Mary Hays, Novelist and Dreamer (1761-1843)

Magdi Wahba*
M. A. (Hons.) B. Litt. (Oxon.)

Foreword by Nadia El-Kholy**

Magdi Wahba's comprehensive examination of Mary Hays (1761–1843) life and literary legacy offers a compelling gateway into her world – a world marked by personal tumult, radical ideas, and groundbreaking literary endeavors that challenged societal norms of her time. The article highlights Mary Hays as an important but often overlooked figure in 18th-19th century literature and feminism. It emphasizes her role as a novelist, feminist thinker, and self-reflective writer whose works challenged societal norms, gender roles, and moral conventions. The analysis begins by noting the disparagement Hays faced, particularly from Richard Polwhele, whose satirical poem aimed to diminish her intellectual stature. Wahba emphasizes that despite such hostility, Hays remained committed to truth and moral integrity, exemplifying her resilience in a male-dominated literary world.

Wahba's analysis of Hays's major work, The Memoirs of Emma Courtney, *shows how this semi-autobiographical novel is not only about romantic disappointment but also serves as a revolutionary critique of social norms, emphasizing the connection between reason and sensibility. Wahba reveals how Hays used the novel as a vessel for her feminist ideals and philosophical reflections, challenging readers to reconsider notions of morality, love, and societal expectations. Wahba also illuminates the profound influence of Mary Wollstonecraft on Hays's thought, particularly in her early essays and her depiction of female agency. Hays's evolving views are evident in later works like* The Victim of Prejudice, *which focuses on exposing social injustices against women. Wahba emphasizes Hays's moral courage in challenging prejudice and defending virtue, deepening our understanding of her as both a writer and social critic.*

The article also discusses her relationships with notable thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft and William Frend, her literary approach – particularly her use of first-person narration as self-examination – and her bold stance on issues like morality, gender roles, and social injustice. It also includes quotes from contemporary reviews and her own prefaces to demonstrate how her ideas were received and how her work was both revolutionary and controversial for her time. Hays's emphasis on sincerity, self-awareness, and the critique of social prejudices resonates with contemporary feminist and philosophical debates. Her life and works

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** Professor of English Literature and Children's Literature in the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University.

remind us of the importance of intellectual independence, the struggle for women's rights, and the enduring need to challenge societal norms – issues still pertinent today.

In sum, Wahba's article not only situates Mary Hays within her historical and literary context but also celebrates her as a pioneering feminist thinker and novelist whose courage and convictions broke barriers and inspired future generations. Her life exemplifies a relentless pursuit of truth, justice, and intellectual independence – a legacy that Wahba brings vividly to life in these pages. As we delve into Hays's writings, we are reminded of the enduring power of the written word and the indomitable spirit of a woman who dared to dream – and to write – against all odds.

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Richard Polwhele, whose previous attempts at topography and county history had enjoyed a certain measure of success, published a long copiously annotated poem in 1798. It was intended as a satire on the literary pursuits of Mary Wollstonecraft and her disciples. One of these he stigmatised in a line, gratuitously vicious and fundamentally untrue:

"And flippant HAYS assum'd a cynic leer."[1]

Mary Hays was anything but flippant or cynical, as we may gather from her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796).[2] Her purpose in writing this novel was to re-create and, possibly, to "work off" the desperate sentimental adventure of her life. When her first and last lover, John Eccles, died, she wrote to his sister, with all the violence of frustrated love:

> His soul is now beyond the reach of earthly and transitory things; yet in eternity, my Eccles, you promised not to forget me! Look down thou blessed spirit, and compassionate the sufferings of your own afflicted Maria—who now, before God, and his angels, vows to be yours![3]

Strangely and quite involuntarily she was to remain true to her vows all her life. On two occasions at least she sought to replace John Eccles in her heart. The first time, with William Frend, a Unitarian mathematician from

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([1]) (Richards Polwhele): *The Unsex'd Females: a Poem addressed to the Author of The Pursuits of Literature*. London. 1798. p. 16.

