

## Reconciling Empowerment and Submission: Female Agency and Desire in Hannah More's *A Search After Happiness*

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### Abstract:

*Hannah More's conservatism is the principal trait that characterizes her work. Her writing is embedded with didactic elements that appear to serve the function of enlightening the audience and instructing them into the path of virtue. In her Juvenilia work A Search After Happiness, a moral tone is clearly present and the reader encounters four women who need to readjust their urges if they wish to turn these into traits that their society will accept. However, in spite of such a traditional configuration, More's play is embedded with ambiguity and paradoxes that seem to go beyond the prototypical expectations with respect to female desire. In the play, the degree of female agency that is found is considerable, and we observe that the text constitutes a first step towards a wish to expand the limits of female experience in order to make it much more inclusive. This paper offers a close reading of Hannah More's pastoral drama in order to show that the four protagonists of the play are allowed a considerable amount of self-determination. I will argue that the four women's acknowledgment of their unruly desires reflects a need to redirect those urges and turn them into traits that, while conforming to societal demands, still allow a significant amount of self-determination.*

**Key words:** morality, didacticism, submission, empowerment, agency, self-determination, female desire, disorderly desires.

Hannah More is a tremendously influential literary figure who is mostly known for her conservatism, evident in most of her

works, especially in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) and the series *Cheap Repository Tracts*. (1795-7). In her writing, there is a clear didactic purpose in which morality and religion play a fundamental part. A fervent Evangelical<sup>1</sup>, she was a firm believer in meliorism and often took the role of the educator who set out to influence the masses through her writing; this she did with an apparent traditional and conservative stance. Therefore, her work is often analyzed in direct contrast with that of some of her much more revolutionary contemporaries, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, whose *Vindication to the Rights of Woman*, appears to be in conflict with Hannah More's cautious and moderate discourse<sup>2</sup>.

Hannah More's emphasis on the didactic dimension of literature can be traced back to her juvenilia work, the pastoral play *A Search After Happiness* (1762, hereafter ASAH)<sup>3</sup>, which serves a double purpose, since "not only does the play inaugurate More's career but it also signals her major preoccupations" (Demers 1996:27). One of these preoccupations was the role of women in society and, particularly, the need to readjust women's disorderly desires, as they had the potential to pose a threat to propriety and even to society at large. Female desires needed to be monitored so as to ensure that

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<sup>1</sup> As Kowalesky-Wallace observes: "if, under the guise of Evangelicalism women like More were allowed to assume an important social and political position as 'maternal agents', as their empowerment was ultimately limited by a discourse insisting upon cultural stereotypes for female behaviour" (1991:57).

<sup>2</sup> As Demers notes: "Feminist criticism has been understandably and rightly severe about More's dedication to the doctrine of the two spheres and her solemn discourses on submission. In contrast to the revolutionary women novelists (Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Helen Maria Williams, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Charlotte Smith), More is the touchstone of conservatism" (1996:21).

<sup>3</sup> More's pastoral drama went through thirteen editions. Throughout these editions, More modified certain elements of her work, but what is noteworthy is the constancy and devotion she showed, as she never abandoned her play and continued to work on it during a considerable amount of time. It is worth noting that More's pastoral drama lacked a critical edition, until recently, when together with fellow researchers I undertook to produce such a critical edition of the play so as to critically delve into More's juvenilia writing.

they illustrated “a specific configuration of sexual features as those of the only appropriate women for men at all levels of society would want as a wife” (Armstrong 1987:59).

At the time when Hannah More wrote her juvenilia play, the mid-eighteenth century, there was a marked insistence on the need to regulate the passions in order to make them acceptable at the eyes of society<sup>4</sup>. This fixation is very much present in *ASAH*, which shows the process that four women undergo in order to regulate their desires in a way that allows Hannah More to “function as a dramatic and spiritual mother, choreographing a quest and indicating its full extent” (Demers 1996:35). To this end, More’s conservative stance was palpable, as she “similarly balanced conventional snobbery and moral reform” (Ford 1996:7). Didacticism was a crucial aspect of her play, indeed, one of its main tenets.

Yet such traditional doctrine fails to epitomize the play’s intricacy. In this discussion I want to suggest that, in spite of her conservatism, Hannah More’s *Juvenilia* work goes beyond traditional configurations concerning the nature of female desire and leaves room for a certain amount of female agency within women’s submissive state. Thus I will argue that the four ladies’ women’s acknowledgment of their unruly desires reflects a need to find ways to redirect those urges and to turn them into traits that, while conforming to demands, still allow a considerable amount of self-determination.

In More’s pastoral drama *ASAH*, the reader encounters four women: Euphelia, Florissa/Cleora<sup>5</sup>, Pastorella and Laurinda. In the play Hannah More “employs the familiar didactic trope of a frustrating search for happiness” (Ford 1996:8). The four women embark on a journey, an experience

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<sup>4</sup> This insistence was aimed at making sure that desire exemplify illustrated “a specific configuration of sexual features as those of the only appropriate women for men at all levels of society to want as a wife” (Armstrong 1987:59).

