The Politics of Seduction in British Fiction of the 1790s: The Female Reader and Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse

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Anna Laetitia Barbauld writes in her introduction to The British Novelists (1810) of “the passionate, the eloquent, the seductive Rousseau ... whose thoughts ... breathe and words ... burn.”¹ In this statement Barbauld responds to two well-established concerns of eighteenth-century English critics and educationalists: first, the danger novels posed for the female reader, and second, the specific dangers of Rousseau because of the limited reading capabilities of women. While educators, critics, and writers disagreed as to why women were poor readers, they concurred that they were eager readers of and dangerously susceptible to the novel. Susceptible because the novel encouraged an escape into an illusory world that foregrounded the female character, her thoughts and predicaments, and generally exaggerated her importance in society.² For these reasons educators attempted to dissuade women from reading novels, which


² For a survey of readings about female capabilities and duties, see James Fordyce, Sermons to Young Women, 2 vols (1766); Vicesimus Knox, Essays, Moral and Literary, 2 vols (1778); Hannah More, Essays on Various Subjects, Principally Designed for Young Ladies (1777) and Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education: With a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent Among Women of Rank and Fortune, 2 vols (1797); and Thomas Gisborne, An Enquiry into the Duties
would distract them from more appropriate activities. Vicesimous Knox complained that “Plays, operas, masquerades, and all other fashionable pleasures have not half so much danger to young people as the reading of these books” and “if the present age is more corrupt than the preceding the great multiplication of Novels has probably contributed to its degeneracy.” John Bennett described novels as “profligate and improper books” which “provide that fatal poison to virtue,” while James Fordyce called novels “an infernal brood of futility and lewdness ... utterly unfit” for the female reader “as they paint ... loose and luscious ... scenes of pleasure and passion altogether improper for [females] to behold, even in the mind’s eye.”

No one novel appears to epitomize the genre’s dangerously seductive character so well as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse. Lettres de Deux Amans, Habitans d’une Petite Ville au Pied des Alpes (1761) with its articulation of female sexuality and desire through Julie’s willing participation in a sexual relationship with her tutor, St Preux. The intimate portrayal of Julie’s living arrangements and affairs of the heart was widely thought inappropriate for the susceptible female reader. Robert Darnton suggests that La Nouvelle Héloïse was an overwhelmingly influential text both for its stylistic features and for its sexual content, since it “transformed the relation between writer and reader, between reader and text.” Rousseau’s description of himself as editor/author in the two prefaces encouraged readers to blur the activities of “Reading, living and loving” to the extent that they imaginatively entered a world Rousseau depicted because it both corresponded to and articulated their own lived experiences of the Female Sex (1797). For a discussion of the seductive qualities of novels, see Devendra P. Varma, The Evergreen Tree of Diabolical Knowledge (Washington: Consortium Press, 1972); Jean Hagstrum, Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Leslie Rabine, Reading the Romantic Heroine: Text, History, Ideology (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985); Nancy Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and G.J. Barker-Benfield, The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

3 Knox, 2:72, 1:68; John Bennett, Letters to a Young Lady, on a Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects: Calculated to Improve the Heart, to Form the Manners, and Enlighten the Understanding, 2 vols (1789), 1:144; Fordyce, 1:149.


experiences and desires. What is clear is that La Nouvelle Héloïse became one of the most influential and widely read works of the eighteenth century. Darnton describes how “the demand for copies outran the supply so badly that booksellers rented it out by the day and even by the hour, charging twelve sous for sixty minutes with one volume” and that “at least seventy editions were published before 1800.” Among its numerous readers were many impressionable females.

Rousseau’s sense of the vulnerability of the female reader is evident in his preface to Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse: “Il doit déplaire aux dévots, aux libertins, aux philosophes: il doit choquer les femmes galantes, et scandaliser les honnêtes femmes.” He notes with regret: “Il faut des spectacles dans les grandes villes, et des Romans aux peuples corrompus. J’ai vû les mœurs de mon temps, et j’ai publié ces lettres.” He comments on the novel’s seductive qualities in his later Confessions: “Les sentiments furent partagés chez les gens de lettres, mais dans le monde il n’y eut qu’un avis, et les femmes surtout s’enivrèrent et du Livre et de l’auteur, au point qu’il y en ait peu, même dans les hauts rangs, dont je n’eusse fait la conquête si je l’avoir entrepris.” Among the corrupt people, he singles out young female readers for particular comment, asserting: “Celle qui, malgré ce titre, en osera lire une seule page, est une fille perdue: mais qu’elle n’impute point sa perte à ce livre; le mal étoit fait d’avance. Puis-qu’elle a commencé, qu’elle acheve de lire: elle n’a plus rien à risquer.” The fault, Rousseau argues, lies not with him but with the reader. This sentiment is reiterated by Fordyce, who exclaims “she who can bear to peruse [novels] must be in her soul a prostitute, let her reputation in life be what it will.” In his ironically contradictory preface he first declares that the work should not be read, but then accepts that everyone, especially young women, will read it. Indeed, Rousseau’s theatrical suggestion that the austere reader be disgusted in the first volume, revile the editor, and throw the book onto the

6 Darnton, p. 228. There are two prefaces to La Nouvelle Héloïse. The second, a dialogue of some ten thousand words, published by Guern in pamphlet form (16 Feb. 1761), presents a conversation with an imaginary critic about the appropriateness of Rousseau’s writing a novel.


