn out to be unbearable and destructive in the current state of society. That happiness is a goal is made explicit: Emma Courtney, for instance, writes to her mentor Mr Francis that «*happiness* is, surely, the only desirable *end* of existence!» (Ty 1996, p. 85); and again later, she reflects: «Individual happiness constitutes the general good: *happiness* is the only true *end* of existence» (p. 116). However, the protagonists of these novels, which are revolutionary in several respects, never achieve happiness.

I will discuss the way in which happiness is defined dialectically in relation to such key concepts and values as nature, reason, virtue, the passions and sensibility. I will also examine the parallel between the tensions generated by the rejection of simple binary oppositions (such as reason and the passions, for instance; Jones 1994, and Ty 1994, discuss this opposition) and change in the genre of the novel, which in our corpus becomes a mutant form where fiction and truthful autobiographical material are indistinguishable. I will not be primarily concerned with characterizing the demand for social change in the corpus, but with the intellectual and

2 In parenthetical references, *Mary, A Fiction* will be abridged as *M*, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* as *EC*, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* as *WW*, and *The Victim of Prejudice* as *VP*.

ideological implications of that demand. As the concepts listed above are intricately connected with each other, and as the novels under study tend to question their separateness, my own discussion will involve some overlap.

The four novels by Wollstonecraft and Hays have never been analysed together, but I will use the insights of Mary Jacobus on *Emma Courtney* and Vivien Jones on that novel and *The Wrongs of Woman*, as well as my own article that discusses sensibility and repetition in Hays's fiction (Jacobus 1999, Jones 1994, Bour 1998). Gary Kelly, in his two monographs (Kelly 1976 and 1993), has particularly focused on the political content of those novels, seen as advocating a middle-class cultural revolution: his reading provides a background for the analysis which follows.

I will start with brief liminal remarks on a computer search of the number of occurrences of the words 'happiness' and 'happy' and their antonyms in Hays's and Wollstonecraft's novels as well as in their *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* and *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Those words occur much more often in the essays, partly no doubt because they are longer works but also, I would suggest, because they are very much concerned with redefining happiness for females and emphasizing that it should be factored into the workings of society. The high frequency of those words in the novels is, in a way, more surprising, as their protagonists are more often *unhappy* than happy; this can probably be put down to the high theoretical content of novels that are all more or less didactic and demonstrative. The words 'unhappiness' and, especially, 'unhappy' are more frequent in Hays's fiction, whose protagonists express their emotions more emphatically than Wollstonecraft's.<sup>3</sup>

From what and whom did Wollstonecraft and Hays derive their ideas of happiness? First, from their own reading of fiction, where the dominant aesthetics and ethics had been for several decades those of sensibility, the corresponding generic model being the romance. But they set out to challenge that model rather than endorse it, as it was based on the centuries-old *doxa* about woman's intellectual inferiority and a construction of female nature as dominated by the passions; however, as will be seen, they could not break away completely from their conception of the female mind seen as partly structured and ennobled by sensibility. Further, both Wollstonecraft and Hays were well-read in the philosophy of their own day; both embraced Locke's epistemology, complemented, in Hays's case in particular, by William Godwin's emphasis on the role of circumstances both past and present as a determinant of action, which role was sometimes seen in necessitarian

3 In Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), there are 36 occurrences of 'happiness', 12 of 'happy', one of 'unhappiness', and 5 of 'unhappy'. The word count in the same order for the other works is: *Appeal*: 29, 15, 0, 2; *Mary*: 6, 9, 0, 4; *The Wrongs of Woman*: 8, 9, 0, 2; *The Victim of Prejudice*: 9, 10, 0, 5; *Emma Courtney*: 29, 16, 0, 10.

terms.<sup>4</sup> Empiricist philosophy, in which knowledge is grounded in the senses, states that human beings naturally seek pleasure and try to avoid pain. Pleasure thus becomes a component of happiness. Emma Courtney, in the eponymous novel, writes to Augustus Harley: «What is it we desire – *pleasure* – *happiness*? I allow, pleasure is the supreme good; but it may be analysed – it must have a stable foundation» (Ty 1996, p. 124). Hays frequently mentions Helvétius, whose materialism and sensationalism she endorses, with some inconsistency, as she occasionally (for instance at the very end of *Emma Courtney*) voices Godwin's belief in the overarching power of reason to prevail over prejudice and misguided passion.<sup>5</sup> She is also close to David Hume, when Emma Courtney says: «my reason was but an auxiliary to my passion» (p. 61). As for Wollstonecraft, Adam Smith's notion of sympathy, as expounded in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), made a deep impression on her: there are many references to that work in the 1792 *Vindication* and sympathy governs the behaviour of many characters in her fiction. Both women might also have been aware of Jeremy Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789). All those theoretical references provide a backbone for the representation of the behaviour of women in their interaction with men and the negotiating of social life, but they also generate tensions and contradictions, as will be seen.

