

Aiming for a Middle Ground: Mary Hays's *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain* and the Challenge of Perspective

Helena Bergmann, University of Borås

Abstract

In 1798, a year after the death of the renowned feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, her friend, the Unitarian writer and polemist, Mary Hays, authored her own tract on the subject of women's liberation. Entitled *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women*, the publication was not intended to compete with Wollstonecraft's fiery *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Hays wished to address the major societal issue of inequality between the sexes from a less adversarial angle. As opposed to Wollstonecraft, in her introduction, Mary Hays assumes a posture of humility when stating her ambition: 'to restore female character to its dignity and independence.' This paper discusses the rhetorical devices employed by Hays to modify the engrained ideas of her anticipated male readers. Her tract is divided into a set argumentative sequences in the shape of seven chapters. The first of these calls in question the reliance on the Scripture as a foundation for the acceptance of the male-female hierarchy. The second seeks to invalidate the conviction that the subjection of women's in society could be condoned through rational causes. The third and fourth chapters give an overview of some major, misconceptions of men with regard to women's capabilities. Chapter five and six illustrate plentiful examples of unsavoury realities of female existence. In the last chapter of the *Appeal*, Mary Hays delivers a set of exhortations and hopeful recommendations for effectuating a change. The overall aim of the paper is to identify and analyse Hays's strategy for converting the opposite sex, not through revolutionary ferocity or meek supplications, but through constructive persuasiveness. In a concluding section some supportive male intellectuals are introduced to illustrate Hays's achievement of a middle ground on which to communicate.

Keywords: feminism; Wollstonecraft; Hays; Godwin; Crabb Robinson

Introduction

The revolutionary era of the 1790s in London engendered a growing concern for the rights of women in society. Two of the most significant proponents of the feminist cause were Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) and Mary Hays (1759-1843). To this day, Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) maintains its position as the foremost tract of its kind. Mary Hays had started writing her plea for the improvement of the situation of women in the early 1790s but lost her confidence after reading Mary Wollstonecraft's opus. Severely intimidated 'by its pointed

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title and declared purpose,' admitting to 'spark of envy'¹ over a rhetorical perspicuity of Wollstonecraft's work, Hays had 'flung aside' her own 'little sketch in favour of women.' It was to take several years before she resumed working on her: *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women*, published in 1798

This article begins by exploring some resemblances and divergences between the ideas of Wollstonecraft and Hays. The major focus of the text will concern the rhetorical moves made by the author of *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* when wishing to embrace the interests of both sexes. In conclusion, some samples will be given of a middle ground of appreciation, which Mary Hays was to attain later in her life.

Two Proponents of Female Rights

Mary Hays (1759-1843) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) became acquainted in 1792. They were both members of the Unitarian Church in London, a dissenting community known as 'the religion of females' (Gleadle 1995: 21) for its support of the female cause.² They were also closely linked to the radical London publisher and bookseller Joseph Johnson (1738-1809). Mary Hays was starting out as a political journalist when she approached Mary Wollstonecraft for some guidance on her writing. The response she gained was at once wary and supportive. Wollstonecraft who had vowed to steer clear of 'flowery diction' (Wollstonecraft 1792: 6), praised Hays's *Letters and Essays Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793) for containing 'fewer of the superlatives, exquisite, fascinating, &c, all of the feminine gender, than I expected' (Hays 2004: 301-302). She did not, however, approve of Hays's obsequiousness when receiving favourable assessments from male readers: 'An author, especially a woman, should be cautious lest she hastily swallows the crude praises which partial friend and polite acquaintance bestow thoughtlessly when applying eyes look for them.' Although there may have been a tinge of competitive awareness in her comment, Wollstonecraft knew how

¹ From 'Advertisement to the Reader,' unpaginated, in *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain Behalf of Women*.

