

## THE FALL OF THE DUTIFUL DAUGHTER OR THE JOURNEY WITHOUT RETURN<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Elizabeth Hamilton was an intelligent and educated woman who was aware of the legal, social and economic constraints that oppressed women and, in fact, denounce their cruel predicament in a covert way in her writings. She was particularly concerned with women not receiving the right intellectual and moral training that would allow them to reason and think for themselves. But at the same time she knew that in the revolutionary aftermath, in which traditional values were being reasserted, rebellion against the status quo was not a viable option for women. Thus, instead of rising false expectations of life, she teaches her female readers the terrible consequences of violating the sacred rules of a conservative society which shows no compassion for its 'sinners', especially if they are women. Hamilton was preaching conformity to conventional sexual roles because she was aware of the fact that those who transgressed established social rules were doomed to defeat and destruction.

**Keywords:** fallen woman; society; daughter, father; chastity; education.

**Título en español:** La caída de la hija de la virtuosa o viaje sin retorno.

**Resumen:** Elizabeth Hamilton era una mujer inteligente e instruida, consciente de las restricciones legales, sociales y económicas que oprimían a las mujeres y, de hecho, denuncia esta cruel situación en sus escritos de forma encubierta. Le preocupaba de manera especial que las mujeres no recibieran la educación intelectual y moral que les permitiera razonar y pensar por sí mismas. Pero, al mismo tiempo sabía que en el periodo posterior a la Revolución, en el que se había producido una revalorización de los valores tradicionales, el rebelarse contra el status quo no era una opción viable para las mujeres. De ahí que en lugar de despertar falsas expectativas en sus lectoras, les haga ver las terribles consecuencias que puede tener el violar las reglas sagradas de una sociedad conservadora que no muestra compasión alguna por sus "pecadores", especialmente si son mujeres. Hamilton predicaba conformidad con los roles sexuales convencionales porque era consciente de que aquellas que transgredían las normas sociales establecidas estaban condenadas al fracaso y la destrucción.

**Palabras clave:** mujer perdida; sociedad; hija; padre; castidad; educación.

Although women had been writing novels throughout the eighteenth century, their literary output had been both denigrated and viewed with contempt by the cultivated elite. The main complaint about these works was that they gave young woman an idealistic and romantic picture of life and contributed to the corruption of the intellect and moral and

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religious principles. Lady Sarah Pennington provides us with a very good example of the prevailing attitude towards novels written by women:

*Novels and Romances*, very few of them, are worth the trouble of reading; some of them perhaps contain a few good morals, but they are not worth the finding where so much rubbish is intermixed. Their moral parts indeed are like small diamonds among mountains of dirt and trash, which, after you have found them, are too inconsiderable to answer the pains of coming at; yet, ridiculous as these fictitious tales generally are, they are so artfully managed as to excite an idle curiosity to see the conclusion, by which means the reader is drawn on, through a tiresome length of / foolish adventures, from which neither knowledge, pleasure or profit, seldom can accrue, to the common catastrophe of a wedding...by representing persons and things in a false and extravagant light, and by a series of improbable causes, bringing on impossible events, they are apt to give a romantic turn to the mind, which is often productive of great errors of judgment, and of fatal mistakes in conduct... (145-6)

In order to defend themselves from the accusation of having a bad influence on young ladies and justify their activity, female writers decided to become moral and didactic, “combining entertaining and convincing event with total moral commitment to the ideology of femininity” (Todd 1989: 147). Through their novels these writers promoted what Tompkins has called a type of “prudential morality”, preaching duty, filial obedience, propriety, chastity, submission of wives to their husbands, etc. Interestingly enough, as Turner has pointed out, this concern with moral certainties and being didactic generated a contradictory situation: “In other words, something as seemingly ‘unfeminine’ as the rise of women’s literary professionalism...may actually have reinforced more restrictive notions of ‘femininity’” (56).

But women not only had to change the content of their novels in order to meet society’s expectations, but also transform their own image as writers: “The new writer had to conform to the age’s ideal of womanhood, whatever the individual reality seemed to be. She had to be virtuous and domestic, writing either from financial necessity, unsupported by the proper guardians of femininity such as a husband or father, or from a desire to teach virtue to the unformed” (Todd 1989: 126).

The fact is that by the end of the eighteenth century writing was an established employment option for women and thus they could enter the literary market without threat to their respectability. Of course, it was not only the didactic content of their novels and their new public persona which granted this change, but their literary achievements as well: “But during the last decade of the eighteenth century a change took place: women began to write novels with a skill and authority which commanded the respect of both sexes and for the next fifty years they colonised the medium and made it their own” (Figs 1982: 1). The consolidation of their respectability and the authority some of these women writers achieved allowed them to address the main religious, social and political issues of the day. Women writers were not so much concerned with portraying individual experiences in their novels, but “focused...on the facts of shared daily life, insisted on the forces of social context” (Tayler and Luria 1978: 121). Women writers wanted to provide young female readers with more realistic portraits of a woman’s life than earlier novels had created.

Serious female writers firmly believed in the educational purpose of fiction and thus saw themselves as moral commentators who used their work to recreate contemporary life and provide their readers with a moral or political evaluation of it: “But until the gates of the universities and libraries swung open to women on equal terms with men, what better way to educate women, to help them transform themselves and live with greater perceptiveness and self-awareness, than through the novel which was everywhere being devoured – to quote Hanna More – like a ‘complicated drug’?” (Tayler and Luria 1978: 114).

