



From Patriarchal Oppression to Philosophical Freedom: Establishing a Feminist Framework for Transcendence in *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney*

Andrew Schenck

American University of Sharjah, UAE

Email: aschenck@aus.edu

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i5.2745>

APA Citation: Schenck, A. (2026). From Patriarchal Oppression to Philosophical Freedom: Establishing a Feminist Framework for Transcendence in *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 8(5).23-34. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i5.2745>

Received:

17/06/2026

Accepted:

02/08/2026

Keywords:

Emma
Courtney;
Mary Hays;
feminism;
stereotypes;
patriarchal
values

Abstract

Emma Courtney from The Memoirs of Emma Courtney is quite different from other female protagonists of the 18th or 19th centuries. Rather than serving as a role model for female chastity and propriety, she is imbued with an independent spirit, which compels her to violate strict social norms assigned to females. Her independent spirit helps her discover the power of raw passion, as well as a means to control this passion with rational thought. Through her unique philosophical epiphany that combines stereotypical "female" passions with "male" reason, Emma acquires the confidence and independence needed to transcend patriarchal oppression. Although lacking a great deal of agency, she gains a psychological sense of freedom through developing her own personal philosophy. This coping mechanism serves as a guide for ordinary women of the period, who may have lacked a means to obtain status or marry for love. Essentially, Emma represents every woman, defining how feminist values can be universally applied in a dominant patriarchal regime.

1. Introduction

Rousseau's (1763) seminal work entitled *Emile* establishes an ideal for the 18th century woman. Through depiction of a fictional character named Sophy, the differences of both men and women are described as follows:

If woman is made to please and to be in subjection to man, she ought to make herself pleasing in his eyes and not provoke him to anger; her strength is in her charms, by their means she should compel him to discover and use his strength. The surest way of arousing this strength is to make it necessary by resistance...This is the origin of attack and defence, of the boldness of one sex and the timidity of the other, and even of the shame and modesty with which nature has armed the weak for the conquest of the strong. (Rousseau, 1763, para. 9)

From this excerpt, females are portrayed as having magnetism through charm and timidity, which serves to evoke and enhance male strength. Feminine appearance that "pleases the eyes" also serves to conquer strong male figures such as Emile, Sophy's counterpart. Concerning the mind, Rousseau suggests that women are not by nature able to establish abstract and speculative truths (Wokler, 2001, p. 128). This perspective is exemplified by the female protagonist's name, which is a reference to sophistry. Defined as "subtly deceptive reasoning or argumentation" ("Sophistry," 2020), the term defines the ideal woman envisioned by Rousseau. In accordance with this perspective, a woman is inferior in reason, yet deceptively charming. She is also physically weaker, serving as a complement to a man's bodily strength and cognitive acuity.

Following the philosophical traditions of Rousseau, literary depictions of feminine figures reveal subjugation by an oppressive patriarchal regime. In the 18th century novel named *Clarissa*, by Samuel Richardson (1932), a female protagonist is raped and unjustly imprisoned due to the nefarious designs of a licentious character named Robert Lovelace. Likewise, in the novel *Pamela*, also by Samuel Richardson (2015), the female protagonist is sexually assaulted and kidnapped. In both circumstances, women are helpless amidst a world dominated by males. Although such women can earn respect through virtue, they are often powerless to avoid assault and imprisonment. In early novels of the 19th century, females appear to gain more agency, albeit within the same discriminatory patriarchal system. In the novel *Emma*, by Jane Austen (2003), a female protagonist named Emma Woodhouse uses patriarchal privilege obtained from her father to manipulate both men and women of lower status. She convinces her friend, Harriet Smith, a girl of moderate means, to disregard a proposal from Mr. Martin, the "gross, vulgar farmer" (p. 27).

In other works by Austen, female protagonists gain status by channeling socially undesirable female characteristics into traits that are accepted by a male-dominant system. This perspective is exemplified by Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, who uses humility and control of temperament to overcome patriarchal subjugation, flawed morality, and marital infidelity. Although frail and of weak social position, she becomes a symbol of female propriety that propels her to the top of the social ladder, allowing her to marry her love, Edmund Bertram, and become the master of Mansfield Park (Austen, 2008, p. 370). As in the examples of both Emma Woodhouse and Fanny Price, other characters in Austen's novels adapt to a patriarchal system, overcoming feminine "flaws" to obtain wealth or validation through marriage (Canton, 2016, p. 119). Female figures in Austen's novels show the strength of women through adaptation and behavioral modification in a male system.

In later 19th century depictions of women, some female characters appear to transcend traditional stereotypes. Sir Conan Doyle's (1891) seminal work "A Scandal in Bohemia," for example, includes a female protagonist named Irene Adler who "eclipses and predominates the whole of her sex" (p. 11). Though a lowly opera singer, she is able to outsmart the great Sherlock Holmes through disguise and reconnaissance, eventually absconding with a compromising photograph of a Bohemian King. The actions of this female protagonist reveal that a woman of humble personage can become both autonomous and successful. Irene controls her own life through outsmarting prominent male figures like Holmes, maintaining a career as an American opera singer, and marrying for love.