² Through their belief in a one and unifying God, the Unitarians denied the 39 Articles that form the basic summary of belief of the Church of England. For information on the movement, see Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socianism and its Antecedents* (1945).

easy it was for a woman to be grateful for compliments. Her mind was set on informing Hays of the necessity to defend one's position as an independent female thinker: 'Rest on yourself — if your essays have merit they will stand alone, if not, the *shouldering up* of Dr this or that will not long keep them from falling to the ground.'³

Through their involvement in social issues, particularly with regard to inequalities between the sexes, Mary Hays and Mary Wollstonecraft had earned themselves a reputation as 'female philosophers.' Although, ultimately, they shared a common mission of promoting female liberation, the roads they suggested were not exactly identical. The differences in their approaches were manifested in the titles of their works: the one (very famous) named a 'Vindication,' and the other (not as highly rated) an 'Appeal.' In capital letters Wollstonecraft called for 'a REVOLUTION' in support of women (Wollstonecraft 1974: 254); Hays employed the same typographical emphasis, when deploring women's confinement to a state of 'PERPETUAL BABYISM' (Hays 1798: 97). For some years, they enjoyed an inspirational and rewarding exchange of ideas, which, sadly, was not allowed to continue. When Mary Hays's *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* was published in 1798, her friend was no longer there for her to discuss their common concerns with. The militant author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, who had married the political philosopher and novelist William Godwin (1756-1836) on the 29th of March 1797, died in childbirth on the 10th of September of the same year.

Despite the semantic divergences between the titles of the two feminist tracts, Mary Hays and Mary Wollstonecraft did not address their implied readers with conflicting ideologies. They both shared 'a rationalist hope for their sex and understood the imprisoning cultural construction of female sensibility' (Todd 1989: 237), recognising that the 'prison of sensibility' had been 'created by patriarchs to contain women.' In her 'Author's Introduction' to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft had voiced her commitment to the issue of equality and rights 'between man and man,' before entering upon the question of female liberation (Wollstonecraft 1974: 5). Her criticism was often directed against women themselves on the grounds of their acquiescence and proneness to accept being treated like 'weak artificial beings'

³ Wollstonecraft to Hays, November 27, 1792 (Hays 2004: 303).

(Wollstonecraft 1974: 5). Wollstonecraft aimed to expose the degree to which subordination is engendered by their lack of initiative, which, after centuries of male domination, had become a firmly integrated characteristic of the female psyche. Seeking 'to persuade women to acquire strength, both in mind and body' (Wollstonecraft 1974: 5), she reprimanded them for capitulating to the forces of male willpower. She did not exempt herself from falling a victim to 'those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence' (Wollstonecraft 1974: 5). When calling for a 'revolution in manners,' Wollstonecraft urged women to rise collectively against their suppressors and manipulators. 'Let men become more chaste and modest!', she mocks sarcastically in her 'Introduction,' envisioning a society granting women the freedom to exercise their intellectual powers (Wollstonecraft 1974: 7)

Mary Hays was greatly impressed by the vociferousness and persuasiveness of Mary Wollstonecraft's oeuvre, yet she did not wish her own work to be an imitation. When *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* was published, it was without an author's name to it, a fact that led to some questions regarding its origin. The supposition that the work might be attributable to another writer has, however, been refuted by experts on Hays, such as Gina Luria Walker (Walker 1972: 190). In *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community* (2009), Stephen C. Behrendt posits that Hays may just have 'strategically concealed her identity and her known association with Wollstonecraft (and Godwin),' since they were associated with revolutionary ideas and were 'often lumped together' (2009: 45). Similarly, in *A History of Women's Political thought in Europe 1700-1800*, Karen Green suggests that Hays did not wish to come across 'as dangerously radical.' Although strongly influenced by William Godwin and arguing 'for materialism and determinism in her essays,' it was, none-the-less, impossible for Hays to stop 'maintaining the importance of religion' (Green 2014: 200). Maybe it was the mere possibility of being weighed against her charismatic and adventurous forerunner that made Hays choose not to mention her name. In *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (2004), Claire Tomalin suggests that this may have been the decision of the printer and that Mary Hays's work 'was published anonymously, something Johnson commonly did to shield authors when in doubt of their reception' (Tomalin 1974:

239). A contributing factor might have been his knowledge of her suffering at the negative reactions to *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*.⁴