Elizabeth Hamilton was a late eighteenth-century writer who firmly believed in the educational purposes of fiction and used her novels to provide her female readers with a realistic portrait of a woman’s life. Maybe, as some critics have pointed out, she was socially critical, denouncing the oppression and frustration of women in a covert way (Kelly 1990; Johnson 1990; Doody 1975; Ty 1991; Thaddeus 1994, 1995; Taylor 2000; Grogan 2002), but I think that her first intention was to be didactic in the sense of making her female readers aware of the limitations that society imposed on them, limitations that could not be ignored without paying a high prize for it. In *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* Hamilton shows her readers how severely and cruelly women, unlike men, are punished for violating the sacred rules of a society which shows no compassion for its female “sinners”.

By the time Elizabeth Hamilton published her novels the enthusiasm for the French Revolution had long faded away and the emphasis had shifted from rebellion and change to reaction and reassertion of traditional values. Conservative conduct books for women, such as James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women*, were published in new editions and the female ideal that the conduct books had helped to construct throughout the century was firmly reasserted. A virtuous woman had to be defined by her meekness, submission, chastity, modesty, reserve, delicacy, sympathy, gentleness, as well as a unique capacity for self-control and self-knowledge. Reacting against the reformers and the way in which they challenged the traditional family structure, conservative novels and conduct books preached domesticity, resignation and the duty of female submission and propriety. The subjection of women was now justified in terms of “a renewed model of ‘domestic woman’ as professionalized custodian of the ‘national’ conscience, culture and destiny” (Kelly 1997: 21). Although there were no changes in the laws that oppressed women and denied them any autonomy, females were told that they had a vital task to fulfil, that of regenerating the spirit of society.

The new virtuous domestic woman had to be above all chaste.<sup>2</sup> Unchastity was a mortal sin which could not be forgiven and which marked a woman’s social death. Bernard Mandeville summarizes it very clearly in *An Enquiry into the Origin of Honour* (1732): “Whereas Honour once routed never rallies; nay, the least *Breach* in Female Reputation is irreparable; and a *Gap* in Chastity, like a *Chasm* in a young Tree, is every day a *Widening*” (Yeazell 1991: 17). But whereas unchastity was unforgivable in women, in a man it was just considered a venial sin. Thus, whereas a woman’s moral and sexual behaviour had to be above reproach, a much lower standard of conduct was tolerated in men.<sup>3</sup> Radical writers,

<sup>2</sup> In *Fictions of Modesty*. Yeazell explains how Mary Douglas has pointed out that cults of virginity tend to appear at times of social upheaval and stress (1991: 23).

<sup>3</sup> It is true that this double standard was based on practical considerations: since property was inherited through the male line, it was necessary that there should be no legal doubt about the legitimacy of the heir: “Fe-

such as Mary Hays, Catharine Macaulay or Mary Wollstonecraft, strongly criticised this moral double standard that was more flexible towards men. They pointed out the irony and absurdity of considering women weak of intellect and reason, unable to control their passions, but expecting a higher standard of conduct of them. Interestingly enough, these radical writers did not want to destroy or ridicule the virtues of modesty and chastity, which for them, as for their contemporaries, were of paramount importance, but to claim a change in male sexual behaviour. Thus at the same time that Hays attacks the licentiousness of men, she encourages women to possess the “amiable” and “indispensable” virtue of modesty. Wollstonecraft and Macaulay also praise chastity and modesty and call for equality in moral behaviour.

But although both conservative and radical writers celebrate the qualities of modesty and chastity, they greatly differ in their attitude towards fallen women. As would be expected, radical authors are more sympathetic to those who have erred. Thus, for example, Mary Hays asks virtuous women to show humanity and compassion **towards fallen** women and expresses her belief that some of them are capable of returning to the path of rectitude, thus proving “that in some minds nothing can totally extinguish the love of virtue” (1991: 237).

Catherine Macaulay agrees with Hays that a first fault must not necessarily lead to a woman’s destruction and adds that very often a false step becomes “an irretrievable misfortune” (1991: 115), because “they are thrown into a state of desperation, by the venomous rancour of their own sex” (cit. in Wollstonecraft 1993: 226). **She asks** for “benevolence to the frailties of the fair as circumstances invite” (1991: 116) and reminds her readers that the real villains are the seducers and not the seduced. Mary Wollstonecraft also asks for compassion and points out that many girls are “ruined before they know the difference between virtue and vice” (1993: 150), thus emphasising **that** all the causes that degrade women spring from their want of understanding and knowledge.

Conservative writers were not so benevolent towards fallen women. In their aim to support the status quo they heavily criticised anything that could contribute to its destruction. The best representative here is Hannah More who denounces the dangerous messages of many novels and attacks those writers, including *the female Werter*, that is to say, Wollstonecraft, who justify adultery and paint the heroine who has violated the seventh commandment so amiable and benevolent that the reader forgets the horror of the crime she has committed. Most revealing about More’s text is her attitude towards fallen women:

And, while you resolutely persevere in making a stand against the encroachments of this crime, suffer not your firmness to be shaken by that affectation of charity, which is growing into a general substitute for principle. Abuse not so noble a quality as Christian candour, by misemploying it in instances to which it does not apply. Pity the wretched woman you dare not countenance; and bless HIM who has ‘made you to differ’. If unhappily she be your relation or friend, anxiously watch for the period when she shall be deserted by her betrayer; and see if, by your Christian offices, she can be snatched from a perpetuity of vice. But if, through the Divine blessing on your patient endeavours, she

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male ‘virtue’ was moral propriety concealing and defending the material property, social interests, and cultural power of ‘their’ class” (Kelly 1997: 6).

should ever be awakened to remorse, be not anxious to restore the forlorn penitent to that society against whose laws she has so grievously offended; and remember, that her soliciting such a restoration, furnishes but too plain a proof that she is not the penitent your partiality would believe; since penitence is more anxious to make its peace with Heaven than with the world. (1991: 136)

More's attitude towards a fallen woman was shared by many conservative writers, although some of them argued that pity should be shown towards those who had repented of their sins.