9 Peggy Kamuf, Fictions of Desire: Disclosures of Héloïse (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), teases out the implications of the reader’s being incriminated by having read one of the several title-pages before reading the full title or warning.
fire concludes a tantalizing invitation to read on. That certain readers took Rousseau’s warning seriously is evidenced by one Mme De Créqui, a devout Catholic, who on receiving La Nouvelle Héloïse would read no further than the preface until Rousseau could inform her if the work contained more than “l’érudition du coucher” and thus be appropriate for her to read.

That La Nouvelle Héloïse was widely read, published, translated, reviled, and revered is well documented, as is its association with the “intense subjectivity—and passionate sexuality—of the French Revolution.” The influence of Rousseau’s text on the private lives of authors and the way in which it shaped later fiction has been considered by others. Nicola Watson, in Revolution and the Form of the British Novel 1790–1825, uncovers the “dismembering and rearticulating” of the “plot of La Nouvelle Héloïse” to reveal the connection between revolutionary politics and sentimental fiction. Little attention, however, has been paid to the appearance of La Nouvelle Héloïse as a novel within other works of fiction. The intertextual use of La Nouvelle Héloïse in British fiction some thirty years after its original publication reveals different theories of reading.

10 Œuvres complètes, 2:6. This is exactly what Amelia Opie has the mother do in Adeline Mowbray: Mother and Daughter. Ironically the heroine suffers precisely because she was never able to complete her reading and thereby learn that Julie renounces her love for St Preux to become the ideal mother and wife. Curiously, Opie removed all mention of Rousseau from the 1844 edition.


13 Watson p. 40, Watson’s study, given its “principal focus ... on the different narrative structures that evolved to reappropriate or to contain the potentially revolutionary force of the Heloise plot” (p. 16), deals with several of the works discussed in this paper, but from a different perspective. Mine is a reading of the physical appearance rather than the thematic reworkings or influences of La Nouvelle Héloïse.
The incorporation of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in at least fourteen British novels at the turn of the century not only testifies to the continued familiarity and notoriety of Rousseau’s work, but also indicates the importance of this novel in shaping a young female reader’s attitudes towards and expectations about society, family, and female sexuality.14 Developing Watson’s argument that “even the most passing allusion” to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* “might operate as a convenient shorthand for multiple anxieties surrounding females,” I suggest that its actual physical appearance within other works of fiction carries even stronger messages about “female sexuality, national identity, and class mobility.”15

Of these fourteen works (thirteen by women), a sample of four published between 1796 and 1800, by authors who span the political spectrum, illustrates the different ends to which *La Nouvelle Héloïse* could be put. The political implications of the seduction of the female reader by *La Nouvelle Héloïse* took on heightened importance during the French Revolution and ensuing Napoleonic era, as the genre itself was used by writers to agitate for or against a rewriting of social roles, duties, and rights. Jane West, Elizabeth Hamilton, Mary Hays, and Mary Wollstonecraft all warn of the perils of reading *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and yet, like Rousseau in his preface, assume that it will be read. Although these four women strongly disagree with Rousseau’s view that women are inherently corrupt and flawed, they agree that novels, and this one in particular, are capable of prompting specific behaviour in the female reader. Such a view is based upon their beliefs about the female reader’s intellectual capabilities. As in their educational treatises and polemical works, they use their fiction to reaffirm, modify, or challenge received views about a woman’s intellect and her reading capabilities.

During the 1790s writers in the debate about the female intellect fell into three camps. The first and most conservative, to which Jane West subscribed, believed that there was “a different bent of understanding in the sexes,” and, since females were innately intellectually inferior, no amount

14 References to *La Nouvelle Héloïse* appear in the following: Helen Maria Williams, *Julia* (1790); Thomas Holcroft, *Anna St Ives* (1792); Eliza Fenwick, *Secresy* (1795); Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1797); Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1798); Charlotte Smith, *The Young Philosophers* (1798); Jane West, *Tale of the Times* (1799); Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) and *Cottagers of Glenburnie* (1808); Lady Sydney Morgan, *St Clair* (1802); Amelia Opie, *Adeline Mowbray* (1805); Maria Edgeworth, *Leonora* (1806); Mary Brunton, *Self Control* (1811); and Susan Ferrier, *Marriage* (1818).