An Appropriate Apparel

Due to its being cloaked as an 'Appeal,' Mary Hays's tract has not always been well received by the feminist readership. Her failure to position herself initially as an adversary to the opposite sex, has been read as a form of capitulation and token of submissiveness. Comparing Hays's tract to Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*, has been a routine procedure for critics from the very outset. On its first appearance, her *Appeal* was given a positive reception by the radical journal *The Monthly Magazine*:

'*An Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women*' is the production of a female pen; it has not the fire, the animation and originality of Mrs Wollstonecraft's work on the same subject, but the author will not have the fewer admirers on that account. We have read the work with pleasure, because the subject ought not to sink into oblivion: the author appears to be an amiable, sensible, diffident woman.

(December 6th 1798)

Mary Hays's work was given a favourable, very lengthy, evaluation in another radical journal, *The Analytical Review*. The reviewer, Alexander Geddes (1737-1802), a Scottish Catholic reformer and biblical scholar, known to support female emancipation also refers to the imprint from Wollstonecraft:

The present champion for her sex more wily, but not less urgent comes forward with a feminine grace and assuming a sportive air, assails us with no unskilful weapons.

(28th July 1798)

In our own time, the perceptions of *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women*, have been astonishingly varied. In *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (1982), Katherine Rogers comments that it was because she was '[w]riting in a period of conservative reaction' that 'Hays carefully began her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* in an apologetic tone, but went on to argue as vigorously as

⁴ *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* was published by Joseph Johnson in Saint Paul's Churchyard. Hays's semi-autobiographical novel, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), was published by G.G and J. Robinson of Paternoster Row. Both printers were located close to one another in London.

Wollstonecraft against the stereotyping of sexual character' (Rogers 1982: 185). Janet Todd, in *The Sign of The Angellica* (1989), emphasises the similarities between the two works: '*The Rights of Woman* and *An Appeal* both testify to the fact that at moments in their lives Hays and Wollstonecraft saw a rationalist hope for their sex and understood the imprisoning cultural construction of female sensibility' (Todd 1989: 237). Ann K. Mellor focusses on the differences of attitude and intention in her chapter 'The Rights of Woman and the women writers of Wollstonecraft's day,' asserting that 'Mary Hays's most radical feminist claims appeared in her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain*' and that she 'is much more critical of men than was Wollstonecraft' (Mellor 2002: 144). Similarly, in *Chastity and Transgression in Women's Writing, 1792-1897*, Roxanne Eberle vows that 'Hays's text does not treat her male readers very kindly; indeed, one could argue that *The Appeal* is far more confrontational than *Vindication*' (Eberle 2002: 69). In *A Writing Halfway between Theory and Fiction*, Miriam Wallraven dwells on the unreliability of the author noting that although initially claiming not wanting to act like 'an Amazon,' in 'blatant disregard of this statement, however, Hays proceeds to a very explicit critique of patriarchy' (Wallraven 2007:63).

It seems to have been difficult to formulate a unified assessment of Mary Hays's *Appeal*. This is no doubt due to its unruly style of spontaneous outbursts, coupled with irony as well as ceremoniousness. Ruth Watts, in *Gender, Power and the Unitarians*, suggests that if Hays's tract was not favourably received, it was because its 'passionate outpourings were too radical for the times' (Watts 1998: 93). Katherine Rogers, however, in *Feminism in Eighteenth Century England* posits that Hays's text is in fact 'less adversarial than Wollstonecraft's, more good-natured and easy-going' due to her writing an 'Appeal' to the Men rather than a *Vindication* of women's rights' (Rogers 1987: 138). This view can be contrasted to Gina Luria Walker's attempt to conventionalise *An Appeal* in her *Mary Hays (1759-1843): The Growth of a Woman's Mind*, when establishing that 'Hays embraced her mentor's fiery feminism and filtered it through her own sense of decorum, which sometimes appeared to the observer to be prim rigidity' (Walker 2006: 187). In *British Women Poets and the Romantic Writing Community* (2002), Stephen C. Behrendt, acknowledges that there is 'a considerable ideological diversity' between the 'rhetorical strategies' used by Wollstonecraft and Hays (Behrendt 2002:45). William Stafford, in *English Feminists and Their Opponents in*