Let us first look at the relationship between happiness and sensibility. *Mary. A Fiction* stands apart, as it is – at least ostensibly – imbued with a deeply Christian conception of life and rules out happiness on earth. This is clearly stated on at least two occasions: «happiness only flourished in paradise – we cannot taste and live» (Todd, Butler 1989a, p. 22); and again a little later: “She [Mary] forgot that happiness was not to be found on earth, and built a terrestrial paradise liable to be destroyed by the first serious thought» (p. 42). Indeed, trying to grasp the nature of happiness is repugnant, as Mary writes at one point:

There are some subjects that are so enveloped in clouds, as you dissipate one, another overspreads it. Of this kind are our reasonings concerning

4 In the first chapter of *The Victim of Prejudice*, the autodiegetic narrator notes: «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» (Ty 1994, p. 6); a little later on, she says she is «[e]ntangled in a series of unavoidable circumstances» (p. 41). In *Emma Courtney* the protagonist asks her mentor Mr Francis: «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» (Ty 1996, p. 147).

5 Emma tells her husband Mr Montague: «I feel for you all the affection that a reasonable and virtuous mind ought to feel – that affection which is compatible with the fulfilling of other duties. We are guilty of vice and selfishness when we yield ourselves up to unbounded desires, and suffer our hearts to be wholly absorbed by one object, however meritorious that object may be» (Ty 1996, p. 170).

happiness, till we are obliged to cry out with the Apostle [Paul], *That it has not entered into the heart of man to conceive in what it could consist, or how satiety could be prevented* (p. 60).

The pleasures on earth are delight (pp. 57, 65), rapture (pp. 26, 57), sympathy, the pleasures of sensibility, «the luxury of wretchedness» (p. 65; also p. 40). Now, it is very striking that what is ruled out in *Mary* is happy married life, marriage itself being rare in this novel: Mary's mother was a frivolous young woman who married fashionably – and married a fool; Henry's beloved betrayed him and died; Mary obeys her parents in marrying Charles, who sets off for the continent on the same day (p. 20), pointedly before the marriage has been consummated. Later, Mary and Henry fall in love, but their relationship remains a Platonic one. After Henry's death and Charles's return, she sees her husband, but without any physical intimacy developing; indeed, «when her husband would take her hand or mention any thing like love, she would instantly feel a sickness, a faintness at her heart, and wish, involuntarily, that the earth would open and swallow her» (p. 72). The very last sentence of the novel is: «She thought she was hastening to that world *where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage*» (p. 73). The reference to the Gospel of Matthew (22: 30) neatly concatenates the themes of happiness, marriage and sexuality. Of course, as has been pointed out by earlier scholars, Wollstonecraft intended to criticize the loveless, ill-assorted marriages, which were widespread in the eighteenth century, and to this extent *Mary* adumbrates Wollstonecraft's feminist critique of established social institutions (for the homoerotic overtones of this rejection of marriage see Johnson 1995). However, what seems to me more striking is that the strong heterosexual bond, which lies at the heart of this novel, is exclusive of sexual consummation, and that (true) sensibility and sensuality are exclusive of each other. This suggests that, while the depth of Wollstonecraft's religious faith is not in question, Heaven here is to some extent a signifier that serves the purpose of stating that happiness is out of reach on earth – because it cannot be embodied. In Heaven, existence *will* be purely spiritual and happy, Wollstonecraft seems to say, while on earth, it *cannot but* be 'disembodied' and unhappy: true interaction can be emotional, aesthetic and intellectual, but not sexual.