If the virtue of chastity was considered sacred, so was the father/daughter bond. Many of the novels published during the period idealize the bond between father and daughter as one of emotional closeness and intensity. But as writers such as Caroline Gonda, Margaret Anne Doody or Eleanor Wikborg have explained, the introduction of the element of love and tenderness in the father/daughter relationship was just another means of reinforcing paternal authority: "In a situation where patriarchal rulers in both the public and the private sphere were confronted by revolutionary beliefs in the rights of the individual, a daughter figure's deeply felt devotion served to allay anxieties over the legitimacy of their power" (Wikborg 2002: 9). Filial love and devotion thus became the new weapons to obtain a daughter's obedience and submission in the new sentimental family. As a matter of fact, many of the conduct books of the age dwelled on the "benefits" of inculcating filial love:

At the same time that the Authority of Parents is to be maintain'd above every other Consideration, Children should be taught to love them to a superlative Degree. This Love in Children to their Parents, will naturally make them fly to them on every Emergence; and thus Obedience will become a Pleasure. (Gonda 1996: 31)

Elizabeth Hamilton was an intelligent and educated woman who was aware of the legal, economic and social constraints that oppressed females. But she also realized that in a reactionary and conservative environment women could not challenge the status quo. In fact, as Rogers has explained, many of the authors that we describe nowadays as anti-feminist, were not so much against change in social institutions as sceptical about the possibility of any reform being introduced: "Therefore, it was surely more kind, as well as more realistic, to prepare women for the position they were destined to occupy... When More argues that girls should not be accustomed to being the center of attention and should learn 'to expect and to endure opposition,' it is not to disparage and humiliate them, but to prepare them for 'a lesson with which the world will not fail to furnish them'" (1982: 245). Hamilton wanted to provide her readers with a more truthful picture of society by showing them that those who, as a contemporary reviewer put it, "dispense with the laws of propriety and decency" (Ty 1998: 4), had to pay a high **price** for it. And to teach her audience this harsh lesson Hamilton uses the character of Julia in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*. Julia has violated two sacred rules of society: she has challenged paternal authority, thus destroying the ideal father/daughter bond, and lost her most precious treasure, her chastity. Because she is essentially virtuous, she is destroyed by her sense of shame, guilt and grief, and finally dies. Although, as some critics have pointed out, this was the inevitable end for seduced maidens in the eighteenth century (Rogers 1977; Staves 1980/1), I believe that it

is precisely in the melodramatic or “preachy”<sup>4</sup> ending of the novel that we find the didactic message Hamilton wanted to give her female readers: there is no forgiveness or hope for those women who transgress a moral or social law. In the following pages I will explore how Hamilton conveys this harsh lesson on life.

In “British Seduced Maidens” Staves explains that the figure of the pathetic seduced maiden fascinated both writers and readers because she embodied precisely those virtues their culture especially prized in a young woman: beauty, simplicity, trustfulness and affectionateness. The seduced maiden is not presented as a lascivious, promiscuous woman who cannot control her desires, but as a young woman deeply in love with her seducer. Julia perfectly fits the profile: she is a young woman of previously fair fame who is persuaded to illicit intercourse. Julia has betrayed her father, who is wholly devoted to her, by eloping with a villain who with his rhetoric has convinced her of the inadequacy of all traditional ties. Julia is debauched and abandoned and eventually finds shelter in the Asylum of the Destitute. Her ruin weakens the health of her father, who dies from pain and grief, and causes her own death from remorse. But instead of dwelling on Julia’s fatal mistake, the narrator of *Memoirs* is more concerned with highlighting the heroine’s virtues and presenting her as a victim rather than a criminal.<sup>5</sup> She is described as charming, fair, lovely, good-natured, tender, grateful, affectionate, possessing a pure and uncorrupted mind. Her natural openness and candour makes her a stranger to any kind of artifice and concealment, and that is why she suffers so much when she has to hide her relation with Vallaton from her father, who obviously disapproves of him. In this sense, the narrator emphasises how in spite of Julia’s clandestine meetings with Vallaton she is essentially modest. Thus, when Julia sees Vallaton **she reacts like** a chaste, virtuous woman:

Mr. Vallaton was the last person to whom she addressed herself; but the blush that overspread her countenance, plainly denoted that he was not the most indifferent to her heart. Mr. Vallaton likewise reddened; but who, so little skilled in physiognomy as not to have perceived, in the different shades of the colour that overspread each countenance, the difference of the sensation by which it was produced? Whilst the pleasure of beholding the object of an innocent affection heightened the glow in the cheek of modesty, and sweetly sparkled in the eye; the passions that flushed the countenance of the deep designer, were evidently of far grosser birth. (2000: 49)<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ty uses this term to refer to the ending of *The Father and Daughter*, by Amelia Opie, which is also about a young woman who elopes with a villain, **but is** essentially virtuous. Like Julia she pays a high prize for the “crime” she has committed (1998: 183).

<sup>5</sup> In *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* Rogers explains how writers such as Opie and Hamilton introduce radical feminist characters who are usually misguided but always virtuous as a means of paying tribute to Wollstonecraft’s essential purity and uprightness, although they believed her theories to be wrong and dangerous (1982). Thaddeus has also emphasised that what is relevant about Julia and marks her off from other heroines of the period is precisely her combination of innocence and thoughtfulness (1995).

<sup>6</sup> In *Fictions of Modesty* Yeazell explains how in the **eighteenth century** there was scarcely a tribute to the modest woman that did not mention blushing: “The modest woman can be recognized by her downcast eyes, her head turned aside, and above all by the blush that suffuses her cheek – an ‘innocent paint’ more attractive than any rouge, and mysterious proof that she has neither done nor thought anything for which she genuinely need blush” (1991: 5).

One of the reasons everybody is shocked by her elopement is precisely because they are aware of how modest, how “far from any forwardness or levity” (268) she is, and would have never expected such a transgression from her.