([2]) Memoirs / of / Emma Courtney / by Mary Hays. / Quotation (7 lines) from Rousseau / in two volumes / London: / Printed for G.G. and J. Robinson, Pater-/ Noster-Row. / 1796.

([3]) A.F. Wedd: *Love-letters of Mary Hays*, 1779-1780. London, 1925. p. 204.

Cambridge, she succeeded only in causing him acute embarrassment and in writing down the sad and idealized record of her unrequited love in the *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. The second time, for she had not learned her self-imposed lesson, with Charles Lloyd she exposed herself to ridicule and mockery.[1]

Before writing the *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, Mary Hays had already acquired some literary reputation with the publication under the pseudonym of 'Eusebia' of a pamphlet addressed to Gilbert Wakefield and entitled *Cursory Remarks on an Enquiry into the Expediency and Propriety of Public or Social Worship* (1792). This little pamphlet was well received by the press. The *English Review* referred to it as an "elegant and polite little performance."[2] William Frend, who was yet unknown to her wrote a long letter from Cambridge in which he remarked: "We seem to agree together nearly in our creed."[3] She also received an encouraging letter from Mary Wollstonecraft, who gave measured praise to "your sensible, little pamphlet."[4] In William Frend, Mary Hays imagined a successor to John Eccles. But in Mary Woolstonecraft she found the true inspirer of her feminism and her political ideals. This influence soon became apparent in Mary Hays's next publication, the *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793). There is already a revolutionary ring in his warning to women that

> like monarchs, we have been flattered into imbecility, by those who wish to take advantage of our weakness... Remember, you are born for immortality (not merely for the solace of man, but for those regions where there will be neither marrying, nor giving in marriage;)[5] and that you must give an account of the talents committed to your charge![6]

([1]) Writing about Edmund Oliver, Miss Tompkins suggests that "Miss Hays's share in Lady Gertrude has not, I think, been hitherto noticed…" (in an essay entitled "Mary Hays, Philosophess" in *The Polite Marriage*, Cambridge 1938, p. 176). Yet H. Crabb Robinson says explicitly in his *Diary* (*Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and Their Writers*, ed. by Edith J. Morley, London 1938, vol. 1, p. 5 (1799)) that Dr. Reid, "who delighted in sarcasm, and had quarrelled with Charles Lloyd, resented Lloyd's satirical attack on Miss Hays in his *Edmund Oliver* by a very bitter review in the *Analytical Review*."

([2]) *The English Review*, June 1792, vol. XIX, p. 475.

([3]) A.F. Wedd: *The Love-Letters of Mary Hays*, London, 1925, p. 220.

([4]) Ibid. p. 224.

([5]) Incidentally, this Scriptural phrase is also mentioned in the last page of *Mary, A. Fiction* (1788) by Mary Wollstonecraft.

([6]) Mary Hays: *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous*. London, 1793, pp. 92-93

The Memoirs of Emma Courtney were conceived as a curious mixture of an uncompromising feminism and the rage of unrequited love. The result was certainly something out of the ordinary, something for which one cannot find a parallel until, twenty years later, in Lady Caroline Lamb's *Glenarvon*. Crabb Robinson says that it attracted attention as a 'novel of passion,' but this description is not entirely apt, for it does not imply all the philosophical argument (sic) which implemented the 'passion.' Novels of 'passion' existed in large numbers, in which the ideal was a triumph of Sensibility. Here, 'Reason' was yoked with 'Sensibility' and both were crushed by the incomprehensible cruelty of fate. It was, finally, a record of defeat on all fronts, for the failure of Emma Courtney to arouse the love of Augustus Harley was not only a sentimental failure, but also (and this was, in a sense, more tragic) a failure of logical persuasion. This was definitely something new in novel-writing. The *Monthly Review* asserted that: "These memoirs rise above the class of vulgar novels";[1] and Southey writing to Joseph Cottle said:

> She has lately published a novel, 'Emma Courtney', a book much praised and much abused. I have not seen it myself, but the severe censure passed on it by persons of narrow mind, have made me curious, and convinced me that it is at least an uncommon book.[2]