Through depicting struggles in a male-dominant society, stories of the 18th and 19th centuries highlight challenges that women faced during this period (Cruea, 2005, p. 186). If women were to achieve happiness, they had to overcome patriarchal roadblocks, "the myriad of ways society has denied women the means of attaining it" (Norton, 2013, p. 297). Though superficially empowering, the achievements of female characters in 18th and 19th century stories are still firmly rooted in a man's world and require extraordinary skills that the average woman may not possess. Additionally, depiction of characters like Irene reinforces a male view of autonomy, which affirms that self-made, self-directing and self-sufficient characteristics are "an unmistakably masculine ideal, modeled on the social roles and fantasies of men, leading some to question its ultimate value for women" (Norton, 2013, p. 297). Through being the exception, an extraordinary woman that is "as good as" a man, Irene's characterization upholds standard masculine stereotypes. Sherlock Holmes characterization as having a "cold, precise but admirably balanced mind" further upholds these stereotypes (Doyle, 1891, p. 11), describing men as the rational creatures envisioned by Rousseau. Because Doyle relies on a stereotypical view of female inferiority to make the story more surprising and fantastic, the great Irene Adler may be considered the exception, rather than the rule. Such a perspective is far from the view presented in Wollstonecraft's (2017) *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she envisions a world where Rousseau's male qualities can be extended to all women.

2. Emma Courtney: 18th Century Stereotype or Exceptional Other?

Initially, characteristics of Emma Courtney, from the 18th century novel entitled *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, appear to parallel the typical female stereotypes in other 18th and 19th century novels. Emma has little social power and is ultimately controlled by the patriarchal family and social system in which she is ensconced. This control is evident after her father sends her to boarding school, where she reports that "my actions were all constrained;—I was obliged to sit poring over needle-work, and forbidden to prate;—my body was tortured into forms" (Hays, 2009, p. 15). Through Emma's experience, we become keenly aware of patriarchal power. Not only does her father control her life, but the school serves as a tool of indoctrination, inculcating common female stereotypes popularized by Rousseau. Emma is taught to be quiet, subservient, and cognizant of appearance. Following this education, she is forced to live with her uncle after the death of her father. She then endures poverty resulting from a patriarchal system that has left her without an adequate inheritance or potential trade. In order to gain some kind of financial security, she agrees to marry a man whom she dislikes, named Montague, after being refused by her true love, August Harley. Emma concludes the story by serving as a rational woman, trying to quell the jealous ravings of a husband who eventually kills himself. Like Montague, nearly all of the people dear to Emma die, highlighting the tragedy of her existence. Her unfortunate circumstances ultimately serve as an attack on oppressive patriarchal systems. As a woman who is forced against her will to adhere to the "Cult of True Womanhood," Emma illustrates the detrimental consequences of traditional feminine stereotypes, which are "overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience" (Cruea, 2005, p. 188; Smith-Rosenberg, 1985, p. 13).

Emma clearly believes that women are oppressed by a patriarchal system and expresses her views honestly in the novel. Concerning this issue, Ward (2009) writes that the novel was "controversial in the extreme, attracting the opprobrium of conservative critics. What caused such consternation was not merely their vivid description of political and social injustices suffered by her female compatriots, but the role of the law in perpetuating such injustices" (p. 131). While descriptions of patriarchal domination are clearly evident in the story, the female protagonist does little to actively oppose injustice. Emma's obsession with male figures like Augustus Harley and Mr. Francis, both of whom characterize a stereotypical rational male figure of the period, actually serves to validate the patriarchal system that Emma so opposes. By emphasizing the mental superiority of these two figures, Rousseau's view that males are cognitively superior is reinforced. Emma's reliance on motherhood, rather than work, also appears to validate a common female stereotype. On the whole, actions seem diametrically opposed to the protagonist's feelings about society, making interpretation of the novel problematic. Perhaps this is why the author, Mary Hays, "has been a largely forgotten figure, her novels occasioning rare interest amongst literary critics and historians, rarer interest still amongst jurists" (Ward, 2009, p. 131).

Emma Courtney's adherence to patriarchal values appears to subvert the feminist ideals that she holds dear. This rather unamazing behavior has been difficult to fully appreciate. Some scholars argue that Emma acts as a "philosopher," revealing the burgeoning intellectual development of women during the period (Binhammer, 2003; Joy, 2010, p. 221). Other scholars assert that her primary function is to expose injustice and oppression inherent within a male dominant society. Fisk (2006), for example, points out that Emma Courtney, like her counterpart Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë, 2020), criticizes a "respectable" patriarchal society that "allows no place for such passionate female expression" (p. 133). In addition to feminist rhetoric, Courtney and Earnshaw bring to light negative influences of patriarchal domination; they are both "continually upbraided for and warned against their wayward passionate natures, both submit to passionless marriages, and, eventually, both are either psychologically or physically destroyed" (Fisk, 2006, p. 33). Through the tragic circumstances of women in these stories, deleterious effects resulting from

male domination are uncovered. Nowka (2007) further elaborates upon the nature of this oppression, arguing that science and rationalism, traditionally associated with the male gender, are used in the novel to "explain women's subjection to men and to narrate a form of feminism based on the immutable laws of science" (p. 521). While many argue that Emma's role is to philosophize and expose injustices inherent in a patriarchal society, other scholars note that the novel is largely autobiographical. It is based on the life of Mary Hays herself and serves as an account of "her unreturned and unrestrained passion for the Cambridge radical William Frend" (Rajan, 1993, p. 149). As a result of plotlines that parallel real life, some scholars contend that Emma exposes the juxtaposition of experience with imagination, showing "the Real itself problematic" (Green, 2007, p. 709).