15 Watson, p. 4.
of education could ever remedy this failing. Because of her inability to control her own responses, the female reader, easily worked upon by the novel and the author, must be carefully regulated as to what she reads. Those of a more liberal bent, such as Elizabeth Hamilton, held the view that females were intellectually capable, but that an inadequate and poorly directed system of education failed to develop their potential, a potential that was domestic in nature: "our sex is doomed to experience the double disadvantage arising from original confirmation of mind, and a defective education." Women are consequently poor readers, apt to muddle fact with fiction, and be too easily distracted from the pressing domestic duties of life. The third and most radical camp, which included Wollstonecraft and Hays, argued that since "there is no sex in the soul or mind" women were the intellectual equals of men. They challenged the established system in a bid to improve the educational possibilities, rights, and economic prospects of women, arguing that women had been systematically kept ignorant and subordinated by social conditioning.

Thus West, Hamilton, Hays, and Wollstonecraft believe that a woman is susceptible to the novel because of her limited reading capabilities, but they differ as to how this weakness should be remedied: by censorship, by guidance, or by knowledge. The four authors concur about the dangerously seductive powers of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, but they differ, according to their own political sympathies, as to why and how it seduces the female reader. They make political comments about the female reader, her critical abilities, her choice of reading material, and her sexuality when discussing, in their own fiction, the novel’s reputation for seduction—a genre, it should be noted, that accommodates four quite distinct writing styles, since West writes an anti-Jacobin tale, Hamilton a political satire, Hays an "autonarration," and Wollstonecraft a mixture of memoir and political polemic. The writers’ political beliefs clearly inform the chosen format and


19 Tilottama Rajan defines autonarration as “a specific form of self-writing ... characterised by its transgressive miscegenation of public and private spaces ... in which writers bring details from their personal lives into their texts, speaking in a voice that is recognizably their own or through a persona whose relation to the biographical author is obvious.” She continues, “autonarration is not autobiography because it is still fiction, but it is not just fiction because of its genesis in the life of a real individual.” See “Autonarration and Genotext in Mary Hays’ *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*,” *Studies in Romanticism* 32 (1993), 160–61.
the manner in which their heroines read *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, how they taste the forbidden fruit, and succumb to what it offers. They apportion blame for the novel's seductive powers to Rousseau, to patriarchal society, or to women themselves. Not surprisingly each writer portrays the seduction differently: as the dangerous abandonment of female propriety leading to adultery, prostitution, and inevitably death; as the unshackling of traditional religious and social customs; as the hitherto unknown expression of female desires; or as an emancipation of the female self. Their use of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in distinct and different ways testifies to the malleability of Rousseau's work (such that, as Edward Duffy notes, "Rousseau the writer becomes less text than pretext"), to the range of the genre, and to the political agenda of each writer.

*La Nouvelle Héloïse* is most commonly used in the fourteen other works of fiction as a catalyst for licentious behaviour on the part of the villain and the heroine—simply put, the reading of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* prompts acts of adultery or fornication. By the end of the eighteenth century, the association of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and sexual licentiousness is the dominant response to Rousseau. As Edmund Burke complained, "Him they study, him they meditate; him they tum over in all the time they can spare from the laborious mischief of the day, or the debauches of the night." Burke laments that Rousseau teaches "a love without gallantry ... of metaphysical speculations, blended with coarsest sensuality."

As a staunch Loyalist and established writer of fiction, Jane West incorporates *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in her *A Tale of the Times* (1799) to affirm her support for establishment sentiments and to illustrate her contempt for all things foreign. She patriotically associates upright, decent, honest, loyal behaviour with the English, and degenerate, licentious, inhumane behaviour with the French in an attempt to protect her female readers from invidious foreign corruption. *A Tale of the Times* is an anti-Jacobin tale written to dissuade the young female reader from sympathizing with either foreigners or foreign sentiments. West depicts a Frenchified villain, Fitzosbourne, who, to gratify his carnal desires, preys upon an English heroine’s innate intellectual inferiority, gullibility, and naïveté. The heroine, Geraldine, a seemingly ideal mother and wife, abandons her husband and children, and causes her father's untimely death when she succumbs to an adulterous affair with Fitzosbourne. He persuades her into believing herself


philosophically adept by seducing her mentally and physically with the intricate complexities of Rousseau’s teachings and New Philosophical ideas. West, like many other anti-Jacobin writers, shows the way in which revolutionary sentiments undermine the established social order (the system of primogeniture, family values, filial affection, and duties). Geraldine’s steady decline into adultery culminates in her reading *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, a text Fitzosbourne has purposely misquoted. That West’s villain can “misquote a well-known passage” indicates the general reader’s familiarity with Rousseau’s work. When Geraldine fetches the volumes and finds in the pages some fictitious love letters between her husband and his mistress, she seals her fate by turning to Fitzosbourne for solace. The appearance of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is emblematic of Geraldine’s precarious state: “its reading is the prelude to sexual fall.” The intimate reading of this sexually explicit book in which the heroine responds to her own sexual needs in defiance of the patriarchal system heralds the character’s fateful slip into adultery. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is for West the obvious place to hide clandestine mail. In a similar vein, West depicts French as the language of deceit when the eloping lovers speak French to confuse the servants.