the 1790s: Unsexed and Proper Females discloses that, on the surface, Mary Hays's 'tone is witty and eloquent,' yet that 'the modest and unassuming tone insinuates the subversive message' (Stafford 2002: 18). This seems to be a highly relevant observation, for there is every reason to believe that Mary Hays was consciously using a strategy of diffidence to coax her readers into following her lead. Or, as Roxanne Eberle points out, it is through the use of apparent humility that 'Hays establishes a position of sublime rhetorical authority' (Eberle 2002: 70).

Rhetorical Motions

In the 'Introduction' to *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women*, feigning ingenuousness, Mary Hays begins by underlining the 'absurdity' of her objective, and the assumption that men must prefer 'that things should remain on the footing they are' (1798: i). The impact of this introductory statement is twofold: it establishes her use of irony, and of the term 'footing,' a vital metaphor returned to throughout her text. Not wishing her tract to appear to be an imitation, initially she distances herself from the discourse of *A Vindication*, deciding instead to communicate her message in the shape of an entreaty. The reader is ushered into her reasoning through reliance upon four classical rhetorical devices. First of all, she commences by questioning why 'men should wish to counteract the benevolent designs of Providence in [women's] favour?' (1798: ii). This pertinent query is made to incite the listener's identification of *logos*. Secondly, after singling out her 'addressees'—'fathers, brothers, husbands, sons and lovers' (1798: iii)—the author sustains her *ethos* by underscoring the benefits to be had for both men and women: 'The consequence of this attention to their improvement, however good, however happy for them, are, I apprehend, equally interesting to you' (1798: iii). Then, with *pathos*, she articulates the hope that male readers 'will deign to peruse the following attempt to restore the female character to its dignity and independence' (1798: iii-iv). In the final lines of her brief introduction Hays clarifies the mission and method of her undertaking, which is rhetorically far removed from the assertiveness of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication*:

Know, however, that I come not in the garb of an Amazon, to dispute the field of right and wrong; but rather in the humble attire of a petitioner, willing to submit the cause, to him who is both judge and party. Not as a fury flinging the torch of discord and

revenge amongst the daughters of Eve; but as a friend and companion bearing a little taper to lead them to the paths of truth, of virtue, and of liberty. (1798: v)

At this strategic moment of *kairos*, her mission is introduced not as an attack, but as an expression of mildness. This posture has been stamped by some as a token of submissiveness. Mary Hays, was however, well aware of her intentions. It seems to have been her aim to establish a middle ground to engender an understanding between the sexes. Yet, as a 'petitioner,' aiming to unite two contending parties, she knew she had to tread with care.

Scriptural and Rational Foundations

In her first chapter entitled 'Arguments Adduced to the Scripture against the Subjection of Women,' Mary Hays affirms her *ethos* as a Christian 'petitioner,' relying on both scriptural and rationalist thoughts. Through an abrasive use of irony, she defies society's expectations of female 'obedience and submission,' asking whether 'our benevolent and merciful legislator' would 'by any one hint, encourage such pretensions?' (Hays 1798: 18). Here, she conducts her biblical exegesis with a disarming spirit of playfulness, ever with the purpose of getting through to both parties in her mission for peace and compromise.

The second chapter, 'Arguments Adduced from Reason against the Subjection of Women,' covers only a few pages. It begins with an anonymous text in defence of rational thinking: 'In the tumultuous scenes of life the voice of Reason is too weak to be heard, or too weak to be understood' (Hays 1798: 27). Struck with temerity over her own undertaking, the author questions her ability to tackle 'a host of foes, against man's apparent consequence, against the accumulated prejudice of ages!—Insect of a day—what am I?' (Hays 1798: 29).⁵ This sudden display of hesitancy was yet another, conscious rhetorical move. Feigning insecurity is an effective way of magnifying the impact of an intended purpose. Also, it provided an occasion for her to bring to the fore some women who actually have attained important positions in history, such as Sappho and Joan of Arc.