The morality of this novel was questioned in a retrospective review written by Dr. Bisset[3] in the *Anti-Jacobin Review* for May, 1799. The tone of this review was both discourteous and unfair and the final sneer: "To your distaff, Mary" constituted no real accusation of immorality. The more liberal *Monthly Review*, reviewing *Emma Courtney* much earlier, recognised that

> the authoress informs us that her production is constructed to operate rather as '*warning* than *example*' and thus to rivet the fetters of the established system of conduct.[4]

Yet the most curious testimony to the morality of this novel is to be found in the fact that Madame Guizot (1773-1827), a very respectable French writer on

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([1]) *Monthly Review*, April 1797, p. 443.
([2]) Joseph Cottle: *Reminiscences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey*. London, 1847, p. 203.
([3]) Identified by a previous owner of the interleaved copy in the British Museum (P.P. 3596).
([4]) *Monthly Review*, April 1797, p. 443.

education, undertook to translate it soon after its publication in England. The result was *La Chapelle d'Ayton, ou Emma Courtney*, imité de l'anglais de Marie Hays. (5 vols. in-12, 1799) par Mademoiselle Elisabeth Charlotte Pauline de Meulan, dame Guizot. I have not been able to see a copy of this novel, but it seems that Mary Hays proved too heretical for her translator:

> Mademoiselle de Meulan s'étant mise à traduire ce roman, se laissa bientôt aller à le refaire sur un fond presque entièrement neuf et à le continuer pour son compte et à sa guise.(1)

The best apology for her moral principles, however, is to be found in Mary Hays's own Preface to *Emma Courtney*.

Her purpose was first to speak a language of complete and uncompromising sincerity:

> Innumerable mistakes have been made, both moral and philosophical: – while covered with a sacred and mysterious veil, how are they to be detected.(2)

On the basis of this sincerity she wanted to examine her own conduct as represented in Emma Courtney's, and to describe her heroine's character (no doubt, also her own) with all its imperfections, but also, with all its virtues:

> I meant to represent her, as a human being, loving virtue while enslaved by passion, liable to the mistakes and weaknesses of our fragile nature... The philosopher – who is not ignorant, that light and shade are more powerfully contrasted in minds rising above the common level; that as rank weeds take strong root in a fertile soil, vigorous powers not unfrequently produce fatal mistakes and pernicious exertions; that character is the produce of a lively and constant affection – may, possibly, discover in these Memoirs traces of reflection, and of some attention to the phaenomena of the human mind.(3)

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(1) P.A.E. Girault de Saint-Fargeau: *Revue des Romans*. Paris. 1839. tom. I. p. 320. This adaptation of *Emma Courtney*, as far as I have been able to discover, has not been remarked upon outside the pages of Saint-Fargeau.
(2) *Emma Courtney*, Preface. pp. 6-7.
(3) *Emma Courtney*, Preface. pp. 8-9.

She made it clear at the outset that she was mainly interested in Emma Courtney. It was her character alone which she endeavoured to make plausible and alive. "For the conduct of my hero, I consider myself less responsible—it was not *his* memoirs that I professed to write."[1] Consequently more than in any other novel of the period narrated in the first person, the other characters are only shadows. For most novelists the narrative in the first person was merely a literary device; here it is a serious method of self-analysis. Mary Hays wrote this novel in the belief that she was judging herself, but also, no doubt, that she might cure the sickness of her heart.

Consequently, this novel has no clearly defined villain. All the evil which Mary Hays contemplates goes on in Emma Courtney's mind. The nearest approach to a villain, however, can be found in Mr. Montague, who becomes Emma's husband towards the end of the novel. Yet the all too rapid sequence in which he passes from jealousy to unfaithfulness, to infanticide and finally to suicide, seems to have been added as an afterthought. Mrs. Wollstonecraft felt her sympathy cease at this place[2] and "Mrs. Robinson, also a novelist, declared that her husband should have been suffered to die a natural death."[3]

The portrait of Mr. Montague given at the beginning of the novel shows features which in some respect resemble Emma's own character:

> This young man was bold, ardent, romantic, and enterprising, but blown about by every gust of passion, he appeared each succeeding moment a different character: with a glowing and rapid imagination, he had never given himself time to reason, to compare, to acquire principles: following the bent of a raised, yet capricious fancy, he was ever in pursuit of meteors, that dissolved at his approach.[4]

Is this not precisely Emma's own weakness? Augustus Harley is certainly a kind of phantom that dissolves at her approach. Yet Emma's passionate temperament goes even further: "enslaved to passion," it would enslave the very precepts of philosophy:

([1]) *Emma Courtney*, Preface. p. 10.

([2]) See letter from Mary Wollstonecraft to Mary Hays reproduced in A.F. Wedd: *The Love-Letters of Mary Hays*, London. 1925. pp. 240-241

([3]) J.M.S. Tompkins: *The Polite Marriage*, Cambridge. 1938 (Essay entitled "Mary Hays, Philosophess," p. 170).

([4]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. I. pp. 66-97.

> "Philosophy, it is said, should regulate the feelings," she writes to Augustus Harley, "but it has added fervour to mine! What are passions, but another name for powers? The mind capable of receiving the most forcible impressions is the sublimely improveable mind!"[1]

As a Godwinite she could draw on morality to justify her mad pursuit of Augustus Harley. Social utility being the only criterium of morals, there was no logical reason why Augustus Harley should resist her advances. She felt and knew that their union would promote "social utility." "From such an union," she writes,

> I conceive mutual advantages, would result...Now then, can I believe it compatible with the nature of the mind, that so many strong efforts, and reiterated impressions, can have produced no effect upon yours? Is your heart constituted differently from every other human heart?[2]

What puzzled Emma was that "social utility" and "happiness" (for Mr. Francis had taught her that "*happiness* is, surely, the only desirable end of existence"[3]) should not of themselves constitute a justification and a motive for love. Yet all this was only a feeble rationalisation of what after all was no more and no less than a hopeless sentimental frustration. Emma realised that the evil effects of her conduct stemmed from a "confused system of morals," but the tragedy lay in the fact that the confusion was not merely one of ideas, but rather one between ideas and feelings.

It would be unfair, however, to lay the burden of moral responsibility entirely on Emma's shoulders. Her friend and counsellor, Mr. Francis (alias Godwin), has clearly contributed to the formation of her ideas about conduct. In a series of letters to her, he causes her to question every accepted principle of conduct that might have bridled the passionate yearnings of her heart. It is Mr. Francis who urges her to reject the bonds of a rigid and absolute system of morals which she might have found in religion. Appealing to him for advice she writes a little incoherently:

([1]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. I. p. 170.
([2]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. II. p. 63.
([3]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. I. p. 168.

> I would see virtue exemplified. I would love it in my fellow creatures—I would catch the glorious enthusiasm, and rise from created to uncreated excellence.
>
> I am perplexed with doubts; relieve the wanderings of my mind...[1]

Then comes the fatal answer cast in vigorous language and enlivened just a little with the spice of paradox:

> That immutability, which constitutes the perfections of what we (from poverty of language) term the *divine mind*, would inevitably be the bane of creatures liable to error; it is of the constancy, rather than of the fickleness of human beings that we have reason to complain.[2]

He proposes that she should assume that most dangerous martyrdom, the martyrdom for an intellectual system:

> Let us remember, that vice originates in the mistakes of the understanding, and that, he who seeks happiness by means contradictory and destructive *is emphatically the sinner*. Our duties, then, are obvious...if selfish and violent passions have been generated by the inequalities of society, we must labour to counteract them, by endeavouring to combat prejudice, to expand the mind, to give comprehensive views, to teach mankind their true interest, and to lead them to habits of goodness and greatness. Every prejudice conquered, every mistake rectified, every individual improved, is an advance upon the great scale of virtue and happiness.[3]

Emma is only too prepared to listen to this kind of harangue, but, what is more dangerous, she twists these generalities to suit her own specific purposes. This is the beginning of her "confused system of morals;" human society becomes one man, Augustus Harley; and salvation and love will become one in her tortured mind. "A clumsy forerunner of the Shavian huntress woman," remarks Miss Tompkins,

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([1]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. I. p. 88.
([2]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. I. p. 91.
([3]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. I. pp. 94-95.