Thus West uses *La Nouvelle Héloïse* to illustrate the perils of meddling in philosophical, political, and foreign affairs. She argues that the “infidel” Rousseau is the touchstone for such unpatriotic behaviour, since in his “paradoxical and highly dangerous works” he deems virtue compatible with an indulgence of sensual pleasure. Since West believes that hierarchy, paternalism, and female dependence are necessary to the stability of the existing social system, she uses her fiction to coalesce existing and emerging middle-class values for middle-class readers. She clearly indicates the perils of meddling in unfeminine areas or of exhibiting unfeminine intellectual traits.


23 Todd, p. 231.

24 In Susan Ferrier’s *Marriage: A Novel* (1818), ed. H. Foltinek (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), Adelaide’s reading of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* with her cousin Lindore precipitates their adulterous elopement to France: “Goethe and Rousseau were studied, French and German sentiments exchanged till criminal passion was exalted to the purest of all earthly emotions” (I:109). In Charles Lucas, *The Infernal Quixote: A Tale of the Day* (London, 1801), “Miss Emily’s learning was chiefly confined to a knowledge of the French language. Mr. Maruder frequently conversed with her in that tongue—the very language of deceit. Among the many other writings which Maruder recommended and brought for Emily’s perusal, were the celebrated works of Rousseau” (pp. 173–74).

Elizabeth Hamilton, a less xenophobically conservative writer, similarly illustrates the seduction of an unsuspecting and virtuous female by a villain’s use of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) is a political satire on New Philosophical ideas presented by the pseudonymous editor Geoffrey Jarvis, who finds the manuscript half destroyed in his Pater-noster Row lodgings. Hamilton writes a cautionary tale to warn her readers against embracing New Philosophical ideas and automatically rejecting old systems of governance and faith. Her incorporation of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, however, is more complex than West’s, since she uses it to illustrate the perils of muddling fact and fiction and of succumbing to delusions of grandeur. In *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* the heroine’s sheltered upbringing and limited education make her vulnerable to the villain’s foul schemes. The young and beautiful Julia Delmond is receptive to New Philosophical ideas because her father foolishly dotes upon her and openly castigates the established church and its doctrines. Julia—reminiscent of both Rousseau’s Julie and Helen Maria Williams’s Julia—succumbs to the spurious charms of Vallaton, a hairdresser masquerading as an aristocrat. His questionable ancestry highlights a problem of the Revolutionary years—the breakdown of social hierarchy that enabled persons of unknown background to mix with members of higher classes. Revolutionary turmoil makes it initially impolitic and later impossible to ascertain quickly a person’s pedigree. Vallaton is in fact a vagabond who masquerades as a philosopher when he perceives “how much it would be to his advantage.”

Julia’s behaviour is contrasted with that of the exemplary Harriet Orwell and the mock heroine Bridgetina Botherim. Harriet never swerves from the straight path, while Bridgetina succumbs to many of the same temptations that Julia does. Bridgetina, a crude caricature of the Jacobin writer Mary Hays, also embraces New Philosophical ideas, but, according to Hamilton, is saved final disgrace and damnation because of her ugly dwarfish stature and disfiguring squint. As a fellow member of the local sect of New Philosophers, it is Bridgetina who introduces the convalescing Julia to Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Full of revolutionary fervour, Bridgetina exhorts Julia (temporarily away from her parents’ watchful eye) to read the forbidden text:

“O divine Héloïse” (pulling two volumes from her pocket) “thou art the friend, whose sentiments are ever so soothing to the sensibilities of a too tender soul!”

26 Perhaps suggestive of Valmont in Choderlos de Laclos’s *Les Liaisons dangereuses*.

saying she put one volume into the hands of Julia, while she began to devour the contents of the other one herself. (2:98–99)

After reading this volume Julia casts Vallaton as St Preux and herself as Julie—the misunderstood and persecuted lovers. To prevent the reader from sympathizing with such a fantasy, Hamilton has Bridgetina perform the same mental trick. She cuts such a ridiculous figure as a lover, however, that the reader is reminded of the fallacious nature of day-dreaming.

Indeed, it is both Bridgetina’s unquestioning devotion to Rousseau and her unrequited but persistent love for Henry Sydney that provide the novel’s comic content. She rhapsodizes to Julia:

O Heloise! divine incomparable Heloise! how, in perusing thy enrapturing page, have all my latent energies been excited? O Henry Sydney, Henry Sydney, the St. Preux of my affections, how at the mention of thy name has a tide of sweet sensations gushed upon my heart! (2:80)