<sup>5</sup> In an attempt to prevent confusion, due to the presence of similar-sounding names, in subsequent editions More decided to change the name Florissa to Cleora.

that will change their lives forever. Their quest for happiness is determined by their intense longing to get rid of those aspects that deviate them from the path of virtue. This wish to modify those aspects that prevent them from achieving the bliss they desire is precisely what unites these four women, what brings them together in their common crusade. As Demers points out, "More's pastoral interlude reflects a knowledge of real girls and their delusions, the kind of experimental shifting Richardson rewarded Pamela recommended" (1996:30).

In order to ascertain the path of virtue, the four women need to relinquish the unruly urges that prevent them from achieving a virtuous state: "To learn this truth, we've bid a long adieu/To all the shadows blinded men pursue" (5/11). This realization is crucial, as it puts forward a personal motivation to liberate themselves from those shadows that do not permit them to see clearly. They feel in their very souls that they need to change certain aspects, and it is their decision, not their society's, to attempt to bring forward that change.

To materialize their transformation, the first step they need to take is to undergo a profound self-exploration in order to detect which are the faults they need to eradicate. The four women separately undertake the task to become aware of their foibles; they each dig into their very essence and acknowledge their flaws.

Euphelia's foible is her vanity; she wishes to be admired: "No sounds but flattery ever sooth'd my ear (dialogue II 12/18). She realizes that she has always given too much importance to externals, to her outer appearance, and not enough to what is really significant: the state of her soul. She learns that her inner appearance is what really matters; true beauty resides underneath what can be seen outwardly.

Florissa/Cleora's fault has to do with her desire to attain fame, to be recognized and praised: "The idol fame my bossom robb'd of rest, / Too small a mansion for so great a guest" (dialogue II 15/21). Her desire mirrors that of Euphelia. Both

women seek other's appraisal and must learn that their contentment should be based on internal, spiritual elements and not on external, cultural ones.

Pastorella's desire has to do with a preoccupation that was very present at the time More wrote her play: the danger of novels and, specifically, its potential disruptiveness over female – and thus presumably more easily influenced – readers. Her discourse on romances perfectly exemplifies this threat that novels were supposed to pose on women:

Folly within my heart empire found,  
My passions floating and my judgment drown'd;  
Reason perverted, fancy on her throwne,  
(My soul to all my sexes softness prone;) (dialogue II 16/22)

The conflict between passion and reason is highlighted by Pastorella's words. She claims that her reason had evidently been perverted by the passions that reading novels excited on her. She found herself drowning, embedded with passionate, intense feelings that made her susceptible to the kind of extreme emotions that women were urged against. In addition, Pastorella's speech on the supposed dangers of novel reading can be linked to the apprehension that novels could potentially undermine moral values:

More believed that this was the danger of modern literature in general and of the representation of women in novels in particular. She realised that if the popular novels written for women readers made the sexually liberated behaviour of the female characters appear normative, then traditional Christian morality was undermined" (Hole 1996:int xvii).

Laurinda's foible has to do with knowledge. She presents herself as a woman whose character is extremely impressionable; she acquiesces to other's behaviours and perspectives:

I liv'd extempore, as fancy fir'd,  
As chance directed, or caprice inspir'd:  
Too indolent to think, too weak to chuse,

Too soft to blame, too gentle to refuse;  
I took my colouring from the world around,  
The figures they, my mind the simple ground:  
Fashion with monstrous forms the canvas stain'd,  
'Till nothing of my genuine self remain'd; (dialogue II 18/23)

Laurinda needs to become aware of the fact that she should never let other people's conduct and inclinations govern her own demeanour. She needs to become skilled at taking control of her actions, and finding ways to adjust her inclinations so as to make them appropriate but she should always make sure that this control is achieved personally and not by imitation.

The four women's acknowledgement of their unruly desires is an act they need to perform individually but to do so they seek the guidance of Urania, who becomes the figure of moral authority. The four women regard Urania as a superior being who will guide them through their cathartic voyage. She is their spiritual leader, the voice of experience that makes them aware of their faults. Urania will make them realise that the readjustment of their desires is something they need to perform through self-analysis and confession and, vitally, through the understanding that their confession, although obvious act of conformity to their society's pressures, is also an act of agency that empowers rather than limits them.

The fact that their leader is a woman is noteworthy. In eighteenth-century literature, the figure of the male mentor was commonly performed by the woman's father or suitor, who exercised the role of patriarchal control in order to protect and educate the woman. In *ASAH* such patriarchal control is exercised through Urania, who as the women's mentor does not wish to protect or educate them. She acts as a kind of conduit, a channel through which they will learn to correct their past errors without any direct intervention.

Urania's role is directed towards helping them realize that their heart is the key to finding the bliss they seek for. She "tells the young travelers to stop gloaming the globe for a good

time” (Ford 1996:10) but by this she does not refer to the fulfilment of their expected domestic role “staying at home with a husband and children. Godliness and the resultant inner peace was within one’s heart” (Ford 1996:10). Reflection and self-analysis are urged at all times. Only through this inner examination can the women overcome their infirmities.