Julia is presented as dutiful daughter who firmly believes that her first obligation is to her parents, whose main concern has always been her happiness. In fact, she makes the firm decision not to marry Vallaton because her father does not think that he is the right match for her.<sup>7</sup> That is why Vallaton has to “work” really hard in order to convince Julia that “the prejudices of *filial duty*, and *family affection*, *gratitude to benefactors*, and *regard to promises*, are the great barriers to the state of perfect virtue?” (235). Julia’s inner struggle is great and painful and when she finally yields to her seducer’s wishes “she grew sick, and was obliged to have hartshorn and water twice before she could proceed” (269). Her desertion is not described by the narrator as a triumphant moment, but as one of the harshest experiences of her life.

Julia, like the “good girls”<sup>8</sup> of the novel, has a benevolent heart that makes her care for other people’s needs. Thus, when her father sends his servant Quintin to enquire after her health, she is all kindness to him: “Observing how much he had been fatigued, she made him sit down, and ordered him a glass of wine and some biscuit” (206). As a matter of fact, when Captain Delmont dies the servant exclaims that who would have thought that “such a pretty creature as she was, and mild-spoken, and to good to every body, that she should after all go for to break her father’s heart!” (314).

But perhaps the greatest proof of **Julia being** essentially virtuous is the fact that what one of reviewers of the age called the “excellent people” (in Grogan 2000: 410) of the novel, that is to say, Maria, Harriet and Henry, enjoy being with her because they are aware of the strength of her understanding and the goodness of her heart. When they are together, “All was hilarity and ease, cheerfulness and good-humour... Where confidence of mutual good-will and congenial harmony of sentiment influence every breast, and the polish of the manners proceeds from the polish of the mind, the forms of ceremony are as useless as impertinent” (98). Julia’s story is essentially tragic not only because she is seduced and finally dies, but because she is essentially virtuous and her good heart and superior understanding makes her fully aware of the pain she has inflicted on others. As Maria, who respects and loves Julia, exclaims: “But, poor, infatuated girl! what store of misery have you not prepared for yourself? When an awakened conscience tells you what you have inflicted on the authors of your being; when the remembrance of their thousand, thousand, tender offices, their fond anxieties, their never-ceasing cares of love, shall tinge with deeper hue your black ingratitude, how must it sting your soul!” (270-1).

<sup>7</sup> Filial duty was seriously tested on the question of the daughter’s marriage. The “general rule” was that a girl must never marry without the consent of the parents and that parents must never force the child into a marriage she did not like. Captain Delmont illustrates this attitude very well when he says that it “was an affair in which he might advise, but never would dictate” (170). But, as Brophy (1991) has explained, while the first condition of the “general rule” was considered “sacred”, the second one was very often rather liberally interpreted. Since young girls’ experience of the world was very limited, parents thought that they could better judge what was better for them.

<sup>8</sup> Claudia Johnson uses this term ironically to refer to the heroine of the novel, Harriet Orwell, who incarnates perfection (1990: 10).

Hamilton tries to raise her loving Julia in the eyes of the reader not only by comparing her with the “good girls” of the novel, but also by emphasising that her error resulted not from vice or depravity, but from her desire to set “an example of high-souled virtue, which soared above the vulgar prejudices of the world” (369). She really believed that she was pointing out to women “a new and nobler path to glory than the quiet duties of domestic life” (372) and that the loss of her honour was merely a sacrifice to the cause. Hamilton also stresses that her decision was not lightly taken, but was the result of a painful and deep struggle against the values she had been taught: “I struggled to overcome the instinctive repugnance of that delicacy which Nature had implanted, and education cherished, in my breast” (372).

Hamilton attempts to “exonerate” Julia not only by pointing out that she innocently believed that her actions would contribute to making a better world for women, but by showing that Julia’s follies are not her fault, but her parents’, who have not given her the right education. Her mother, a cold and selfish creature, who has never shown any maternal affection for her daughter, has always left Julia’s education to others. Her father, on the other hand, is really devoted to Julia, who soothes his physical pain and **enlivens** his otherwise miserable existence. He is convinced of Julia being of a superior order and thus an exception to his belief that females are intellectually inferior. He allows her to choose the books she wants to read and Julia, being young and full of life, evidently shows a preference for novels and romances, thus becoming an “adept in the art of castle-building” (86). But the narrator stresses that what causes her downfall is not so much her romantic view of life, but the lack of religion in her education, which makes her an easy prey for the new philosophers. In fact, Captain Delmont on his deathbed claims some responsibility for his daughter’s fate, admitting that he, who thought himself superior to prejudices, has just been a dupe to them by eliminating Christian religion from his daughter’s education.

By emphasising throughout the novel that learning and self-improvement must be based on solid religious principles, Hamilton is not minimizing the importance of women’s education. Hamilton believed that if women were trained in the same self-discipline and critical thought essential for professional men they would not only become ideal domestic women<sup>9</sup> but achieve autonomous subjectivity and a degree of social independence. **This** is why both in her novels and non-fiction work Hamilton asks for a greater recognition of women’s worth and a better education for them. Hamilton clearly challenges society’s assumptions about women’s limited intellectual capabilities and defends the intellectual equality of men and women in her very first novel, *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), in which she records the astonishment of the Rajah when he finds out that, according to the Bible, a woman occupies a station of equal dignity in the intelligent creation:

There is one particular so novel; so peculiar; so repugnant to the universally received opinions of mankind that it considerably excited my astonishment. In the revelation bestowed upon the Christians, women are considered in the light of rational beings! free agents! In short, as a moiety of the human species; whose souls are no less precious in

<sup>9</sup> Harriet’s father states it very clearly in the novel: “The light of the mind is necessary for the performance of every duty; and great is the mistake of those who think ignorance the guard of innocence and virtue” (103).