Bridgetina’s attempt to woo the reluctant Henry with talk of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* meets with little success, since other characters respond less rhapsodically to Rousseau. She exclaims enthusiastically: “I have just been renovating my energies ... by the impressive eloquence of Rousseau. I need not ask whether the sublime virtues of his Eloisa do not enrapture your soul? Was any character ever drawn so natural, so sublime, so truly virtuous? ... Depend upon it the example of Eloisa will prove a model to her sex” (1:190, 193). Henry’s father, the sage Mr Sydney, cuts through such dangerous nonsense with his response: “the example of Eloisa! ... was she not a wanton baggage, who was got with child by her tutor?” (1:194). Bridgetina remains undaunted and, when she receives a letter from Henry, she ecstatically believes their correspondence will immortalize them as did the letters of Héloïse and Abélard, Julie and St Preux: “Our correspondence shall be printed. It shall be published. It shall be called *The Sweet Sensations of Sensibility*, or the *Force of Argument*” (3:108). Both Bridgetina and Julia use *La Nouvelle Héloïse* as a guide to real life. Julia impetuously elopes with Vallaton (again speaking French to confuse the serving girl), only to be abandoned when pregnant and destitute in London. Unlike West’s Geraldine, Julia’s crime is one of fornication rather than adultery. She resurfaces in the Unmarried Mothers’ and Destitutes’ home, a repentant and newborn Christian with just enough time before she dies to convince Bridgetina of the folly of enacting New Philosophical ideas. Unlike West, for whom transgressions of a sexually and hence political nature

28 The proposed title indicates Bridgetina’s indebtedness to Godwin’s theory of Necessitarianism.
are irreversible (the woman must die in ignominy), Hamilton entertains the idea of reintegrating the fallen woman into society. Social pressures, however, prove insurmountable. As Julia herself observes:

Whether the unrelenting laws of society with regard to our sex are founded in justice or otherwise, it is not for me to determine. Happy they who submit without reluctance to their authority! But first to set them at defiance, and then under false pretenses to shrink from the penalty, what is this but to add hypocrisy to presumption—to add an unjustifiable (because deliberate crime) to an error, which perhaps may receive some mitigation on the score of human frailty. (3:320–21)

Hamilton concedes that transgressors must be punished to prevent other individuals from disregarding the law and social custom.

The malleability of Rousseau’s writing to a villain’s needs is also evident in the fiasco Julia orchestrates when she attempts to “reunite” Vallaton with his long-lost parents. Julia’s steady diet of novel-reading prompts her to assume that every foundling is the misplaced offspring of local gentry. The gentry, however, in the form of the worldly-wise General Villiers and his wife, recognize Vallaton for the imposter he is—in fact they recognize him for the hairdresser he once was! Vallaton’s answer to the confused and unsuspecting Julia after their unceremonious expulsion from the Villiers household is yet another appropriation of Rousseau for his own wicked ends:

My dear mother happened to read the *Emilius* of Rousseau, while I was in my fourteenth year, became so enamoured of his system, that she immediately determined to have me initiated into some handicraft employment, that in case of any revolution in fortune, I might be enabled to earn my bread. (1:306)

Hamilton suggests that Julia fails to question such a response because Rousseau’s entire philosophy is so illogical that any inversion of normality becomes acceptable.

Hamilton depicts Rousseau as an unstable and dangerously attractive alternative for women. Although not as extreme as Dr Gregory, who asserts in his *Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* that women are “not troubled with any sexual desires, at least not in this part of the world,”

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

29 Dr Gregory, *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (London, 1774), pp. 46–47.

While Hamilton employs *La Nouvelle Héloïse* as one of several devices to seduce Julia, she...
makes it clear that Julia is ultimately responsible for her own actions. Julia is seduced both by her undisciplined reading of the work and by her desire to be radical. On her deathbed she explains, "it was my own pride, my own vanity, my own presumption, that were the real seducers that undid me" (3:347), since she wished to lead the vanguard of women as they broke the shackles of convention. Hamilton indicates that it is ultimately Julia's lack of Christian faith that leads to her demise. Since undirected intellectual pursuits corrupt a woman's true nature, all mental speculation should occur within a Christian framework: the tediously exemplary Harriet prays "may we ... never suffer ourselves to be seduced from the plain path of piety and peace" (2:397). Hamilton's juxtaposition of the three young women invites the reader to compare the protagonists. The reader's involvement in assessing appropriate and inappropriate behaviour reflects Hamilton's belief that women should learn to think rather than merely to obey.

The most interesting and original use of Rousseau's text occurs in works by the Jacobin writers Mary Hays and Mary Wollstonecraft. Hays in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1797) and Wollstonecraft in her fragment *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1798) illustrate how *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, through its depiction of an ideal lover, prompts the heroine to seduce herself. In these two works the heroines do not confuse fiction and fact so much as they allow fiction to dictate their expectations and direct their actions. *La Nouvelle Héloïse* presents a new way to express female sexuality and portrays an ideal lover for whom the heroines search in their own lives, but with an obvious lack of success.