Behaviors of Emma Courtney leave the reader confused about the novel's true purpose, explaining controversy in scholarly literature. Was Emma created as a martyr for the feminist cause, or is there a deeper meaning about this woman who is subjected to the cruelty of a patriarchal world? I argue that rhetoric against the patriarchal system, as well as the failure of Emma Courtney to gain the success she desires, provides a more substantial and profound understanding of the feminist cause, which women could utilize to transcend the hardship of social oppression. Rather than providing a behavioral roadmap for success, Emma provides a realistic cognitive means to cope, leading to achievement and autonomy for the average woman. In contrast to exceptional characters like Emma Woodhouse or Irene Adler, Emma Courtney provides a more universal archetype for transcendence. Through dealing with an oppressive male system in a less extraordinary way, she affirms conclusions about the strength of all women, not just the exceptional "other."

3. Patriarchal Oppression and Resistance

Memoirs of Emma Courtney reflects the growing economic prosperity of 18th England, which caused social diversification and widespread expansion of the middle class (Watt, 2000, p. 443). Emma's mother symbolizes this expansion. As the daughter of a rich trader, she has abundant wealth that is coveted by her suitor, Mr. Courtney. Expansion of the trade and merchant class is further illustrated through Emma's aunt and uncle, the "enterprising" and "industrious" Melmoths, who gain social and economic prosperity through the sea trade, a euphemism for widespread colonial domination (Hays, 2009, p. 11). In addition to profitable tradesmen and merchants who grow in prosperity, we see a decline of the traditional aristocracy. Decay of the noble class is illustrated by Emma Courtney's father, "a man of some talents, and of a superior rank in life" who loses his wealth through a profligate and amoral lifestyle (Hays, 2009, p. 10). During this time of social and economic upheaval, individualistic ideals also begin to emerge. There is a clear growth in popularity of a Puritan philosophical tenet that stresses "inner light" (Watt, 2000, p. 443). As Emma reads works such as Plutarch and Rousseau, she gains a love for republican ideals, free-thinking, and individual control of one's own destiny. The French war during this period further suggests a burgeoning appreciation for the ideals of democracy.

Despite rapidly expanding complexity and individuality, the social system of 18th century England also exhibits strong asymmetrical power relationships that are dominated by male figures. This view is exemplified by the patriarchal passing of wealth, which moves from Emma's mother to her father after marriage. Mr. Courtney ultimately entices Emma's mother to marry so that he may "make himself master of her ample positions" (Hays, 2009, p. 10). The strength of an expanding and dominant patriarchal system is further evinced by Montague, who attempts to utilize patriarchal privilege to control Emma, leading to her unhappiness. Ultimately, this growth of patriarchal and asymmetrical power relationships drives a feminist longing for independence. This view is illustrated by Emma's cousin Ann, who declares "my desire of liberty is stronger than my duty" (Hays, 2009, p. 73). As Ann adheres to the bonds of a hierarchical and oppressive society, she desires independence, a sentiment that Emma shares when she cites her preference to live with a more agreeable neighbor, Mrs. Harley.

Although Emma has a keen desire to avoid the patriarchal system that enslaves her, she cannot extricate herself from this system, nor can she effectively utilize it to gain what she desires. Her powerlessness in this regard differs significantly from female characters in Jane Austen's novels, who utilize patriarchal social structure to exert influence or gain power. Female figures in Austen's novels show the strength of women through adaptation and behavioral modification in a male system. In contrast to these characters, Emma Courtney is forced to change her behavior due to external pressures yet stays true to her feminist beliefs. In doing so, she invalidates the patriarchal system, revealing a new sense of achievement and identity.

As in Austenian novels, Emma Courtney initially exhibits feminine "flaws" which prompt reflection. Early in the story, she does not change her behavior in a socially acceptable way to overcome obstacles and obtain her object of desire, an ideal man to marry. She ignores patriarchal social norms for courtship, choosing to pursue a man on her own terms. She mounts a seemingly desperate pursuit of Augustus Harley, even before she is well acquainted with his character. She first learns about him through a picture in his mother's house. After hearing descriptions of his character, she realizes her love is for "an ideal object" (Hays, 2009, p. 60). Concerning her object of desire, she asks, "why should I hesitate to inform him of my affection--why do I blush and tremble at the mere idea? It is a false shame! It is a pernicious system of morals, which teaches us that hypocrisy can be virtue!" (Hays, 2009, p. 79). Rather than adhering to norms of priority, which dictate female passivity, Emma actively pursues her ideal man. She also goes on to write to Augustus repeatedly, choosing to avoid the normal social conventions dictated by courtship, stating that "the voice of nature is too strong to be silenced by artificial precepts" (Hays, 2009, p. 89). Unlike counterparts in Austen's novels, Emma Courtney actively subverts patriarchal norms. At the same time, she is never able to achieve great status nor happiness with a man, in further contrast to Austenian characters.