⁵ Gina Luria Walker has pointed out that 'Hays used this same metaphor of female insignificance in her early fable of "The Hermit"' which was published in 1793 (2006: 196).

Gender Perceptions

Chapter three, 'Of the Erroneous Ideas which Men have Formed of the Characters and Abilities of Women,' begins with a quote from Alexander Pope's 'Of the Characters of Women: An Epistle to a Lady' (1735), which contains the provocative assertion that 'most women have no character at all.' Although Mary Hays discards this statement as 'a very silly line,' she recognises the threat of men actually having 'formed a standard, to which they would willingly reduce the whole sex' (Hays 1798: 31). Spurred by *logos*, and determined to 'combat this degrading idea' (Hays 1798: 34), she directs a petition specifically 'to men of reading and information' and 'to the mass of mankind, who are fully competent to judge, upon the principles of common sense' (Hays 1798: 36). Hays's faith in 'common sense' pervades the work as a corollary to 'Reason.' In this particular context, her mode of communication is not at all an appeal, but an exhortation to the opposite sex to pull themselves together. The author proceeds her argumentation as though heading a debate, in which her opponents are expected to prove their competence by giving sensible answers. In the absence of such response, however, Hays shifts from her posture of deference, and reverts to irony, cheerfully confirming that women 'often laugh in their sleeves at being obliged to acknowledge superiority where they can distinguish [...] nothing that decidedly claims the distinction of superior genius and rationality' (Hays 1798: 41). As a manifestation of boldness, through its momentary suggestion of a reversal of roles, this is a kernel utterance. The author understands she has to strike a balance between humour and accusation. In this context, she is not acting as an appealer to men, but as a confidence-booster to women, spurring them to take action. However, in order not to lose the credibility of her middle ground, Hays hastily reverts to a gender-neutral standpoint underscoring that she will defend 'frivolous or inconstant' behaviour from no one, regardless of their sex (Hays 1798: 43). This third chapter ends on a sociological note, promoting her ultimate plan 'to establish our argument, and bring us again to that equality, so dear to every feeling heart and rational head—That equality which holds a people, a nation, a world equipoised' (Hays 1798: 45).

In Chapter Four 'What Men would have Women Be,' the author dives into the core of the problematics of bringing about change in society, her analysis now shaping itself even more into a sociological mode. Inegalitarianism is blamed on a 'system' condoned by society, 'which men

have contrived with a view to forming the minds and regulating the conduct of women' (Hays 1798: 47). This 'system,' she defines as 'completely absurd,' demoting it to 'a subject of mirth and ridicule' rather than 'serious anger' (Hays 1798: 47), her aim ever being to spur men toward a recognition of their own outrageousness. Irony continues to be her chosen weapon when accusing men of forcing women 'to humor the follies, the caprice, vices of men [...] and to be obliged to consider this her duty' (Hays 1798: 56). Sometimes, however, she demonstrates wariness of becoming too condemning, and risking exit to her middle ground.' Promoting a change of outlook, Hays suggests verbs for men to learn use such as 'admit,' or to avoid doing, like 'degrade,' intended to incite awareness of demeaning gendered values with regard to women (Hays 1798: 62).

Chapter Five 'What Women are,' is written in tandem with the previous chapter or, one might say instead, in opposition to it. Hays begins with a paradox, recognisably using irony as a trope, by declaring that it would be much easier to say about women, 'what they are *not*' (Hays 1798: 66). At this point, Hays approaches, more dogmatically, the faultiness of an educational system that deprives girls of the right to gain the same opportunities as boys, and discloses the mendacity that reigns within education, where for women to want to excel is deemed 'vanity,' while for men this is seen as proof of 'ambition' (Hays 1798: 77). Exercising her *logos*, Hays directs her most outspoken attack on the restrictions imposed upon female education:

Many a good head is stuffed with ribbons, gauze, fringes, flounces and furbelows, that might have received or communicated, far other and noble impressions. And many a fine imagination has been exhausted upon these, which had they been turned to the study of nature or initiated into the dignified embellishments of the fine arts, might have adorned, delighted, and improved society. (Hays 1798: 79)