the eye of the Omniscient than that of the proud lords of creation! What can be more extraordinary? (1999: 87)<sup>10</sup>

In *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education* (1801) she insists on the same idea by pointing out that since Providence has made no “manifest distinction between the sexes, by leaving the female soul destitute of the intellectual powers...it is incumbent upon us to consider, by what right we take upon us to despise the gift of God” (2010: 266). As there is no proof that the rational faculties are useless to women, their mental powers should be cultivated so that they can fulfil their duties as mothers, sisters, wives and members of society. In fact, in one of her letters Hamilton acknowledges that one of the things she most valued when she came to England was that “Men of learning addressed themselves to me, as to a being who was actually capable of thinking” and that “both men and women, very superior both in point of situation and abilities, to those with whom I had been accustomed to associate” conversed with her “upon a footing of equality” (Benger 1818: 34-5).

Hamilton’s conviction that intellectually women **are** men’s equals and that education **has** the power to improve **their minds**, explains her vigorous attacks on the instruction girls were receiving in England. With great irony she makes the Rajah Bramin assert that “the system of their southern neighbours, is now, I am well assured, practised with so much success, that the daughter of a *mountain Rajah*, will soon be as amiably frivolous, as engagingly ignorant; as weak in body, and in mind, as the pupil of the greatest Boarding School in London” (1999: 131). In fact, the Rajah Zaarmilla gets very much disappointed when he goes to England, because he expects everyone to follow the Bible to the letter and thus parents to be eager to cultivate their daughters’ understanding. When he arrives, he realizes not only that women have relinquished “so glorious a privilege”, but that Englishmen prefer “the impertinent tattle of the frivolous, the capricious, and the ignorant” (1999: 274-5) to the conversation of a educated woman. Because Hamilton was aware of the disadvantages resulting from a limited cultivation of the mental faculties, she used her educational books to make her readers aware of the necessity of developing women’s understanding through a more serious education than the one they were receiving and that only contributed to keeping them frivolous and intellectually shallow. She believed that in early life the instruction girls and boys received should be the same, rejecting the prevailing idea that women who cultivated their reason would despise the duties of their sex and situation.

Interestingly enough, Hamilton always uses religion to justify the need to make no distinctions between girls and boys. She insists that they are “equally born heirs of immortality” and “equally favoured in the sight of the Most High” (2010: 244) and that our Saviour came to destroy all the barriers which pride and prejudice had placed between the sexes, thus procuring for women a degree of respect never seen before. Unfortunately, Hamilton argues, this idea of sexual superiority which goes against the morality of the Gospel has prevailed and as a consequence feminine virtues such as meekness, gentleness, temperance, chastity, command over passion, willingness to sacrifice every selfish wish to

<sup>10</sup> As Thaddeus has explained, Hamilton was not advocating absolute freedom for women, since she knew very well that this kind of freedom “would undermine women who were still struggling in an unsupportive social context” (1994: 273).

the happiness of other, the cultivation of benevolent and social affections, are considered derogatory to the dignity of male characters. If prejudices disappeared and men were taught to value themselves on no superiority but that of their virtues, “man would become more worthy, and woman more respectable” (2010: 252).

However, Hamilton believes that an education which only cultivates the intellectual powers of children but not their moral ones, is an imperfect one: “we may give our children knowledge, we may give them learning, we may give them accomplishments, but we shall never be able to teach them to apply these acquirements to just or noble purposes” (2010: 261). Unfortunately the cases in which benevolent affections and understanding mingle are very rare, since parents have not yet realized the importance of cultivating in the hearts of their children the feelings of love, gratitude and tenderness. Of course, the road to benevolence is for Hamilton undeviatingly Christian. The judicious parent is the one who will encourage the growth of benevolence in the infant mind and for Hamilton the perfect family is that in which both parents and children have developed the benevolent affections: “If happiness is to be found on earth, we must look for its residence in such a family of love” (1813: 266-7).

It must be stressed that although **there is obviously a religious bias in Hamilton’s theory of education, she insists** that both the intellectual powers and the impulses of the heart must co-operate, since without one or the other all human effort is fruitless.

As some critics have pointed out, Hamilton’s position on women’s education and their role in society was not very dissimilar from that of many liberal thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Catherine Macaulay or Mary Hays (Taylor 2000; Warburton 2001; Perkins 2010). But there are also obvious differences between them. The first one is that **Hamilton’s** feminism was, as Kelly has described it, more religious and domestic (1997: 142-3). Christian principles pervaded her work: she believed that by providing women with the right education society would be true to the religious principles it had abandoned. Secondly, Hamilton welcomed the double standard of morality and chastity which discriminated against women, because she firmly believed that it caused women to behave more virtuously than men. In fact, she goes so far as to say that those women who denounce that offences against morality are not equally judged, “may pique themselves on being the champions of their sex, but they are the enemies of society” (1813: 322). Thirdly, although Hamilton wanted to expand women’s opportunities for self-improvement, she maintained the emphasis on the domestic sphere as the appropriate one for women. In *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education* she already warns the reader that it is not her intention to engage her sex into the subtleties of logic or metaphysics, but “to enable them to discharge, with fidelity and honour, the momentous duties to which Providence has been pleased to call them” (2010: 259). Hamilton absolutely rejected **women** entering public life. It is precisely because they are the basis of domestic and thus public life that women should be better educated. In her *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* she affirms that she was taught that “toward a strict performance of the several duties of life, Ignorance was neither a necessary, nor an useful auxiliary” (1999: 72-3). Hamilton herself tried to achieve this ideal of female excellence –both cultured and domestic– and in her

novels and private letters praises those women who incarnate this perfect blending of mental powers and benevolent affections:<sup>11</sup>