> humourless, charmless, and too raw and unhappy to be really formidable, she made her attack not in the name of a mystical Life-Force, but of general utility.[1]

Mr. Francis is not entirely to blame for Emma's conduct, for, like anyone else, she must ultimately carry the full burden of her own responsibility. Emma, one is tempted to believe, would have constructed her own system of moral sanctions even if Mr. Francis had not suggested one to her. The *Memoirs* were written as an avowed confession of error. "What is virtue," asks Emma, "but a calculation of the *consequences of our actions?*"[2] and the record of her sentimental pursuit is surely the record of a gross miscalculation of such consequences. And yet, this is a brave confession, almost a perfect self-imposed lesson in humility, but, not quite, for Emma was not brave enough to face the complete emotional indifference of her quarry. "In these last moments," he murmurs on his death-bed

> —when every earthly tie is dissolving—when human institutions fade before my sight. —I may, without a crime, tell you—*that I have loved you*....[3]

This, unfortunately, is not what William Frend would have said in similar circumstances. In a book filled with quotations from Helvetius and Holcroft,[4] it is a sad thought that she should feel: "Mine, I believe, is a solitary madness in the eighteenth century."[5]

Finally, however, there is something rather moving in the way Emma clings to religious belief despite Mr. Francis's indoctrination. Earlier on in her adolescence she went for a walk in the country at daybreak, and her heart swelled with devotion to the "Author of nature" whose Presence was revealed in the beauty around her. There and then she decided that

> after having bewildered ourselves amid systems and theories, religion in such situations, returns to the susceptible mind as a *sentiment* rather than a principle.[6]

([1]) J.M.S. Tompkins: *The Polite Marriage*, Cambridge. 1938. p. 171.
([2]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. II. p. 91.
([3]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. II. p. 182.
([4]) Throughout this novel, Mary Hays quotes copiously from Rousseau, from Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, and *Political Justice*, from Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives*, and from Helvetius.
([5]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. II. p. 107.
([6]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. II. p. 76.

Right up to the end, except for one brief moment of doubt,[1] nothing could shake her simple and spontaneous faith in the existence of "that Being," of "our Author," Who is God.

Mary Hays's career as a novelist was soon to approach its end in literary barrenness. Her next novel, *The Victim of Prejudice*[2], was published in 1799. Here, autobiography is abandoned, and Mary Hays draws on her ideas rather than on her life for the construction of her novel. The *Anti-Jacobin Review*[3] condemned it together with Mary Hays's previous attempt as immoral and extravagant, mainly, it seems, because of her assertion that "individuality of affection constitutes chastity." Yet her anonymous translator recommends this work as eminently fit to be placed in the hands of young ladies standing on the threshold of "life." He feels that

> Ce charmant ouvrage m'a paru d'autant plus utile, que dans un temps où toute idée morale semble être anéantie, l'auteur offre, pour ainsi dire à chaque page, des leçons de sagesse et de vertus sociales.[4]

The heroine of this novel, Mary, is, like Emma, a creature of exquisite sensibility, but unlike Emma, her conflict is with society as a whole rather than with a few people. The influence of Mary Wollstonecraft could be partly felt in *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney*; here we have a novel which is written clearly as an illustration of early feminist ideas. Emma had courted "moral martyrdom" but Mary is the 'Victim of Prejudice' whose martyrdom is inflicted upon her from the outside, by virtue of the mere existence of certain social laws. An involuntary lapse from chastity puts her at the mercy of a cruel society, subjects her to the persecution of an exaggeratedly wicked villain, and finally brings her to an early death. Here we have not a record of "the pangs of contemned love;"[5] but a sad tale of the martyrdom of Woman. Mary has done nothing to deserve this persecution, yet her innocence is no protection,

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([1]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. II. p. 94.