Thereupon, she returns to biblical allusions, appealing to the power of the Almighty, when promoting an educational ideology that would secure adherence to the same 'system' for both sexes (Hays 1798: 90). Owing, however, that women are partly responsible for not changing their ways, Hays momentarily reiterates the voice of Wollstonecraft, chiding them for their behaviour: 'whining and flattery—feigned submission—and all the dirty little attendants, which compose the endless train of low cunning' (Hays 1798: 91). Her discourse burgeons with dramatic anticipation of that

moment ‘when the mysterious veil by formed by law, by precedent, shall be rent asunder,’ and ‘Providence’ will ‘put matters on a fair and equitable footing between the sexes’ (Hays 1798: 100). Through its return to *logos*, the rest of the chapter is composed of stable reasoning in defence of women’s legal rights, nevertheless emanating in a ‘Wollstonecraftian’ outcry: ‘But man! tyrant man! Ye cannot forgive that lips should utter, what rises warm from the heart, if it does not chime in with your present feelings’ (Hays 1798: 122).

Steering towards Change

In Chapter 6, ‘What women ought to Be,’ the didactically orientated final chapter, a fundamental prerogative articulated is that women should ‘be considered as the companions and equals, not as the inferiors—much less as they virtually are, as the slaves of men’ (Hays 1798: 127). However, this ‘slave-rhetoric,’ is soon abandoned and the author switches to an argumentative discourse applicable in an academic lecture theatre. The discourse is no longer aggressive, yet the author’s use of irony continues to cut through, as she concedes that the hearts of all men are not made of marble but ‘few are the instances, in proportion to the bulk of society’ (Hays 1798: 142). Conscientiously adding, however, that ‘there are numbers of artful women, who taking the advantage of the weakness of the men they have to deal with, and who by flattering their vices and foibles, gain their purposes’ (Hays 1798:142). Once more, it is the voice of a mediator we are hearing. Any notions of male ‘superiority,’ but for physical ‘strength of body,’ are, however, continuously rejected (Hays 1798: 153).

Hays’s vision of a society founded on ‘Natural justice,’ supported by ‘Reason’ and ‘Christianity,’ bears witnesses to a strong influence from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract* (1762). Yet, she chooses to apply his ideas to the subject of women’s suffrage, a topic she approached well ahead of her time, albeit quite demurely. To her mind, ‘women ought to be’ full-blown citizens able to have an active influence in society. Preserving her faith in the ‘the voice of Nature’ she propagates that:

a greater degree, a greater proportion of happiness might be the lot of women, if they were allowed, as men are, some vote, some right of judgment in a matter which concerns them so nearly, as that of the laws and opinions by which they are to be governed. (Hays 1798: 150)

This discrete, 'appealing' tone employed here, is a pertinent example of the middle ground Hays steps in an out of at chosen moments. However, in the next instance, when bracing herself in defiance of all the prejudices she encounters, such as the inference that 'knowledge renders women masculine, and consequently disgusting in their manners' (Hays 1798: 172), she retaliates with fervour. Irony, her best weapon when confronted by overt expressions of male conservatism, is often ingeniously disguised as a compliment: 'But I will not so far insult the common sense of men—to whose common sense indeed and humanity, the whole of the Appeal is addressed' (Hays 1798: 179). The same trope is put in use in relation to the barbarity of foxhunting, which she suggests is deemed by society as one of the 'masculine accomplishments' (Hays 1798: 188). Other activities reserved for the male sphere, could, she reminds the reader, be exercised by women with full capacity, such as 'the professions of law and divinity' (Hays 1798: 194) and 'practising physic and surgery' (Hays 1798: 196). Female health is another concern, with regard to the fashion of wearing very tight girdles, designed by male 'stay-makers,' that cause great damage to the female body (Hays 1798: 200). As the conclusion of her *Appeal* draws near, Hays unexpectedly steps down from her didactic pulpit, finally professing herself to be incapable of pointing out 'a finished plan of education for the sex in general' (Hays 1798: 204). What she *can* transmit, she claims, is an awareness of the flaws of a system promoting falsehood and unregulated passion.