Social criticism in this novel remains implicit, and the social role Wollstonecraft carves out for women is still rooted in sensibility, a sensibility which is carefully characterized in two passages (pp. 46 and 59-60), the latter being described as a «rhapsody on sensibility» and providing a comprehensive definition of all aspects of sensibility – physiological, moral, aesthetic. At one point in the rhapsody, Mary states: «these raptures are unknown to the depraved sensualist, who is only moved by what strikes his gross senses» (pp. 59-60).

By excluding sensuality from the purview of sensibility, Wollstonecraft was in line with the conception of femininity conveyed by the major conduct books, which claimed that women had no sexual feelings. This contrasts sharply with what she says in the *Author's Preface to The Wrongs of Woman* about «[t]he sentiments I have embodied» (p. 83). In this novel, which she wrote after her affair with Gilbert Imlay and while sharing William Godwin's life, she explicitly rejects this conception of women as feeling no sexual desire and she broadens the definition of true sensibility to include sensuality:

When novelists or moralists praise as a virtue, a woman's coldness of constitution, and want of passion; and make her yield to the ardour of her lover out of sheer compassion, or to promote a frigid plan of future comfort, I am disgusted. They may be good women, in the ordinary acceptance of the praise, and do no harm; but they appear to me not to have those 'finely fashioned nerves', which render the senses exquisite (p. 144).

This redefinition of sensibility involves a change in the configuring of mental faculties and in the conception of reason. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (in particular, in Chapter II), Wollstonecraft again and again stresses the need to develop woman's understanding and points out that when that has truly been allowed to happen, it will be possible to ascertain whether men's reason is indeed more developed than that of women. There, she still sees reason and the passions as distinct. Six years later, in *Wrongs of Woman*, the distinction disappears, but not because woman's supposedly overdeveloped sensibility has taken over her weak understanding. The narrator says of Maria:

Such was the sensibility which often mantled over it [her brow], that she frequently appeared, like a large proportion of her sex, only born to feel; and the activity of her well-proportioned, and even almost voluptuous figure, inspired the idea of strength of mind, rather than of body (Todd, Butler 1989b, p. 104).

The body/mind divide disappears as the opposition between the passions and reason does. It is no longer just fallen women who are 'sexed'; voluptuousness and intelligence can be combined. The same applies to the fiction of Mary Hays, as has been pointed out by Eleanor Ty (Ty 1996, pp. 19-20). When Emma Courtney says: «[a]re not passions and powers synonymous [*sic*] - or can the latter be produced without the lively interest that constitutes the former?» (p. 147), Hays is paraphrasing Helvétius, who believed that «the passions animate the moral world» (Ty 1996, p. 19).

Mary Hays goes further in this rejection of an exclusionary dichotomy

between body and mind, by indicting chastity in both her novels. The very blunt Emma Courtney writes to Augustus Harley, the man she pursues:

From the miserable consequences of wretched moral distinctions, from chastity having been considered as a sexual virtue, all these calamities have flown. [...] Half the sex, then, are the wretched, degraded, victims of brutal instinct; the remainder, if they sink not into mere frivolity and insipidity, are sublimed into a sort of - (what shall I call them) - refined, romantic, factitious, unfortunate, beings (p. 144).

The *Victim of Prejudice* emphatically points out the injustice of ostracizing and reducing to vice or destitution women who have been raped, as if they had allowed strong sexual feelings to get the better of them and discard established morality. Both the novel's main protagonist, Mary Raymond, and her mother, also called Mary, undergo this fate, but the younger Mary loudly proclaims that her integrity is intact. *Wrongs of Woman* makes the same point about the character of Jemima, a daughter whose life repeated that of the mother: as servants, both of them were seduced and then quickly cast off by their masters. Hays, however, goes further in rejecting asceticism and in identifying pleasure as a component of a happy virtue: «Ascetic virtues are equally barbarous as vain: - the only just morals, are those which have a tendency to increase the bulk of enjoyment» (Ty 1996, p. 116).