Emma's disregard for the patriarchal system is further demonstrated by her behavior toward Montague. Emma spurns Montague's attempts to marry her, despite economic prospects that would present many advantages (Hays, 2009, p. 77). When reaching a point of financial and emotional despair, she finally marries Montague, yet does not hesitate to reveal her concern for her love, Augustus, as he is carried into her home to receive treatment after an injury. Not only does Emma choose to spurn Montague's overtures for marriage, but she resists his attempts to protect her honor. When Emma and Montague's carriage is overturned in an accident prior to marriage, she does not allow Montague to explain the circumstances to her uncle, Mr. Morton. Despite being gone for days and risking disgrace, she demands "from him a promise---that, as he was necessitated to meet Mr. Morton on business, he would make no allusion to the past"; she further states that "I should be mortified, (I added) by having it supposed, that I stood in need of a *champion*---Mr. Morton had no doubts of the rectitude of my conduct" (Hays, 2009, p. 76). Emma does not acknowledge a need to defend patriarchal stereotypes of female chastity and honor. She further rejects the male as a vehicle for obtaining respect or prestige.

While rejection of the patriarchal system is clearly novel, Emma's acceptance of female characteristics deemed to be weak is also unique. She feels that her passions are a strength, rather than a weakness. This belief differs significantly from Austenian characters, who regard their "female" traits as weaknesses to be overcome. Concerning repeated pursuit of Augustus Harley, Emma Courtney writes, "I recollect you once told me 'It was our duty to make our reason conquer the sensibility of our heart.' Yet, why? Is, then, apathy the perfection of our nature---and is not that nature refined and harmonized by the gentle and social affections? The Being who gave to the mind its reason, gave also to the heart its sensibility" (Hays, 2009, p. 81). Instead of accepting the importance of humility and temperament of emotion with reason, she recognizes a virtue in her passions, which may be utilized to enact real change. This view is supported by her comments at a party at Mr. Melmoth's house. A new idea emerges from Emma's passions against war. As she compares soldiers and murderers, she declares the following:

All the difference between them is, that the one (a murderer), rendered desperate by passion, poverty, or injustice, endeavours by wrong means to do himself right, and through this terrible and pitiable mistake destroys the life or the property of a fellow being---The others (soldiers), wantonly and in cold blood, cut down millions of their species, ravage whole towns and cities, and carry devastation through a country. (Hays, 2009, p. 110)

From Emma's passionate words, a novel argument about the nature of war emerges. Her statements reveal that war is a political means of amassing wealth through murder. It is also a means to defend social norms that subjugate, so as to maintain wealth and prosperity of the elite. From passion we see a spark of truth, which may be refined through reason. This refinement is seen as the argument turns toward slavery. When Mr. Melmoth indicates that "thousands more of these murderers" are needed in the West Indies, Mr. Harley exerts the power of reason to refine Emma's passions, pleading "the cause of freedom and humanity with a bold and manly eloquence" (Hays, 2009, p. 112). Through this application of reason, Augustus exposes and confutes "the specious reasoning and sophistry of his antagonist" (Hays, 2009, p. 112). In the mind of Emma, reason becomes an ability to harness powerful passions, which can then be used to combat social injustice.

Ultimately, we see that Emma does not seek to subdue her passions but control them through reason. She states, "It is by tracing, by developing, the passions in the minds of others; tracing them, from the seeds by which they have been generated, through all their extended consequences, that we learn, the more effectually, to regulate and to subdue our own" (Hays, 2009, p. 93). Instead of working to reduce passion, Emma chooses to utilize it in tandem with reason. Therefore, the two traits become synergistic, fueling each other. This view is revealed when Emma writes, "Philosophy, it is said, should regulate the feelings, but it has added fervor to mine!" (Hays, 2009, p. 86). According to Emma, thought which is sparked by passion and tempered with reason reveals truth. Such a perspective redefines common stereotypes about the role of "feminine" passions and "male" reason. Just as Augustus reveals weakness in his inability to express obstacles that impede him, Emma reveals weakness in her effusion of emotion without rational control. Both qualities must be combined to ensure social equity and justice.

By ruminating about stereotypical qualities of both men and women, Emma reveals a new philosophical journey that eventually leads to epiphany and empowerment. She begins to acquire intellectual tools that help her gain agency in an otherwise ordinary life, leading to psychological emancipation from oppressive patriarchal social norms. As she continues to face obstacles to happiness, her journey continues to progress toward personal enlightenment and liberation.

4. An Ordinary Existence but Amazing Resolve: The Growth of a Feminist in Practice

While Emma Courtney does not embrace the patriarchal system, she is compelled to marry Montague at a time of financial bankruptcy, leading to a problematic marriage. At the end of the story, all of Emma's family members pass away, except for the adopted son of Augustus Harley. Montague commits suicide, while Augustus dies after a carriage accident. Her daughter also dies. Although Emma does receive an annual income of 10,000 pounds, her life seems isolated, tragic, and lonely. This plotline appears to reveal a character that is rather unremarkable. In contrast to Austenian characters or Sherlock Holmes' Irene Adler, Emma does not gain independence through outsmarting male protagonists. Augustus ignores her explicit overtures for dating, only revealing affection on his deathbed. In contrast to characters like Fanny Price, from Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Emma Courtney does not gain status and reputation through typifying female stereotypes of a virtuous, chaste, and weak woman. She marries a physician, a trade of relatively moderate status that is "relegated to the sidelines" in most Austenian novels (Copeland & McMaster, 2011, p. 122). Essentially, Emma defies the patriarchal system but fails to receive significant gains through these actions.

