

Helena Bergmann, **A Revised Reading of Mary Hays' Philosophical Novel *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796): Enlarging the Canon of the Mary Wollstonecraft Literary-Philosophical Circle**. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press. ISBN 9 780773 439481.179 pages.

In her pioneering survey of feminist literary history, *A Literature of their Own* (1978), Elaine Showalter wrote: "As the works of dozens of women writers have been rescued from what E. P. Thompson calls 'the enormous condescension of posterity,' and considered in relation to each other, the lost continent of the female tradition has risen like Atlantis from the sea of English literature". (10) This work of recovery of neglected women writers has since then successfully established itself as a gynocritical field of literary history (or herstory) that continues to flourish to this day. It might seem difficult to imagine that there are any female writers still left to be rescued from the shadows of literary history, but this is exactly what Helena Bergmann has achieved with her new book on the radical English novelist, journalist, playwright and biographer, Mary Hays (1759-1843). In Bergmann's own words, her study seeks "to rehabilitate Mary Hays' position as a writer and educational feminist" (6), not least by reasserting her significance within the radical circle of writers and thinkers that were linked to the more famous feminist figure of Mary Wollstonecraft.

It is perhaps not surprising that periods of revolutionary upheaval in history have also inspired a gender debate about the relationship between men and women, in which women in particular have posed questions about how we live and how we might live, both separately and together. It is clear from Bergmann's study that Mary Hays was one such female voice that articulated a radical questioning of the condition of women, by dramatizing their social, political, educational and sexual discrimination through her writing, not least in her politically and emotionally charged fictional *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), a novel that became something of a publishing cause célèbre because of its heady mixture of radical politics and sexual adventure. Without doubt, an explosive literary combination appearing in the wake of the French revolution, and written by a young, unmarried Englishwoman.

Bergmann's research has not only uncovered the fascinating if rather unhappy fate of one of the more peripheral members of the network of radicals around Mary Wollstonecraft. She has, even more uniquely, traced the influence of Hays's writing both in England, but also in France, where it led to a spate of fictional, philosophizing heroines who followed in the radical footsteps of Hays's Emma Courtney.

Part of the "condescension of posterity" has also involved the personal demonization of Mary Hays herself by male and female critics both during her lifetime and down to our own. As Bergmann notes, the epithets of "highly strung", "neurotic", "mad", and "crazed" have been used about Hays over the years, all of which seem to have taken their cue from her contemporary, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who described her as "a Thing, ugly and petticoated". (4) It is

this barrage of critical sexism that Bergmann has had to cut through in an act of gynocritical writing back at Hays's literary detractors. By returning to Hays's complete oeuvre, including her recently published collected letters, Bergmann has succeeded in reasserting not only the lasting literary qualities of Hays's own writing, but also the continued validity of her ideas about what women want in a world still dominated by men.

Ronald Paul