Hays devotes more time than Wollstonecraft to the re-mapping of mental faculties and moral values, pitting the ideas of Helvétius against those of Mr Francis/William Godwin, and pointing out that the rationalism of the latter comes up against the legitimate needs of human beings' passionate make-up. To Mr Francis, who argues that the only real evil is dependence, and who states definitively: «had you worshipped at the altar of reason but half as assiduously as you have sacrificed at the shrine of illusion, your present happiness would have been as enviable, as your present distress is worthy of compassion» (p. 139), who claims that Emma wilfully caused her own unhappiness, Emma retorts, in writing: «What does it signify whether, abstractedly considered, a misfortune be worthy of the names real and substantial, if the consequences produced are the same?» (p. 141). This very advocacy of the importance of feelings is at the heart of Maria Venables's defence at her trial in *The Wrongs of Woman*; the judge, whose concern is less the prevalence of reason than that of 'the good old rules of conduct', exclaims: «What virtuous woman thought of her feelings?» (Todd, Butler 1989b, p. 181). It does not mean that Hays and Wollstonecraft renounce reason: in her letter to her ward, Augustus Harley junior, which comes before the narrative of her doomed love for his father, Emma advises: «be not the slave of your passions, neither dream of eradicating them» (Ty 1996, p. 8); this echoes what Hays had said in her *Preface*, describing her protagonist as «a human being, loving virtue while enslaved by passion» (p. 4). But she

objects to characters in fiction exemplifying «a sort of *ideal perfection*, in which nature and passion are melted away» (pp. 3-4).

This affirmation of the essential unity of mental faculties and of the dialectical enmeshing of reason and the passions, echoes, with regard to the condition of women, the questioning of the supremacy of reason, which is seen here as an instrumental rather than a normative reason – that is to say, it is seen as a reason put in the service of existing hierarchies rather than of a new ‘gender-sensitive’ conception of human rights. As Judith Hawley puts it, Mary Hays «refuses such masculine enlightenment [as comes from Mr Francis], presumably because it would reinforce the existing power structure» (Hawley 1996, p. 27).

It should now be clear that the problematisation of sensibility and, more broadly, of the reason-passion dyad leads to a redefinition of virtue, which may diverge from conventional values or indeed from what is regarded as legally permissible or right. Hays’s character Mary Raymond, who has been raped by Sir Peter Osborne and then persecuted by him, states firmly:

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 (Ty 1996, p. 156).

This conceptual work in turn leads to a scrutiny of the concept of nature. As was common at the time, the concept is highly polysemic, ranging from the natural environment to an ideal norm that everybody can find in his/her heart and mind to guide their aesthetic and moral choices, manifesting the potential for man’s perfectibility. Nature as the natural environment plays an important part in *Mary* and in *The Victim of Prejudice*, whose female protagonists have enjoyed the moral benefits of an upbringing in the country. There is some latent primitivism here, but the country is not presented as an alternative to the corruption of cities: Hays and Wollstonecraft know that cities are where the main battles between men and women are enacted, and where they may be won – in law courts or when gainful employment makes their female protagonists fitfully independent. They also show that vice can pursue virtue in the country. The Nevilles, who welcome Mary in *The Victim of Prejudice* when her guardian Mr Raymond wants to remove her well away from the lewdness of Sir Peter Osborne, live a simple but happy life. Mary exclaims:

*Happiness*, coy and fair fugitive, who shunnest the gaudy pageants of courts and cities, the crowded haunts of vanity, the restless cares of ambition, the insatiable pursuits of avarice, the revels of voluptuousness, and the riot of giddy mirth, who turneth alike from fastidious refinement and brutal ignorance, if, indeed, thou art not a phantom that mockest



our research, thou art only to be found in the real solid pleasures of nature and social affection (Ty 1994, p. 46).

The very rhetoric of the passage – the use of allegory, of the obsolescent second person singular – as well as the hypothesis that happiness may be a ‘phantom’ undermine the idyllic depiction of the frugal happiness of the Nevilles, soon to be annihilated by a revengeful Sir Peter.

Nature as guiding principle governs the aesthetic judgements of Henry in *Mary*: «His taste was just, as it had a standard – Nature, which he observed with a critical eye» (Todd, Butler 1989a, p. 33). The reason-virtue-nature sequence appears repeatedly in Hays’s fiction (see Ty 1994, pp. 35, 55, and 1996, p. 81), constituting a normative triad that underwrites emotions. The sequence suggests a reference to *jus naturale*, the law of nature that is the law of reason and directs one to virtuous behaviour. The extra element brought by Hays and Wollstonecraft is precisely the creation of a continuum between that conceptual triad and passion. In *The Victim of Prejudice*, Mary Raymond exclaims, when she understands that her illegitimate birth makes it impossible for her to marry William Pelham: «What tyranny is this? When reason, virtue, nature, sanctify its emotions, why should the heart be controlled?» (Ty 1994, p. 35) The traditional dualism of early-modern natural law, which distinguishes between the moral and the physical, is here rejected. Further, nature is clearly used as a way of criticizing established norms of social behaviour and institutions.