Although Nancy Armstrong (2000) suggests that authority in the domestic sphere affords 18th and 19th century women with a great deal of power to dictate terms concerning courtship practices and family relationships (p. 470), Emma is rather unsuccessful in both respects. Her power in a domestic sphere is questionable, which makes her character not only more realistic, but more meaningful. Emma represents a common woman who is unable to defy domestic norms, which are ultimately the product of a discriminatory patriarchal system. At the same time, she gains a feminist sense of defiance that helps her firmly establish an identity as a woman. Through providing a strong female perspective, Emma serves "to unify the interests of those groups who were neither extremely powerful nor very poor" (Armstrong, 2000, p. 467). Essentially, she provides a more universal female perspective that can transcend traditional aristocratic and patriarchal boundaries, serving to inspire the average woman.

Rather than providing an exceptional character that most women could not hope to achieve, Emma Courtney represents a protagonist that is more common and realistic. While essentially powerless to change a patriarchal system, she does not accept it, revealing a new feminine sense of pride in qualities like passion. Rather than showing how an external, male-dominant society can be used or changed to promote success, Emma reveals an inner, cognitive form of feminism that rejects the patriarchal system entirely, leading to a new identity as a woman. Her new sense of self may be embodied in a statement by Fortier (2016), who writes, "The body is one site of oppression for women; subjectivity is another...feminism attempts to understand the ideologies which have limited women's ways of becoming subjects or agents and to open up new patterns in which women are free to escape the confines of the subjectivity patriarchy sets up for them" (p. 88). The excerpt describes how both body and mind are used to subvert female independence. Patriarchal norms of appearance, as well as discriminatory ideologies that influence the psyche, keep women from obtaining freedom. This perspective is used to characterize Emma's physical appearance and cognitive development. Concerning both body and mind, Emma Courtney reveals a sense of awareness that allows for the empowerment of women.

Concerning body, Mary Hays empowers Emma through appearance, or rather, lack thereof. Emma is not described as an object of beauty. We know nothing of her appearance, which frees her from the bodily stereotypes that suppress women. Such characterization emphasizes internal aspects of beauty and virtue as is exemplified in a letter to Augustus Harley, in which she writes, "Beauty may inspire a transient desire, vivacity amuse, for a time, by its sportive graces; but the first will quickly fade and grow familiar---the last degenerate into impertinence and insipidity" (Hays, 2009, p. 120). From this statement, we get the sense that Emma does not consider beauty to be an important trait. She also resists being objectified by this quality. She relies on a deeper virtue to define who she is. In some ways, this characterization appears to be reminiscent of the author. Concerning Mary Hays, Adams (1940) states that, "she had to resort wholly to philosophy, and Cupid's wings were promptly clipped" (p. 472). Lacking an ability to engage the men she desired, Hays turns inward for social and psychological satisfaction. Unlike other female authors of the period, who infuse elements of their own disembodied identities through rhetoric or narration, referred to by Gallagher (1995) as "partial Nobodies" (p. 19), Hays directly equips Emma Courtney with her own personal characteristics. External aspects of beauty and decorum are never considered for Emma, projecting Hays' desire to be liberated from feminine stereotypes.

Concerning the mind, Emma is empowered through a voracious appetite for scholarship. Although she lacks material wealth and status possessed many Austenian characters, she does have an intellect that cannot be subdued by any external patriarchal pressure. Thus, the limitless potential of her intelligence becomes a symbol of equity, as well as a pathway to emancipation for all women, even those who are "neither extremely powerful nor very poor" (Armstrong, 2000, p. 467). Through development of internal mental faculties, Emma is able to cultivate a sense of identity and empowerment that all women may possess, regardless of rank or fortune. Her intellectual prowess is first revealed by her passion for reading, in which her mind begins

"to be emancipated" (Hays, 2009, p. 25). Through reading the works of great philosophers like Descartes, Emma develops a "passion for metaphysical enquiries," which allows her to detach from the oppressive social systems that control both mind and body (Hays, 2009, p. 25). It is at this point that she begins to reflect upon the world in which she lives. She ruminates about the social systems that enslave women, telling Mr. Francis that "The character, you tell me, is modified by circumstances: the customs of society, then, have enslaved, enervated, and degraded woman" (Hays, 2009, p. 39). From this excerpt, we can see that Emma realizes the true nature of oppression. Although an enlightening feminist view, the epiphany does not exemplify a power to enact change. Emma does not exert any notable influence on characters she encounters. Ultimately, interaction with other figures is rooted in a domestic sphere, a microcosm of the patriarchal system that controls women. Instead of using this domestic sphere to enact change, Emma exhibits a metaphysical, intellectual power that is unassailable.