The *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* is presented as a letter in several parts written by Emma to her adopted son, Augustus Harley, Junior. These letters frame and interrupt her life story. Her autobiography is included ostensively "to operate as a warning, rather than as an example" to Augustus (and the reader) about the excesses of passion. Like West and Hamilton, Hays writes a cautionary tale, but, unlike them, she addresses an intimate and includes considerable personal material. Emma's confiding in her "more than son," Augustus, allows Hays to assume the tone and broach the subject matter of a private correspondence, which is denied the third-person narrative. Emma's first-person narrative incorporates Hays's own love letters to William Frend and her correspondence with William Godwin. This mixing of real letters with fictional representations of her own life, the blending of fact and fiction, is heavily indebted to both *La Nouvelle*.

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Héloïse (from where its epigram is taken) and to Rousseau’s Confessions. Hays’s “autonarration” merges public and private forms of expression to validate her emotions and posit an historically situated self who “consciously raises the question of the relationship between experience and its narrativization.” It is Rousseau as writer and La Nouvelle Héloïse as text which allow Hays to articulate her thoughts and feelings in the Memoirs of Emma Courtney.

The heroine of Hays’s Memoirs of Emma Courtney is raised by her uncle, a novel-loving sailor, and his sentimental wife. They are a disastrous influence on Emma, since she is encouraged to develop an extreme sensibility that cripples her in adult life. Like Rousseau and Mary Hays personally, Emma’s insatiable consumption of novels prompts her to perceive life as a novel. She endows people she meets with the romantic abilities of characters she has read about. When her estranged father, a rationalist, discovers this flaw, he determines that

Your studies, for the future, must be of a soberer nature, or I shall have you mistake my valet for a prince in disguise, my house for a haunted castle, and my rational care for your future welfare for barbarous tyranny. (p. 63)

He attempts to curb her excessive sensibility by making her read methodically his choice of the classics, philosophy, and history. To restrict her access to unsuitable texts, all the library cabinets are locked. After three

31 “The perceptions of persons in retirement are very different from those of people in the great world: their passions, being differently modified, are differently expressed; their imaginations, constantly impressed by the same objects, are more violently affected. The same small number of images continually return, mix with every idea, and create those strange and false notions, so remarkable in people who spend their lives in solitude.” The epigram is an English translation from the Seconde Préface: “Dans la retraite on a d’autres manières de voir et de sentir que dans le commerce du monde; les passions autrement modifiées ont aussi d’autres expressions; l’imagination toujours frappée des mêmes objets, s’en affecte plus vivement. Ce petit nombre d’images revient toujours, se mêle à toutes les idées, et leur donne ce tour bizarre et peu varié qu’on remarque dans les discours des Solitaires” (2:14).

32 Rajan, p. 160.

33 See book 1 of Rousseau’s Confessions: “je ne sais comment j’appris à lire (a); je ne me souviens que de mes premières lectures et de leur effet sur moi: c’est le temps d’où je date sans interruption la conscience de moi-même. Ma mere avait laissé des Romans. Nous nous mimes à les lire après soupe mon pere et moi. Il n’était question d’abord que de m’exercer à la lecture par des livres amusans; mais bientot l’intérêt devint si vif que nous lisions tour à tour sans relâche, et passions les nuits à cette occupation. Nous ne pouvions jamais quitter qu’à la fin du volume. Quelqquesfois mon pere, entendant le matin les hirondelles, disoit tout honteux: allons nous coucher; je suis plus enfant que toi” (Œuvres complètes, 1:8). See The Love Letters of Mary Hays (1779–1780), ed. A.F. Wedd (1925). As Emma says, “my avidity for books daily increased: I subscribed to a circulating library, and frequently read, or rather devoured—little careful in the selection—from ten to fourteen novels in a week” (p. 18).
years, however, she is free to roam the library shelves and is immediately drawn to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Given her propensity for passion, her sense of isolation, and her extreme sensibility, she is quickly seduced by the work. Emma dates her true existence from this reading:

The *Héloïse* of Rousseau fell into my hands.—Ah! with what transport, with what enthusiasm, did I peruse this dangerous, enchanting work!—How shall I paint the sensations that were excited in my mind!—the pleasure I experienced approaches the limits of pain—it was tumult—all the ardour of my character was excited.—Mr. Courtney, one day, surprised me weeping over the sorrows of the tender St. Preux. He hastily snatched the book from my hand, and, carefully collecting the remaining volumes, carried them in silence to his chamber: but the impression made on my mind was never to be effaced—it was even productive of a long chain of consequences that will continue to operate till the day of my death. (p. 25)