This shows how Hays and Wollstonecraft use key concepts of Enlightenment thought, trying to reshape them within the overarching framework of their feminist politics, with the added difficulty that they redefine sensibility: rejecting it when it is seen as a marker of inferiority and a means to perpetuate female subjection, upholding it when its sexual dimension becomes a sign of a whole human nature. The tensions and instability among those components are intellectually productive, although, on the level of the plot they often explain the protagonists’ pain and the unhappy endings of the stories. The conceptual instability is an aspect of what Vivien Jones has called «the novels’ refusal to compromise» (Jones 1994, p. 181).

The combination of concepts borrowed from natural law, empiricist philosophy, and Godwin’s perfectibilist rationalism, but also from a sexualized conception of femininity underlain by recent developments in medicine (see Laqueur 1990), makes for a revolutionary representation of womanhood. The apologetic aims of Wollstonecraft’s and Hays’s fiction may explain why their depictions of men are extreme and somewhat schematic, as male characters become figments of fantasy, sometimes akin to the males of Gothic fiction. Henry in *Mary* is somewhat ectoplasmic, partly because of the consumption that is wearing him down, partly because he is a mirror image of Mary, whose sensibility excludes the embodiment of love. August-

tus Harley, in *Emma Courtney*, is known mostly through Emma's letters to him and through her projection onto him of her romantic desires; as a result of Augustus's mother's constant praise of her son, he became «the St Preux, the Emilius, of [her] sleeping and waking reveries» (Ty 1996, p. 59) even before she had met her. Augustus's answers to Emma's letters are few, often cryptic and cold, so they do not enable the reader to form an 'objective' idea of him. The same projection of an ideal image of masculinity applies to Darnford in *The Wrongs of Woman*; he is even seen at a further remove, as Maria first becomes acquainted with him through his annotations in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Heloisa* and then identifies him with Saint-Preux. George Venables, in Wollstonecraft's unfinished *Maria*, and Sir Peter Osborne, in *The Victim of Prejudice*, become villains worthy of Gothic fiction, expressions of libidinal disgust and repulsion more than fully accomplished (im)moral agents. The former is the vile husband who does not balk at offering his wife as payment for a much-needed loan; the latter the vile seducer who extends his hatred to his victim's friends. All these male figures are fantasies of one sort or another.

The projections of perfection and of literary archetypes onto the very imperfect men with whom Maria and Emma fall in love shows that only literary models are available and that a new model of masculinity cannot even be outlined: in *The Wrongs of Woman*, Darnford, the man of feeling, turns out to be as unreliable as George Venables, the traditional authoritarian and conceited husband. This excludes any plot focused on balanced relationships between male and female characters and ending in shared happiness.

The instability of the philosophical underpinnings of the novels under study, combined with the strong autobiographical dimension of the extreme affects of the female protagonists, explain why the structure of the sentimental novel explodes. Wollstonecraft's two novels were heavily autobiographical, as shown, emblematically, by the names of their protagonists. Mary's passionate friendship with Ann is based on Wollstonecraft's own romantic attachment to Fanny Blood, and the eponymous protagonist's parents are not unlike Wollstonecraft's own parents. In her second novel, Darnford is reminiscent of Gilbert Imlay, Wollstonecraft's first lover. In Hays's case, the autobiographical component is so strong that she used some of her letters to William Godwin and some of his answers, as well as, probably (probably only, as this correspondence is not extant), letters to and from William Frennd, the man she pursued, perhaps from 1791 and, in any case, until 1796. The wording is sometimes altered, some passages are cut, but many are used *verbatim*. *Emma Courtney*, *The Victim of Prejudice* and *The Wrongs of Woman* are patchworks of different kinds of discursive material: omniscient narration (the basic mode of *The Wrongs of Woman*), first-person narration (used in the main narrative of *Emma Courtney* and *The Victim of Prejudice*), memoirs, letters, inset stories included in the main

narrative. Thus, the romance – whether epistolary, autodiegetic or endorsed by an extradiegetic narrator – dissolves into a series of related discursive units staging the unhappiness of women and stating their demands. Just as narrative is no longer continuous, the difference between fiction and autobiography disappears. I would say that this epistemological indistinction goes even further than what Tilotama Rajan has called «autonarration», a «specific form of self-writing, in which the author writes her life as a fictional narrative, and thus *consciously* raises the question of the relationship between experience and its narrativisation» (qtd in Ty 1996, p. xvii).