At this final stage of her *Appeal* the author's pedagogical strategy becomes increasingly inconsistent. After offering a short piece of guidance to parents for how to handle the very young, she makes a swift shift to criticising women for being 'too preoccupied with the attainment of husbands, and the management of them, when attained' (Hays 1798: 218). Her text becomes more and more anecdotal, wavering between viewpoints, one of many being the licentiousness of men and the plight of their victims. Recognising that she is about to finalise her tract, she assures the reader that she will 'not expatiate much more upon the education of females' (Hays 1798: 239) embarking instead upon the social issue of the maltreatment of domestic staff among the privileged classes (Hays 1798: 245). Ultimately, she puts into relief her reliance on the fundamental values of Unitarianism: 'a love of truth,' 'a detestation of hypocrisy and disguise' 'simplicity of manners,' 'unaffected modesty of heart and conduct,' 'allowances for frailties,' 'liberal opinions and humane conduct'

and ‘a reasonable desire for knowledge’; last but not least: ‘*Religion*—the most important concern of all’ (Hays 1798: 252).

Anticipated Outcomes

Two-hundred years ago, Mary Hays proposed that men and women should be able live in companionship on a base of equality. Her ‘appeal’ was constructed for an educational purpose. Coming from a congregation of proactive Unitarians, who were in favour of extending female rights, she used as her discourse a mixture of biblical influences and elements of radicalism pertaining to her denomination. Her key caption ever being for men and women to live ‘on a rational and equitable footing’ (Hays 1798: 292):

Let them but endeavour to make women happy—not by flattering their follies and absurdities—but by every reasonable means; and above all by considering them as rational beings upon a footing with themselves. (Hays 1798: 293)

In this motley selection of moral guidelines that constitute her last chapter, Mary Hays entered a domain of which she was to have no experience, namely, parenthood. Fathers exercising tenderness and authority over their children, together with mothers, is an idyllic combination, she concedes: ‘But with regard to the authority of husbands, the case is altogether different,’ recalling many cases of domestic violence, where passionate love has *not* been succeeded by a pure and steady friendship and good will (Hays 1798: 263). Returning to the issue of assumed male superiority, her pen becomes more and more vituperative, ridiculing the ‘absurd mixture of the meagre reliques of *ancient chivalry*, that occur only before marriage’ (Hays 1798: 267). Recalling the much bolder discourse of Mary Wollstonecraft, Hays’s directs an outpour of violence which is extremely forceful: ‘Servility and tyranny, but too often meet in the same character; and woe to her who is the victim of such!’ (Hays 1798: 269). Replete with animosity, her address to the male species seems to be far removed from that of the beginning of her *Appeal*, when suddenly her tone from the outset is resumed:

In all humility then, may I be permitted to say, there cannot be reasonable doubt, but that the gradual emancipation of women—shackled and enslaved by a thousand prejudices,—would in this enlightened age, produce the most salutary effects.
(Hays 1798: 277)

Hays continues, pragmatically, speaking about women as a 'useful commodity' to men (Hays 1798: 281). A wife without access to her own money, 'is neither more nor less than—a great baby in leading strings,' unless the 'chance is, that of her husband happening to be, a sensible, a reasonable, a humane man, in a more than ordinary degree' (Hays 1798: 282). In this now subdued, reflective voice, a middle ground still in view, Hays offers her final advice towards bridging the gap as ever being through 'reasoning upon the principles of common sense and experience' (Hays 1798: 283).

'What women ought to be,' the last section of *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women*, is 65 pages long in the format of the original edition. Halfway through, the reasoning becomes flitting and varying in its perspective, which inevitably mars the reading experience. From the point of view of didactic persuasiveness there is a big difference between the message transmitted in the early chapters and the development of the ideas put forward towards the end. The last part seems to have been authored under stress and great fluctuations of mood. Since it was published less than a year from the death of Mary Wollstonecraft, it is quite possible that, when writing her last chapter, Hays was weighed down by survivor's guilt over it still being possible for her to devote her time to the woman question.