Emma is so seduced by the text’s introduction of female sexuality and desire that all her subsequent actions become re-enactments of this text. In her search for the living equivalent of the fictional hero she invests a portrait of a neighbour’s eldest son, Augustus Harley, with St Preux’s qualities. The actual appearance of Augustus does nothing to abate her obsession, and he becomes “the St. Preux, the Emilius, of my sleeping and waking reveries” (p. 59). While restricted to his mother’s home, Augustus appears willing to re-enact the tutor-student relationship of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* with Emma. Once back in London, however, he rejects Emma’s repeated propositions (cerebral and sexual) and falls far short of his fictional role model. In truth, nothing can compete successfully with the partner of Emma’s fantasy, since her reading of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* provides the climax of her life against which all other relationships and sexual encounters are measured. In the ensuing debates with Mr Francis (a representation of William Godwin) and Augustus about the efficacy of her love, she employs Rousseau to defend her actions: “It was in vain I attempted to combat this illusion; my reason was but an auxiliary to my passion” (p. 61). However, while Rousseau enables her to articulate her desires, she takes full responsibility: “He is not to be blamed—I *alone am guilty*—I alone, am the author of my own misfortunes, and should therefore be the only object of my anger and resentment” (p. 150). In so doing she grants women a degree of autonomy in matters of love. Thus it is neither Rousseau nor Augustus who is responsible for the seduction of Emma, but Emma herself.

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34 As in Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1805), her failure to read the subsequent volumes leaves the heroine with a distorted view of the outcome of the lovers’ passion for each other in the face of parental, social, and religious disapproval.
In Mary Wollstonecraft’s posthumously published fragment *Maria: or, the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), we discover yet another use of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. While incarcerated in an insane asylum by her husband, Maria finds solace in writing her memoir, in which the reader learns that Maria deluded herself about her fiancé’s character by projecting her model of ideal sensibility upon him: “My fancy had found a basis to erect its model of perfection on.”35 Rudely awakened to his selfish and callous nature after their marriage, Maria resolves by means of her memoir to educate her abducted infant daughter about such self-delusion, which she knows is exacerbated by women’s lack of “active duties or pursuits” which make it “difficult ... for women to avoid growing romantic” (p. 87). Despite her self-awareness, Maria rereads “Rousseau’s Héloïse” while imprisoned and immediately succumbs to the fictional world it offers. Maria’s subsequent desire and thwarted attempts to view a fellow prisoner, “a gentleman confined in the opposite corner of the gallery” (p. 85), throws her upon *La Nouvelle Héloïse* for solace. She transfers the stranger Darnford’s appearance to St Preux and “donates all of St Preux’s sentiments and feelings, culled to gratify her own” to Darnford. This transformation is consolidated when she reads his marginalia in their shared copy of Rousseau’s work and sees her own sentiments expressed: “Rousseau alone, the true Prometheus of sentiment, possessed the fire of genius necessary to portray the passion, the truth of which goes so directly to the heart” (pp. 89–90).36 In this way, Maria orchestrates her own seduction. She projects the qualities of an ideal lover onto a real man who, like Emma’s Augustus, can only fall short of his fictional model. Both Darnford and Augustus are good lovers in socially isolated and remote situations—the country house, the insane asylum—but intercourse with the world at large destroys the “perfect love.” When reality intrudes in the guise of social pressures, responsibilities, and prejudices about sexual and social roles, the lovers part. Significantly, it is the men who buckle under these pressures while the women tenaciously hold on to the remnants of their idealized love. Their tenacity brings them into conflict with their partners, with society, and with the legal system, and it invariably leads them into financial straits.

There are differences, however, in the use of Rousseau’s work by these Jacobin writers. Hays’s heroine offers herself physically to Augustus in

35 Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria, a Fragment*, ed. Gary Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 135. References are to this edition. Wollstonecraft poignantly has Maria repeat this act of wishful thinking with Darnford: “she ... combined all the qualities of a hero’s mind, and fate presented a statue in which she might enshrine them” (p. 99).

36 Interestingly, Wollstonecraft, in a letter to William Godwin before their marriage encouraging him to read Rousseau, used the term, “Prometheus of sentiment.” See St Clair, p. 169.
the belief that he is single, and is appalled to discover that he is married
and that she has suggested adultery: "Ignorant of his situation, I had been
unconsciously, and perseveringly, exerting myself to seduce the affections
of a husband from his wife. He had made me almost criminal in my
own eyes—he had risquéd, at once, by a disingenuous and cruel reserve,
the virtue and happiness of three beings" (p. 135). This is quite distinct
from Wollstonecraft, whose heroine Maria defiantly commits adultery and
attempts to justify it to the world at large by revealing the hypocrisy of the
married state. In response to her husband George Venables’s commencing
"an action against Darnford for seduction and adultery," Maria “instructed
his counsel to plead guilty to the charge of adultery; but to deny that of
seduction.” As she explains “in a paper ... read in court,” “I voluntarily gave
myself [to Darnford] ... I acted with deliberation” (pp. 192, 194, 195, 197–
98). The judge abhors her defence, stating that “we did not want French
principles in public or private life—and, if women were allowed to plead
their feelings, as an excuse or palliation of infidelity, it was opening a flood-
gate for immorality. What virtuous woman thought of her feelings?” (p.
199).