Mary Jacobus has argued that «Hays's letters to Godwin thus resemble the psychoanalytic encounter, in which the analyst's reticence and self-control make possible the analysand's self-disclosure and potential self-realisation» (Jacobus 1999, p. 212). The letters enabled Hays to understand, and free herself from, her largely phantasmatic passion, with Godwin challenging her and exacting her reflection in his uncompromisingly rationalist injunctions. The letter-writing and the letters created a sort of limbo from which Hays could emerge, having reconstructed the fiction of which she had been a prisoner. In the same way her character, Emma Courtney, voices her passion and her misery again and again, obsessively pestering Augustus Harley, who usually does not answer her correspondence, as has been noticed. Godwin had apparently advised Hays to turn her abortive affair into a novel (Ty 1996, p. 15). Though in 1796 few of Hays's readers would have known that Hays was writing about herself, reading her *Emma Courtney* and *Wrongs of Woman* would have placed them in a new narrative space', beyond linear romance and within a narrative hall of mirrors, where characters belonging to successive generations undergo the same experiences or where one character is repeatedly faced with the same occurrences – usually persecution by a man, though Emma Courtney rather assumes a male position in constantly writing argumentative and peremptory letters to Augustus. The thematic repetition becomes an equivalent and a manifestation of the generic dead-end, of the inadequacy of the romance.

Towards the end of *Emma Courtney* the eponymous protagonist acknowledges that she has behaved irrationally, but explains that the wider social context left her no choice:

If I wildly sought to oblige you to chuse happiness through a medium of my creation – yet, to have assured *yours*, was I not willing to risque all my own? I perceive my extravagance, my views were equally false and romantic – dare I to say – they were the ardent excesses of a generous mind? Yes! my wildest mistakes had in them a dignified mixture of virtue. While the institutions of society war against nature and happiness, the mind of energy, struggling to emancipate itself, will entangle itself in error (Ty 1996, pp. 158-159).

This exculpation, the primary relevance of which is on an intradiegetic level, can also be read on a meta-narrative level as a sort of vindication by Hays of the repetitive patchwork she wrote, suggesting that fiction could no longer be fiction and that a love story could no longer have a happy ending.

The romance, which has become thoroughly dystopian, exposing as it does the many ways in which women are exploited by men, and formally dysfunctional, voices the misery of the protagonists in the hyperbolic style that may be associated with revenge tragedy or Gothic fiction, and the stories can only end in disaster or in renunciation. In *Mary* and *The Victim of Prejudice*, the only way out of the failure of heterosexual relationships is death, both protagonists, though in very different predicaments, wanting to avoid sex as that is the only way of preserving their integrity – the Mary of Wollstonecraft's fiction before the consummation of her marriage, and the Mary of *The Victim of Prejudice* after being raped. In the other two novels, the way out of romantic illusion is motherhood. After Augustus Harley has died in Emma's arms, she brings up his son, who was born of his secret marriage. As for Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel, various endings were very briefly sketched, the most developed one seeing Jemima bringing her daughter to Maria, the child not having died as she had been told, and Maria deciding to live for the sake of her child. *Emma Courtney* combines this shift from heterosexual love to motherhood with an apocalyptic ending which, seen on a meta-fictional level, again rehearses the contradictions and ambiguities of the traditional romance: Mr Montague, whom Emma had married once she had lost all means of maintaining a modest financial independence, kills the infant born from an affair with a servant, then commits suicide. The genre of the romance ends in a bloodbath, as it were. In both *Emma Courtney* and *The Wrongs of Woman*, motherhood is the alternative to death, which looms at the end of *Mary* and *The Victim of Prejudice*.