Cultivation of feminist intellect and identity is a process in the novel, which slowly develops as Emma faces each patriarchal restraint. She finds ways to empower her feminist beliefs at each obstacle, a view which is supported by her preference for letter writing. During the period in which this novel is written, expression of honest sentiments is strictly controlled for women, as evinced by Mrs. Morton's criticism of Emma's conversations with Mr. Francis. Due to strict regulation of social relationships, letter writing becomes an essential medium of obtaining freedom. Although Emma is controlled by her social surroundings, her values can be freely expressed on paper and sent out of the local sphere of influence. This view is exemplified in a letter to Mr. Francis in which Emma writes, "I sought earnestly for the privilege of addressing you on paper. My mind seemed to overflow with a thousand sentiments, that I had not the courage to express in words; but now, when the period is arrived, that I can take up my pen unawed by your penetrating glance, unchecked by your poignant reply, and pour out my spirit before you, I feel as if its emotions were too wayward, too visionary, too contradictory, to merit your attention" (Hays, 2009, p. 46). We see that Emma has an effusion of emotion, as well as a desire to transcend patriarchal stereotypes that mandate female restraint. At the same time, we can also see that letters represent a liberating medium. Emma is allowed the freedom to express herself in her own way. By providing a confidential form of venting, the letters also pose less risk than direct verbal communication. Essentially, the epistolic tradition represents an individualistic means of expressing nonconformist ideas, explaining the popularity of this medium during the 18th century.

As letters progress in the story, we also notice a cognitive change in Emma as she transforms from a philosophical feminist to a feminist in practice. Initially, she tries to reconcile her feminist ideals with patriarchal social norms that seem diametrically opposed. Her mental conflict first emerges in passionate letters to two male figures: Mr. Francis and Augustus Harley. She looks to these male role models for council, suggesting a desire to gain the "male" qualities of rational reasoning. To Mr. Francis she writes, "must the activity of a curious and vigorous mind sink into torpor and abhorred vacuity?" (Hays, 2009, p. 47). In this excerpt, Emma's energetic and creative way of thinking is clear, as well as her acknowledgement of patriarchal pressure to suppress such thoughts. She seeks validation from her male friend as a means to reconcile "feminist" traits with external male expectations. Emma also seems to worship Augustus Harley as an object of affection as she stares at his picture (Hays, 2009, p. 60). As an ideal man, Augustus represents a perfect archetype of rational thought. He also embodies Emma's desire to gain reason and restraint, both of which are stereotypical male characteristics. As with Mr. Francis, ideas are expressed freely to Augustus. Emma writes that their relationship "banished restraint, and assisted me in deceiving myself. I drank in large and intoxicating draughts of a delicious poison, that had circulated through every vein to my heart" (Hays, 2009, p. 72). Although we can see a blossoming desire for free expression, Emma still looks to patriarchal figures for validation.

Emma continues to struggle with a conflict between identity and external social expectations in a letter to Augustus, where she professes her love (Hays, 2009, p. 80). We see a growing boldness, a willingness to reveal passions. In the letter, she questions the patriarchal norms that promote rationalization and restraint of passion by writing, "I make no apologies for, because I feel no consciousness of, weakness. An attachment sanctioned by nature, reason, and virtue, ennobles the mind capable of conceiving and cherishing it" (Hays, 2009, pp. 81-82). Within this excerpt, we see a burgeoning awareness that passion is not negative. It is a positive trait that emerges as a result of both nature and virtue. In addition to this realization, Emma begins to understand that reason is not just a male virtue. It can be synergistically used to focus passions. This perspective is illustrated in a later letter to Augustus, where Emma systematically lists the possibilities for her rejection (Hays, 2009, p. 124). Through using such a rational approach, Emma is able to empower herself, thereby controlling the situation. As she gains an ability to use reason, she also realizes that overreliance on rational thought has its shortcomings. At this point, Emma begins to demean male stereotypical rationalism, citing Harley's failure to express true feelings. She writes that "Concealment is particularly repugnant to my disposition" (Hays, 2009, p. 148), suggesting that honesty and passion must be used in concert with reason to be effective.

As Emma slowly loses her idealistic views of male rationalism, she begins to gaze on the portrait of Augustus in a new way. She writes, "I clasped my hands, and, lifting up my eyes, beheld the portrait of Augustus---beheld again the resemblance of those features so deeply engraven on my heart! My imagination was raised---methought the lively colours of the complexion had faded, the benignant smile had vanished, and an expression of perplexity and sternness usurped its place" (Hays, 2009, p. 150). We can see that Emma's feminist identity has fully developed. She no longer views Augustus as an ideal object of desire, nor does she view male figures as superior, rational creatures. Emma accepts the virtue of her own passions, as well as her inherent ability to utilize reason. Her epiphany is revealed later in the novel when she writes, "Common men know nothing of violent sorrows, nor do great passions ever break out in weak minds," which is a reference to Rousseau (Hays, 2009, p. 156). She embraces the qualities that make her great, regardless of patriarchal stereotypes that may suggest otherwise.

While Emma is still externally influenced by a patriarchal society that subjugates women, she has become mentally liberated. She gains pride in herself, as well as a strong desire to act independently of any assistance. After the death of her benevolent neighbor, Mrs. Harley, Emma is forced to move out of the house. Rather than seeking help through family, she strikes out on her own, choosing to find her own lodgings. Concerning this incident, she comments that "Under pretense of indisposition, I refused to meet the family. I heard them depart. Too proud to accept of obligation, I had not confided to them my plans, if plans they could be called, where no distinct end was in view" (Hays, 2009, p. 160). Though bankrupt and destitute, she stays true to her feminist ideals, trusting in her own capability to earn a living. Rather than succumbing to desperation, she decides to live alone, purchasing an annuity to support a modest, yet comfortable living (Hays, 2009, p. 165). Not only does she gain a sense of independence, but she demonstrates a determination to act on her feminist beliefs. Emma has finally become a feminist in practice. During this period of time, she also meets Montague again, allowing the friendship on her terms. His bouts of passion are repelled "with firmness," making him "struggle to repress, and after absent himself for a long time" (Hays, 2009, p. 164). She fundamentally defines the relationship established with Montague and finally decides to marry him after her investment results in bankruptcy.