Moving on a Middle Ground

Despite the rather angered and distressed tone that permeates the *Appeal*, it would be wrong to claim that Mary Hays lacked male support. She was born into a Baptist family, and before joining the Unitarian Congregation, the Baptist preacher and hymn-writer Robert Robinson (1735-1790) had been an influence of decisive importance during her formative years. A strong believer in the improvement of female schooling, he had trusted Mary Hays with the task of educating his own daughters.

Before the publication of *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain*, Hays's first attempt at polemical journalism had been a Unitarian attack on the practices of worship of the Church of England. Her pamphlet, *Cursory Remarks on An Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public and Social Worship* (1792) had attracted the attention of many London Radicals, among them the Unitarian Cambridge mathematician, linguist and clergyman William Frend (1757-1841). Impressed by her article, he invited her to participate in the theological debate together with the male

members of the Unitarian Church. This appreciation of her intellectual capacities engendered in her a deep emotional attachment. Sadly, her feelings were not reciprocated. It was this painful experience that led to the authoring of her compensatory self-revealing (and by some deemed scandalous) novel, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. Much of the frustration and her thwarted desire for equality between the sexes expressed in her *Appeal* had its foundation in the traumatising let-down by the man she had respected so deeply.

The rumours about Hays's unsuccessful infatuation with William Frend spread across London and led to persistent facetious remarks about her person. However, due to her proficiency in dealing with advanced issues within the area of religion or education, she gained respect from men who approved of such intellectual talents. An eminent figure in this category was William Godwin, with whom she started a correspondence in October 1794, hoping to extract some samples of stimulating 'calm, cool, philosophic investigation' (Hays 2004: 407). Godwin, who was not prepared to exert himself through the use of his pen, suggested that they meet to discuss the letters she had sent him. As authentic documents, Mary Hays's written answers and comments on Godwin's viewpoints offer an insight into the practice of radical conversation in the 1790s, as well as corroborating the expansion taking place within the realm of intellectual womanhood.

Mary Hays was not an isolated person. On the contrary she had 'gained access to an important literary circle that met regularly at the house of Joseph Johnson in Saint Paul's Churchyard' (Burwick 2019: 120). Here she made the acquaintance of many of the radical thinkers of her time. Among them was Henry Crabb Robinson (1775-1867), a Unitarian lawyer, diarist and journalist, with whom she developed a rewarding, intellectual friendship.⁶ He spent much of his time outside England, particularly in Germany, from where he sent her lengthy accounts of that nation's literature and culture.

It was a fact that throughout the major part of her life Mary Hays was prone to fall into periods of depression. Henry Crabb Robinson was well acquainted with her emotional traumas: not only the public exposure of her unrequited infatuation with William Frend, but also the fact that as a young woman she had lost her husband-to-be to an illness a week before

⁶ See Tim Whelan, *Mary Hays: Life, writings, and correspondence* (2018).

their planned nuptials. Henry did not cease to put up with Hays's recurring bouts of despondency; instead he took it upon himself to cheer and console her through her dark periods

In establishing friendships with male intellectuals like Robert Robinson, William Godwin and Henry Crabbe Robinson, Mary Hays experienced a middle ground of companionship comparable to what she had promoted in her *Appeal*. Her interaction with these thinkers had little to do with courtship; it was just a solid genderless exchange of thoughts and ideas.

It took great courage for Mary Hays to write her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain*. The publisher Joseph Johnson had been hesitant about the project and therefore only printed the book in a small number. Previously, in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Hays had challenged the ideal of female subordination and modesty and had had to suffer for it. In *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women* her aim had been general rather than specific, wanting to reach out to men as well as women, to make them understand the importance of achieving equality. This was both with regard to financial status and permitted realms of action in society. Her politics were to support and improve women's place in society; her analysis of the social 'systems' that governed the roles of the sexes clearly had a sociological aim. The perceived diversity in Mary Hays's tract was designed to achieve a unilateral equality of intellect and social standing in both genders. In her commitment she was extraordinarily brave and tenacious. She was an intellectual and emotional individual who dared expose her views to the public, in the hope of creating a better future for everyone.

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