([2]) I have had to rely on a French translation of this novel, now in the British Museum (12808, p. 4): La Victime / du / Préjugé / par Mary HAYS, auteur des Mémoires — d'Emma Courtney. / imprimé à Londres en 1799, / et traduit de l'anglais, la même année / par ***. A Paris, / Chez Lenormand, Libraire, / passage / Saint-Germain - l'Auxerrois; / Et chez les Marchands de Nouveautés.

([3]) *Anti-Jacobin Review*, May, 1799.

([4]) *La Victime du Préjugé*, vol. I, p. vii.

([5]) *Emma Courtney*, vol. II, p. 218.

for 'Prejudice' is implacable and the last words of the novel are a message of gloomy pessimism:

> L'édifice de la superstition et du crime étendant au loin sa base, insulte aux travaux de l'homme qui ne s'occupe que de vains projets.[1]

This novel contains a villain of the most conventionally Gothic kind. Sir Peter Osborn, Bart, is an almost grotesquely wicked young aristocrat. He is shown to us complete with castle, whip, frown, and all. At the end of the novel he disappears prudently out of the back door of an inn and we never see him again. He has been the sinister instrument of Mary's perdition, arrogant, heartless and absurdly terrifying. Seduction is an everyday occurrence in his life, associated with the pleasures of the chase, rather than with the blindness of sensuality. This lascivious baronet is only partly the villain in *The Victim of Prejudice*. Here the true villain is society, a society dominated by wicked laws and by wicked men. The predominant 'maleness' of society is, one feels, the true villain.

After *The Victim of Prejudice*, Mary Hays wrote very little of any literary importance. In 1803 she published six volumes of tabloid lives entitled *Female Biography* [2], in which Mary Wollstonecraft was significantly overlooked. In the Preface to this work, however, we can still find signs of her old feminist fervour.

> "I have at heart," she writes, "the happiness of my sex, and their advancement in the grand scale of rational and social existence. I perceive with mingled concern and indignation, the follies and vices by which they suffer themselves to be degraded."[3]

The "concern and indignation" were not to last very much longer. A letter from Southey in May 1803 shows that she had asked him to suggest subjects for a novel. His advice was that she should write an exotic story based on travel books. She never took his advice, and we next hear of her writing *Harry Clinton; a Tale of Youth* (1804), which is a paraphrase of Brook's *Fool of Quality*. She followed this up with three volumes of *Historical Dialogues for Young Persons* (1808). Among her last publications were two short tracts

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([1]) *La Victime du Préjugé*, vol. II, p. 168.

([2])Mary Hays: *Female Biography: or Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women, of all ages and countries*. Alphabetically arranged, in six volumes, London. 1803.

([3]) *Female Biography*. vol. I. p. iv.

written in the form of dialogues, called *The Brothers; or Consequences: A Story of What Happens Everyday* (1815)[1] and *Family Annals; or the Sisters* (1818). These were written to recommend The Bristol Prudent Man's Friend Society to "that most useful Part of the Community, the Labouring Poor."

Her last book, *The Memoirs of Queens Illustrious and Celebrated* (1821), shows faint signs of undying feminist fervour. In fact, however, she had written herself out. Mary Wollstonecraft had been dead for very long, and, to quote Miss Tompkins, "the fringe of Hannah More's mantle seems to have touched her."[2] Mary Hays was content to spend the rest of her long life (she died at the age of eighty-two) "in retirement, an highly respected character."[3] At the time of her death, Crabb Robinson[4] assures us, she was "a very worthy woman."

[1] I have not been able to find an edition of this tract earlier than the one printed in Dublin in 1820.

[2] J.M.S. Tompkins: *The Polite Marriage*, Cambridge. 1938, p. 187.

[3] Letter from Henry Crabb Robinson to William Pattison, dated 22nd December 1805 and reproduced in *H. Crabb Robinson on books and their writers*, ed. by Edith J. Morley, London. 1938. vol. III. p. 843.

[4] H. Crabb Robinson: *Diary*, February 21st 1843.