After marriage, Emma accepts her role in the domestic sphere, yet she continues to behave according to feminist beliefs. She applies herself "to the study of physic, anatomy, and surgery, with the various branches of science connected with them" (Hays, 2009, p. 168), cultivating an interest in subjects traditionally characterized as masculine. She also masters the use of reason, becoming a rational figure in her relationship with Montague, in stark contrast to her relationship with Augustus. She states that:

I felt for my husband a rational esteem, and a grateful affection:—but those romantic, high-wrought, frenzied, emotions, that had rent my heart during its first attachment---that enthusiasm, that fanaticism, to which opposition had given force, the bare recollection of which still shook my soul with anguish. (Hays, 2009, p. 169)

Emma is the source of reason, while her husband reveals passion and jealousy. In response to Montague's question about feelings of love for Augustus, Emma replies "My first attachment was the morbid excess of a distempered imagination" (Hays, 2009, p. 169). It is at this point that innocent idealization of Augustus, a symbol of patriarchal norms and rational behavior, is replaced with a strong feminine identity. She also replaces passion for a man with a devotion to childrearing. When she becomes a mother, her affections are "awakened to new and sweet emotions" (Hays, 2009, p. 170).

Emma finally moves from a reliance on male figures and patriarchal systems toward an independence based on feminist beliefs. As her passion moves to motherhood, she resists any emotional attachment to a man. This view is exemplified by her care for Augustus, who is injured in a carriage accident and taken to Montague's home. While she watches him die, she states, "I forgot not that I was a wife and a mother---the purity of my feelings sanctified their enthusiasm" (Hays, 2009, p. 177). Devotion to domestic duties is clear, and further solidified by an agreement to adopt Augustus Harley's son, which inflames the "irascible passions" of Montague. Emma ultimately finds "sweet relief" from her sorrows through "tender, maternal, cares" revealing transcendence of male dominance (Hays, 2009, p. 181). After Montague commits suicide, having killed a baby born out of an illicit affair, the only physical link to masculine control is now severed. Emma then takes care of Montague's paramour, Rachel, demonstrating that negative influences of patriarchal decadence may be overcome through superior feminine virtue.

Overall, the story is a Bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story that reveals the rich development of a female identity. Unlike other female protagonists of the period, Emma Courtney is a common girl who keeps her independence, whether mental or physical, while immersed in a hegemonic, male-dominant society. Her journey toward self-actualization is summarized in her final letter to Augustus Harley Jr., her adopted son. She writes:

Let me behold my Augustus, escaped from the tyranny of the passions, restored to reason, to the vigor of his mind, to self-control, to the dignity of active, intrepid, virtue! (Hays, 2009, p. 196)

Through Augustus, Emma reveals her personal journey to mental independence through cultivating passion, controlling this passion with reason, and applying virtue to control behavior. Emma masters her emotion using rational thought, thereby allowing her to gain a sense of control that leads to liberation. The letter to Augustus Jr. mirrors Emma's life, as she moves to control her passion through reason and modify her behavior in accordance with virtue. Ultimately, this progression represents a roadmap to a happy life, free from the fetters of a controlling and oppressive patriarchal social system.

5. Emma Courtney and Wollstonecraft's Vision of an 18th Century Feminist

Female characters of the 18th and 19th century novel are often monolithic. For Rousseau, they are rationally weak but possess feminine wiles that entice the interest of a man (Wokler, 2001, p. 128). To Samuel Richardson (1932, 2015), they are symbols of purity, who must overcome adversity to retain a respectable image. As for Austen (2003, 2008), female figures are flawed yet resilient creatures who learn to succeed by adapting to a patriarchal system, whereas Doyle's (1891) literary conception of feminine greatness excludes most ordinary women. None of these common stereotypical views fully encapsulate the characteristics and behaviors of Emma Courtney. Although she successfully navigates a patriarchal world, she does not succumb to societal pressures concerning female propriety. She boldly exerts her personal opinions and resists patriarchal pressure to adhere to commonly prescribed feminine roles. She also reveals a degree of independence, choosing to live alone rather than depending

on family. Finally, she shows a capacity for reason that surpasses that of a man. Emma Courtney does not fit the mold of an 18th or 19th century female stereotype.