She is a Miss M-, and is, I think, upon the whole, one of the first women, combining, in beautiful union, qualities that but rarely meet. Her fine talents are devoted to benevolent purposes; but her zeal is so tempered by judgment, that her plans for the good of her fellow-creatures, though extensive, are always practicable, and carried into effect by calm perseverance. (Benger 1818: 157)

In *Memoirs* this perfection is incarnated in Harriet, the heroine of the novel, who cultivates her understanding and fulfils her social and domestic duties, whereas Bridgetina and Julia become the instruments through which Hamilton makes her readers aware of the negative consequences of women not being properly educated: “She uses these three young women to articulate contemporary concerns about female capabilities and potential...” (Grogan 2000: 16). Ty, who has given us a positive view of Bridgetina by emphasising that despite the comedy, the melodrama, the foolishness, there is something noble and admirable about her goals, has also argued that Hamilton uses Bridgetina to make the reader aware of the plight of women at that time: “We may laugh at Bridgetina and her various antics, but accompanied by this laughter surely is an awareness of the social and cultural institutions which have placed her in that ludicrous position” (1991: 123). Bridgetina, whom the narrator ironically defines as “the true and proper heroine of this our history” (136), is really the anti-heroine, not only because she lacks the physical qualities of the heroine, but because of her “shallow understanding, and a mind totally occupied by two or three ideas” (71).<sup>12</sup> She lacks the delicacy and good sense of Harriet, refuses to fulfil her filial duties subjecting her mother to a contemptuous treatment, despises domesticity and conventional female behaviour, is completely selfish and self-indulgent, not acknowledging her duties and responsibilities to those close to her, and does not hesitate to openly declare her love for Henry. She spends most of her time reading romances and books on the New Philosophy and while the first fill her mind with unrealistic and fantastic notions of life,<sup>13</sup> the second are beyond her comprehension. She repeats the words of the philosophers like a parrot, because she lacks the critical thinking to analyse and assimilate them. If Bridgetina does not possess the generosity and benevolence of Harriet and her enlightened intellect and is incapable of fulfilling her domestic duties with dignity, it is not because she is an inborn fool or hopelessly selfish, but because she has never received the right moral and intellectual training that would allow her to think for herself. As Mrs. Fielding, an independent, intelligent and generous old **maid** says: “It could not be expected from Miss

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly enough, Kelly has explained that this struggle to become an intellectual, a writer, without risking the loss of femininity, caused in Hamilton, like in many other women, periodic psychosomatic illness and doubts about her intellectual and artistic ability (1997: 193).

<sup>12</sup> Bridgetina is a cruel parody of Mary Hays and, as Grogan has pointed out, the harshness with which Hamilton treats this character seems to go against her Christian avowal of tolerance and openness (19).

<sup>13</sup> Kelly points out that Julia and Bridgetina are quixotic figures because both of them are enthusiastic, but unrealistic and impractical pursuers of visionary ideals. Julia would represent the pathetic Quixote who cures the comic one, Bridgetina, by making her aware of the value of domesticity, tranquillity and respectability (1997: 144-6).

Botherim, that with her limited opportunities of information she should be able to detect the pernicious tendency of the opinions she so unhappily embraced” (326).

Julia, on the other hand, is essentially virtuous –before her fall her behaviour is that of the ideal domestic woman– but makes a fatal mistake because, like Bridgetina, she has not received the right education and lacks the support of religion. As Hamilton says in one of her letters: “Now as I have had occasion...to observe the disadvantages attendant upon the limited cultivation of the mental faculties; as I have seen some sacrificing their happiness, and real respectability, to prejudices which would have vanished before the strength of reason” (Benger 1818: 31). Julia’s intellectual weakness, shared by many eighteenth-century women, makes her an easy prey for Vallaton who admits that one of the reasons why he has become an advocate of the new philosophy is because it is “admirably calculated for gaining proselytes among the young, the unthinking, and the uninformed” (60). From their very first encounter he becomes aware of Julia’s intellectual shortcomings and her tendency to see life in the light of what she has read in **novels**, and decides “to work on the ardent imagination of his fair and unsuspecting pupil” (51). He knows how to manipulate her by appealing to her vanity: she believes that intellectually she is superior to other **women**, when in fact she is just the dupe of her own imagination. Geoffrey Jarvis explains it very well in the letter **preceding the beginning of the novel**:

From the use that is made by Vallaton of some of the opinions promulgated in Mr. Godwin’s Political Justice, it appears to me to have been the intention of your author not to pass an indiscriminate censure on that ingenious, and in many parts admirable, performance, but to expose the dangerous tendency of those parts of his theory which might, by a bad man, be converted into an engine of mischief, and be made the means of ensnaring innocence and virtue. (35-6)

Julia’s essential goodness is also dramatically vindicated at the end of the novel. On the one hand, she plays to perfection the role of the penitent as More and other conservative writers understood it. In fact, her body reveals the suffering she is going through: “her parched and pallid lips” (362), “her languid frame” (362), her “pale face and altered form” (363), her “ghastly smile” (364). Julia also acknowledges her guilt and the need to be punished for her past misconduct, for which she will try to make amends with her future life. She refuses to be removed to Mrs. Fielding’s house<sup>14</sup> because she does not want to contaminate it with her presence: “In retirement, deep retirement, will I bury myself from the notice of the world. Even from you, my kind, my estimable friend – even from you must I hide myself; lest your fair fame should suffer by your deigning to pity such a wretch as I. Oh, I am indeed a wretch!...” (368). Julia knows perfectly well that in her society the dishonour of a woman “attaches not merely to herself alone, but extends to all with whom she is connected” (375). Thus, although Harriet and Mrs. Fielding insist that God is a God of consolation and hope and they really believe in the possibility of Julia being restored to society from future exertion of virtue, she firmly rejects such an option.