Rousseau’s La Nouvelle Héloïse is of course precisely the text in which
the woman’s feelings are of central importance and which therefore allows
the reader to identify with the heroine. Indeed, Wollstonecraft’s and Hays’s
impassioned, personal response to La Nouvelle Héloïse echoes an emerging
theory that, for a text to be fully understood and experienced, reading had
to be active rather than passive. This view is espoused by Johann Adam
Bergk in his reading manual Die Kunst Bücher zu Lesen (Jena, 1799),
which exhorts the reader “to relate everything we read to our ‘I,’ reflect
on everything from our personal point of view, and never lose sight of the
consideration that study makes us freer and more independent, and that it
should help us find an outlet for the expression of our heart and mind.”37
As Rousseau notes in letter 12 to Julie, “Peu lire, et beaucoup méditer
nos lectures, ou ce qui est la même chose en causer beaucoup entre nous,
est le moyen de les bien digérer.”38 For the heroines Emma and Maria, as
for Hays and Wollstonecraft, La Nouvelle Héloïse offers an “outlet for the
expression” of their “heart and mind.”

Both heroines become so involved with the work that they invest a
living person with the traits of the fictional St Preux, but the ideal of an
intellectual mentor, emotional equal, and spiritual soul-mate is an illusion,

37 Quoted in Darnton, p. 250.

38 Œuvres complètes, 2:57–58.
restricted to the inanimate world of art and fiction. Thus the danger posed by *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is that it opens women’s eyes up to the ideal lover that reality cannot supply and to an articulation of personal desires that society will not tolerate. For these reasons *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is not so much incorrect as inappropriate in the hostile social climate the heroines face. It is the correct text but the wrong historical moment. As Janet Todd suggests, “The book functions as an intellectual seduction. ... The result in most radical writers is extremely ambiguous, both liberating and, because liberation takes place in the world as it is, destructive.” Thus while *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is a positive text to read, it must be read with circumspection. As Hays admits, “I would never pretend to give a cool judgement” of Rousseau’s works “for such are the graces of his style, that it is scarcely possible to read them dispassionately.” Wollstonecraft is even more ambiguous, as she lambastes him, in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, as a “partial moralist” who “denies woman reason, shuts her out from knowledge, and turns her aside from truth” only to confess in her private correspondence how she was “always half in love with him.” Significantly, the negative consequences of reading *La Nouvelle Héloïse* are still acceptable to Hays and Wollstonecraft because of the brief moment of fulfilment the text offers women. Wollstonecraft argues in *Maria* that even snatches of happiness are worth the preceding and ensuing misery:

> We see what we wish, and make a world of our own—and, though reality may sometimes open a door to misery, yet the moments of happiness procured by the imagination, may, without a paradox, be reckoned among the solid comforts of life. (p. 189)

In the end, fantasy is all a female reader has. Although St Preux and Julie’s love is only a fiction, the work serves to “open a new world,” which, given the prevailing social, economic, and political realities, is “the only one worth inhabiting” (p. 88).

By the early 1800s, Rousseau’s novel was so well known that it could be appropriated, quoted, misquoted, and used iconically by British writers in their own fiction to pass political comment about woman’s intellectual capabilities, her sexuality, and autonomy. While the four works considered here

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40 Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, pp. 84, 25. *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft* (1798), ed. William Godwin, intro. W. Clark Durant (New York: Haskell House, 1969), 1:55. This is similar to Hays, who denounces much of Rousseau’s sentimentalization of women and yet incorporates her personal correspondence with William Godwin (presented in the character of Mr Francis) within her work to mirror the autobiographical style of Rousseau’s *Confessions*.
were published within four years of each other, they present radically different responses to Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. The four writers agree that the female reader needs to be protected from the seductive dangers of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, but disagree as to how this is best achieved—whether through ignorance, through abstinence, or through knowledge. That an anti-Jacobin tale, a political satire, an autonarrative, and a hybrid fictionalized memoir and political polemic can all use *La Nouvelle Héloïse* to illustrate the dangers it poses for female readers testifies to the flexibility of a work that sustains a range of political readings and vindicates the personal response of each author in containing it within her own work.

The irony that a number of later works of fiction used his novel to teach the female reader appropriate behaviour would not have been lost on Rousseau, who wrote to Charles Duclos (19 November 1760): “Je persiste malgré votre Sentiment à croire cette lecture très dangereuse aux filles. Je pense même que Richardson s’est lourdement trompé en voulant les instruire par des Romans. C’est mettre le feu à la maison pour faire jouer les pompes.”41 The recurring appearance of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* attests to the perceptiveness of Rousseau’s prefatory remark “À qui plaira-t-il donc? Peut-être à moi seul; mais à coup sûr il ne plaira médiocrement à personne.”42 As for the reluctant Mme De Créqui, a letter late in 1761 indicates that she, like so many other female readers, found *La Nouvelle Héloïse*’s seductive pull too much and read it from cover to cover!43

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41 Quoted in Cranston, p. 240. This sentiment is also expressed in the Seconde Préface, *Œuvres complètes*, 2:24.


43 Quoted in Cranston, p. 270.