Both protagonists of *Emma Courtney* and *The Wrongs of Woman* have written their life-story to pass it on to their child – her adopted son in the case of Emma; her only child, a daughter, in the case of Maria. The transmission of those narratives is meant to interrupt the unconscious desire to repeat past behaviour – Augustus Harley junior «wildly persecuted» a young woman just as Emma pursued Augustus Harley senior – and to make happiness possible for the next generation, as Emma states explicitly (Ty 1996, p. 7). At the beginning of her memoir, Maria Venables also says that she wants «to provide for» the «happiness» of her daughter (Todd, Butler, 1989b, p. 123) and writes her memoir for that very reason. As for the «victim of prejudice», she addresses a wider audience, with a more militant aim: «*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» (Ty 1994, p. 174).

In their essays Wollstonecraft and Hays try to outline the educational,

social and legal changes necessary for women to be able to be beneficiaries of the ‘improvement’ advocated by many Enlighteners. In their fiction, they focus mainly on the interaction between individual men and women – although in *The Wrongs of Woman* Wollstonecraft specifically indicts the legal status of women. Fiction thus becomes an effective way of showing the multiple ideological and emotional traps in which women are caught, and the intellectual and moral work that must be done at individual level and will be the dialectical complement to institutional reform. What makes Wollstonecraft’s and Hays’s novels powerful, apart from the unabashed explicitness and occasional ‘extravagance’ of their protagonists (Emma Courtney uses the word repeatedly about her own behaviour; see for instance Ty 1996, pp. 145, 169) is that the repetition of situations over several generations or among characters creates a formal frame for the repeated outraged protests of the protagonists, protests which foreground raw emotion, so much so that, as Vivien Jones says about Emma’s letters to Augustus, the expression of those affects remains «painful» even today (p. 182). The repetition of certain social patterns, or situations, appears correlated to a tendency to psychological repetition.

Thus, happiness is gendered, psychologized and historicized in the fiction we have discussed, and found to be graspable only through redefinition of other values and through a depiction of unhappiness. The ideological reconfiguration is combined with the demembering of the sentimental romance. This is no mean achievement on the part of Wollstonecraft and Hays.

## Bibliography

- Bour, Isabelle (1998). «Sensibilité et répétition dans les romans révolutionnaires de Mary Hays». *Études Anglaises*, 2, pp. 143-155.
- Brooks, Marilyn L. (ed.) (2004). *The Correspondence (1779-1843) of Mary Hays, British Novelist*. Lampeter: Edwin Mellen.
- Hawley, Judith (1996). «Review of Eleanor Ty’s edition of *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*». *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 October, p. 27.
- Hays, Mary; Hays, Elizabeth [1798] (1974a). *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women*. Facsimile edition. New York: Garland.
- Hays, Mary; Hays, Elizabeth [1798] (1974b). *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous*. Facsimile edition. New York: Garland.
- Jacobus, Mary (1999). *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, Claudia (1995). *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s: Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Jones, Vivien (1994). «“The Tyranny of the Passions”: Feminism and Heterosexuality in the Fiction of Wollstonecraft and Hays». In: Ledger, Sally

- et al. (eds.), *Political Gender: Texts and Contexts*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, pp. 173-188.
- Kelly, Gary (1976). *The English Jacobin Novel 1780-1805*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Kelly, Gary (1993). *Women, Writing, and Revolution 1790-1827*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Laqueur, Thomas (1990). *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- Rajan, Tilottama (1993). «Autonarration and Genotext in Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*». *Studies in Romanticism*, 31 (2), pp. 148-176.
- Todd, Janet; Butler, Marilyn (eds.) (1989a). *Wollstonecraft, Mary: «Mary. A Fiction»*. In: *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*. 7 vols. London: Pickering, vol. 1.
- Todd, Janet; Butler, Marilyn (eds.) (1989b). *The Wrongs of Woman: Or, Maria*. In: *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*. 7 vols. London: Pickering, vol. 1.
- Todd, Janet; Butler, Marilyn (eds.) (1989c). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In: *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft*. 7 vols. London: Pickering, vol. 5.
- Ty, Eleanor (ed.) (1994). *Hays, Mary: «The Victim of Prejudice»*. Peterborough: Broadview.
- Ty, Eleanor (ed.) (1996). *Hays, Mary: «Memoirs of Emma Courtney»*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.