<sup>14</sup> Harriet’s insistence to Julia that Mrs. Fielding will be like a mother to her is very interesting because we tend to find female communal conclusions mainly in texts by women, such as *Euphemia*, by Lennox, *The Wrongs of Woman*, by Wollstonecraft, *Julia*, by Williams, or *Adeline Mowbray*, by Opie.

Interestingly enough, although Julia's words provide the reader with a very truthful image of the fate of the fallen woman at the end of the eighteenth century, the fact that the all the "excellent people", that is to say, **the** virtuous middle-class characters are by her side when she most needs them is merely a fantasy, since conduct books of the age advised women not to mix with females whose behaviour was not beyond reproach. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft describes very accurately the terrible predicament of the fallen woman when she affirms that she "cannot avoid feeling the most lively compassion for those unfortunate females who are broken off from society, and by one error torn away from all those affections and relationships that improve the heart and mind" (1993: 150). A more conservative book of the age, *The Evils of Adultery and Prostitution*, that Wollstonecraft herself reviewed, also emphasizes the loneliness of the fallen woman: "The situation of a betrayed and deluded female, is of all others the most to be pitied: despised by her acquaintance and forsaken by her friends,..." (Jones 1997: 207).

But in spite of her friends' good wishes and intentions, Julia dies, because, as Thaddeus has perfectly explained, in "Hamilton's didactic world, if not in her moral world, a seduced woman must be punished" (Thaddeus 1995: 409). The distinction Thaddeus establishes between Hamilton's moral and didactic world is vital to understand the end of the novel. In the introduction to *Memoirs* Grogan affirms that as far as sexual transgressions were concerned Hamilton was more tolerant than West or More and that she wished to restore Julia to society, but, aware of the fact that social pressure **could not** be ignored, accepted that those who disregarded social and legal laws had to be punished to prevent others from making the same mistakes (2000). Hamilton's own opinion on the fate of fallen women was quite clear. In *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* Hamilton is very critical about the lack of sympathy British people show for "these Christian women, being yearly suffered to perish in the streets of their great metropolis, under the accumulated misery of want, disease, and infamy!" (1999: 131-2), who are the victims of the licentious passions of unprincipled men who take advantage of their destitution. In *A Series of Popular Essays* she develops her ideas on seduced women more fully. Hamilton starts by warning of the dangers of partially cultivating benevolent affections: "It singles out a particular description of the vicious as the objects of peculiar sympathy; and, by that sympathy, instead of increasing our abhorrence at vice in general, seeks to veil its enormity, that our disapprobation may in this particular instance be withheld" (1813: 309). Thus a murderer, for instance, instead of becoming an object of pity and compassion on account of the guilt he has contracted, is admired for his gallantry and courage. The same attitude is found in the sentimental woman who shows sympathetic tenderness for the "*amiable unfortunates*". Hamilton believes that this fashionable sentimentality is dangerous since it contributes to "lessening the love of virtue and the abhorrence of vice" (1813: 311). This does not mean that Hamilton did not believe that a woman who had "renounced all those obligations, which, as a Christian, a wife, a mother, a member of society, she was bound to fulfil" (1813: 311) should not be pitied and comforted: "...the vicious are certainly the proper objects of our compassion; nor can a truly benevolent mind consider their unhappy state, without feelings of pity and commiseration" (1813: 308). She insists that pure and active benevolence will relieve the fallen woman from the bondage of sin and guilt, from the passions that have led her to make a fatal mistake and from the false notions and ideas that have made her become

the prey of vice. Sentimental sympathy, on the other hand, will result in a removal of all those restraints that society has imposed on itself, thus breaking the boundaries between vice and virtue and placing the bad and the good upon the same level. Hamilton calls this false sentiment an “*excess of charity*” and warns “that the period is not far distant when the adulteress and chaste matron will be universally received upon equal terms” (1813: 314). Thus Hamilton does not condemn fallen women to eternal fire, but feels for them and considers that it is the duty of all to soothe their pain and relieve them from their terrible circumstances by making them aware of their mistakes. What really worried her was that false sensibility would lead to a degradation of the moral values that prevailed in society and which were so important to her.

But in spite of Hamilton’s benevolent attitude towards fallen women, in spite of Julia being the perfect penitent and not the fallen woman “*without repentance*, in the state of a criminal on whom sentence has been pronounced, but who, though offers of pardon are held forth, spurns the proffered mercy of his offended Judge” (1813: 311), and in spite of Julia being surrounded not by dangerous sentimentalists but by people who incarnate pure and active benevolence, she finally dies. I believe that **Hamilton** wanted to make it clear to her female readers that a woman living in the revolutionary aftermath could take no liberties with her chastity or reputation. Her aim was to teach her audience a hard lesson. Hamilton makes it very clear when she has Julia say: “... Whether the unrelenting laws of society with regard to our sex are founded in injustice or otherwise, is not for me to determine. Happy they who submit without reluctance to their authority!...” (375).

Hamilton’s didactic message is that a momentary yielding to passion or pressure can destroy a woman’s life for ever. As Rogers has explained, chastity was the all-important fact in determining how a woman was valued by others and herself (1982: 9) and this attitude was reinforced at the end of the eighteenth century in both novels and non-fiction texts. Thus, in the same way that in the literature of social reform there was a significant change in the representation of the prostitute, “from the innocent victim of sentimental narrative, the redeemable Magdalen, to the source of contagion which must be locked away from public sight or contact in penitentiaries” (Jones 1997: 203), many of the novels written in the latter half of the century present female characters who are severely punished for their improper sexual behaviour. Very often they are secondary characters but their fictitious fate clearly illustrates the shift in cultural assumptions about women’s sexuality in the course of the eighteenth century (Perry 1992).