Through comparing Emma to similar works of the period, her unique characteristics and behaviors become readily apparent. Rather than relying on social standing or sophistry, she uses resilience and reflection to live independently. She also rejects common patriarchal pressures to conform to female stereotypes. Her divergence from stereotypical norms reflects a pathway to liberation for all women, embodying a feminist vision. This view is exemplified in Mary Wollstonecraft's (2017) *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which argues against stereotypical conceptions of 18th century women and advocates for the following perceptual changes:

So I dismiss those pretty feminine phrases that the men condescendingly use to make our slavish dependence easier for us, and I despise the weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners that are supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker sex. I want to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the most praiseworthy ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, whether male or female, and that lesser ambitions should be tested against that one. (p. 5)

From this excerpt, we can more clearly discern Emma Courtney's exceptionality regarding other female protagonists of 18th and 19th centuries. Rather than serving as a role model for feminine chastity and propriety, she resists stereotypes and exerts psychological independence through philosophy. As envisioned by Wollstonecraft, Emma obtains a human character that is free from the male biases that serve to subjugate. Whenever possible, Emma ignores external pressures to behave according to standard female stereotypes. At the same time, she continues to maintain her feminine role through tempering emotion with reason.

Ultimately, Emma transcends oppression by recognizing the power of raw passion and controlling this passion through rational thought. This ability also reflects Wollstonecraft's vision of the ideal woman, whose passions are used to help "reason to develop" (Wollstonecraft, 2017, p. 9). Through the utilization of both passion and reason, Emma Courtney can assert her feminist beliefs, thereby serving as a role model for all women who demand freedom in a misogynistic world. She also reveals that through emphasis on virtue, behaviors may ultimately lead to positive outcomes. Males who lack this virtue, such as Montague, ultimately die from their passions.

The *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is truly unique for the period, depicting women as powerful and independent figures who can prevail against male social pressures. The way in which Emma retains independence and authority serves as a guide for average women of the period, who may not have the potential to obtain status or marry for love. We see that success as a feminist is ultimately an internal cognitive process. Using learning to gain mental fortitude, Emma transcends external patriarchal pressures to obtain true liberation. The present study provides new insights. At the same time, it is still limited in scope to one novel from a specific historic period. Further diachronic examination of literary characters may reveal how feminist ideals have changed over time. Although more research is needed, Emma exemplifies a new feminist vision for the period, which suggests that all women can achieve autonomy despite patriarchal pressure. Like Wollstonecraft, Emma declares that females are wholly equal to their male counterparts, not simply a complement.

6. References

- Adams, M. R. (1940). Mary Hays, disciple of William Godwin. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 55(2), 472--483.
- Armstrong, N. (2000). Desire and domestic fiction: A political history. In M. McKeon (Ed.), *Theory of the novel: A historical approach* (pp. 467--475). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Austen, J. (2003). *Emma*. Oxford University Press.
- Austen, J. (2008). *Mansfield Park* (J. Kinsley, Ed.). Oxford University Press.

From Patriarchal Oppression to Philosophical Freedom: Establishing a Feminist Framework for Transcendence in The Memoirs of Emma Courtney

- Binhammer, K. (2003). The persistence of reading: Governing female novel-reading in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*. *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 27(2), 1--22.
- Brontë, E. (2020). *Wuthering Heights*. Oxford University Press.
- Canton, J. (2016). *The literature book: Big ideas simply explained*. Penguin Random House.
- Copeland, E., & McMaster, J. (Eds.). (2011). *The Cambridge companion to Jane Austen*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cruea, S. M. (2005). Changing ideals of womanhood during the nineteenth-century woman movement. *ATQ*, 19(3), 187--204.
- Doyle, A. C. (1891). A scandal in Bohemia. In *The adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (pp. 5--29). Castle Books.
- Fisk, N. P. (2006). "A wild, wick slip she was": The passionate female in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. *Brontë Studies*, 31(2), 133--143.
- Fortier, M. (2016). *Theory/Theatre: An introduction*. Routledge.
- Gallagher, C. (1995). *Nobody's story: The vanishing acts of women writers in the marketplace, 1670--1920*. University of California Press.
- Green, G. (2007). Fiction and autobiography in Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796). *Literature Compass*, 4(3), 709--720.
- Hays, M. (2009). *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. Oxford University Press.
- Joy, L. (2010). Novel feelings: *Emma Courtney's* point of view. *European Romantic Review*, 21(2), 221--234.
- Norton, B. M. (2013). *Emma Courtney*, feminist ethics, and the problem of autonomy. *The Eighteenth Century*, 54(3), 297--315.
- Nowka, S. A. (2007). Materialism and feminism in Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. *European Romantic Review*, 18(4), 521--540.
- Rajan, T. (1993). Autonarration and genotext in Mary Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. *Studies in Romanticism*, 32(2), 149--176.
- Richardson, S. (1932). *Clarissa*. The Anglo Egyptian Bookshop.
- Richardson, S. (2015). *Pamela; Or, virtue rewarded*. Courier Dover Publications.
- Rousseau, J. J. (1763). *Emile: Book V---After age 20*. Online Literature. <http://www.online-literature.com/rousseau/emile/5/>
- Smith-Rosenberg, C. (1985). *Disorderly conduct: Visions of gender in Victorian America*. Oxford University Press.
- Sophistry. (2020). In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sophistry>
- Ward, I. (2009). The prejudices of Mary Hays. *International Journal of Law in Context*, 5(2), 131--146.
- Watt, I. (2000). The rise of the novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding. In M. McKeon (Ed.), *Theory of the novel: A historical approach* (pp. 441--466). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wokler, R. (2001). *Rousseau: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (2017). *The vindications: The rights of men and the rights of woman* (J. Bennett, Ed.). Early Modern Texts. <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/wollstonecraft1792.pdf>