Thaddeus has argued that Julia is fictitious, overwrought and unnatural (1995: 410) and that there are **other** women in the novel who find themselves in her same situation but are realistically portrayed. In similar terms expresses herself Ty when she affirms that Hamilton does not allow Julia to become a full subject and thus turns her into the clichéd seduced victim whose only possible end is death (Ty 1993: 27). I disagree with them since I believe that Hamilton uses precisely Julia’s death to teach her female readers what happens to those who do not conform to the ideological construction of women in the eighteenth century. Firstly, it is true that there are other women in the novel who have been through Julia’s experience, but they belong to the lower class and in their case going back to their place in society was easier than for a middle-class woman like Julia, who in the eyes of society was dead and expelled from paradise. Secondly, although it is true that

the description of Julia surrounded by all the “excellent people” on her deathbed may be defined as melodramatic and sentimental, the attitude of one of these virtuous characters, Churchill, towards her responds to the expectations of a society which shows no compassion for a fallen woman. Churchill represents the new feminized man who is ready to curtail the rights with which patriarchy has invested him in order to give the woman he loves some scope for the exercise of her judgment.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the aggressive and authoritarian suitor, Churchill shows the unassertiveness, modesty, meekness, passivity, tenderheartedness and compassion usually associated with women.<sup>16</sup> And because he practises the ‘feminine’ virtues, he is self-sacrificing, generous and sensitive to the needs of others. Thus, although Julia’s elopement deeply affects him, because he is in love with her, instead of dwelling on his cruel fate, he decides to visit her father in order to soothe his pain. And when he realizes that Captain Delmond is desperate because his deteriorated health does not allow him to pursue Vallaton and make him pay for what he has done to his daughter, Churchill comes forward and promises him that he will catch the villain. He proves again to be a sensitive man when Julia talks to him on her deathbed: “To what she said Churchill was too much affected to permit him to make any other reply than by kissing her hand, and bathing it with his tears” (381).<sup>17</sup> We would expect this incarnation of the new feminized man, whose participation in the sufferings of the heroine shows his capacities for empathy with women’s experiences of powerlessness (Wikborg 137), to be more sympathetic to Julia’s fall, especially if we take into consideration that the reason he got attached to her was because of her spiritual and moral worth. Nevertheless, as soon as he hears about her elopement, he expels her from his life. Churchill’s response is absolutely “natural” in an age in which a woman who lost her honour was deprived of the opportunity of getting married. According to conduct books and conventional wisdom the modest woman was made for marriage: a man may flirt with a coquette, but he marries the chaste one. The perfect, virtuous and dutiful “boys”, Churchill and Henry get the perfect, virtuous and dutiful “girls”, Maria and Harriet, respectively. As Julia says before she dies, they all deserve to be happy because of their goodness, whereas she has to be punished for her sins.

Thaddeus has argued that *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* is “a skillful, multilayered, and important novel” (1995: 396) and analysed the multiplicity of voices that can be heard in the text. Ty has also asserted that the reader of *Modern Philosophers* is subjected to a polyphony of voices and experiences (1991) and I think that both critics have given us a very accurate description of the novel. On the one hand, Hamilton wants to share with the reader her concerns about women’s capabilities and potential. She firmly believes that women should be treated as rational creatures and learn to reason and think for themselves, which obviously links her to Jacobin writers such as Wollstonecraft or Hays. In the novel

<sup>15</sup> As Rogers, Forbes, Hoeverler, Wikborg have pointed out, women writers were aware of the fact that the hero they had created was merely a dream, a fantasy: “In many ways, the brother-protector is presented as ‘ideal’ and rather two dimensional compared to the more ‘real’, seductive and dangerous male characters, and to some extent, they can be read as the ultimate fiction of the narrative” (Forbes 1995: 302).

<sup>16</sup> Critics have emphasised how women writers tend to represent the obtrusive or passionate lover as a threat to women’s autonomy and freedom of choice and are, therefore, viewed with suspicion rather than delight (Forbes 1995; Hoeverler 1998; Wikborg 2002).

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly enough, Hoeverler has explained that the best proof that the ideal lover has become a member of what she calls the new benevolent bourgeoisie is his tendency to fall into tears.

Bridgetina boasts of her powers “to reason, to analyze, to demonstrate” (176), but it is obvious that she and Julia lack them and thus are doomed to failure. Although Julia and Bridgetina make great mistakes, Hamilton never blames them for their lack of judgment or intellect, but those who have not given them the right education. Maria Sydney explains it very clearly in the novel when she criticizes Bridgetina’s mother for being a fool incapable of giving her daughter the right instruction:

I am far, you may believe, from justifying a breach of filial duty; but surely the man does great injustice to his children, who gives them a mother so weak, or so ignorant, as to render her despicable in their eyes; not that to a well-regulated mind the weakness of a parent will ever be made the object of contempt; but how should the children of a fool come by the information necessary to point out the line of duty, or to fix the principles of filial piety in the heart? (293)

On the other hand, Hamilton wants to convey her female readers a conservative and didactic message: those who do not conform to the ideological construction of women will be severely punished for it, no matter how pure their intentions or they themselves may be. It is true that not all the middle-class girls who were seduced had to face Julia’s fate – death - but the majority of them had to put up with a still greater ordeal: social ostracism and in many cases prostitution, because of the economic vulnerability of the fallen woman. Hamilton was an intelligent and sensitive woman aware of the limitations that society imposed on her, but sensible enough to know that the best way to help her female readers was not by building castles in the air like Julia does, but by offering them a harsh picture of a woman’s life in the eighteenth century. Unlike Charlotte Smith, who tended to show a tolerant attitude towards fallen women, because her aim was to make her readers aware of how the economic, legal, social codes that enslaved women very often forced them to challenge social conventions, Hamilton believed that *Modern Philosophers* would be more useful to her female readers if she showed them what society expected of them and how this very same society was implacable with those women who **defied** the **established** rules of propriety.

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