This insistence on finding inner peace can be read as a subtle suggestion to redefine the limits of female agency and explore new possibilities. Urania’s discourse always displays a didactic, moral, and religious tone but, within her discourse, one can also notice an incisive craving to discern new options concerning the nature of female desire while exposing the system that tries to control and contain them.

At one point, Urania urges “her female admirers to please God and themselves first, and husbands, male friends and fathers second” (Ford 1996:11).

Her stance, while conventional –since praising God invokes a clear religious fervour – still suggests that it is vital for these women to never forget to “please themselves first”, even before pleasing the male figures in their lives. Such a claim voices the “conflicts within the female character, between her innate desires and the role she was destined to occupy” (Armstrong 1987:253). Urania reminds the women that their place is in the domestic sphere, and that their desires need to be restrained. Yet, she also subtly invites them to dare to go beyond the domestic role that is appointed on them, as long as they do not deviate too far. There is an unremitting attempt to reconcile contradictory elements. Moral didacticism appears to be fighting against women’s urge to free themselves from their fettered state<sup>6</sup>; empowerment and containment seem to be fighting against each other, one always leaving room for the other.

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<sup>6</sup> An urge that was very much felt in eighteenth-century women’s writing, as “whether through sex or fantasy, the eighteenth-century female was looking for an antidote to relieve her fettered state” (Schofield 1986:216).

As Demers claims, ASAH can be described as “a didactic piece, using converts rather than genuine searchers, that nevertheless succeeds in conveying the process of learning. As a conscious-raising exercise, it seems to have had its effect too” (1996:27). The searchers, as we have seen, have foibles that need to be erased for them to find virtue, which “involved not only chastity but also submissiveness, and self-abnegation” (Spencer 1986:126-7) as well as “sensitivity, piety and restraint” (Ty 1998: 9). One of the aspects from ASAH that is remarkable is its capacity to reconcile these expectations regarding women’s virtue with the suggestion that it is possible to unfold “self-awareness, as a necessary blend of venture and tractability” (Demers 1996:31).

In this sense, the play’s reliance on religious elements, such as the notion of confession and redemption, is complemented by a steady emphasis on the possibility of noticing some degree of female agency within women’s subordinate state. The presence of religion in ASAH is essential. The women confess their foibles and are repentant of their past mistakes. They wish to attain redemption, which will allow them to be spiritually reborn. The notion of redemption is introduced as a reminder of the fact that God provides both pain and delight:

She feels the cruellest extreme of fate;  
Yet noble, and superior to distress,  
She knows the hand which wounds, hath pow’r to bless;  
Instead of murmuring at his sacred will,  
Grateful, she bows for what he leaves her still.  
Remembers *Who* to erring man, did spare  
One SON, exempt from *sin*, but none from *care* (dialogue III  
22/27).

In the same way, their desires are also a source of mixed sensations which produce both anguish and pleasure and which they need to overcome to achieve a superior state, under

Urania's guidance who, in turn, seeks providential guidance to fulfil her role:

Then, let us, Power Supreme! thy will adore,  
Invoke thy mercies and proclaim thy pow'r;  
Shalt thou these benefits in *vain* bestow? (dialogue II 8/14)

The women are told that "Fearful of fame, unwilling to be known, /Shou'd seek but Heav'ns applauses and her own:" (dialogue III 27/32). Once again, they are reminded of the importance to please God but also themselves. They should lead a life that allows them to feel satisfied with themselves, to attain their own personal approval, knowing that they are on the right path and that they have overcome all the external circumstances that had prevented them from enjoying that inner peace in the past.

It is precisely this capacity to achieve inner peace that enables them to empower themselves with a certain degree of agency, and to obtain a limited yet significant amount of self-command. This notion is directly related to meliorism, which becomes absolutely vital in the context of women's writing, as "in a world of such minimal opportunities, women writers' adherence to meliorism would seem a logical stratagem; this cognate belief also permitted a range of expressive platforms" (Demers 1996:13).

Thus, the notion of meliorism that permeates the whole play becomes a powerful provider of "expressive platforms", a source of endless possibilities that can be achieved only through moral improvement. It is only once the women are able to achieve that enhanced inner state that they can discern the options that lie ahead of them.

More herself was a firm believer in this concept of meliorism, as she "was a Melliorist who believed passionately, forthrightly in the curative powers of education". Most of the women learn throughout the play leads them to the realization that although they must subdue to external pressures about acceptable forms of behaviour, they should remember that they

ought to do so with a clear, personal purpose in mind: to achieve the internal serenity they long for. Their subjugation is for their own benefit, and they do not allow societal conventions to undermine their will.

This realization is a turning point in the women's quest, as it emphasizes the paradoxes and contradictions that surround their depiction. These women are presented as faulty – and yet not fallen – female characters that seek guidance in an experienced female leader who makes them realise that they need to change their ways if they are to achieve bliss.

Yet, these women are also plagued with ambiguity; since the extent to which they are truly 'guilty' of serious faults is unclear. Their distressed state is caused by their realization that their place in society is threatened by their unruly urges. Vanity, ignorance, fame and imagination, are all aspects that women should be wary about. These women's discourse contains a high degree of *dramaticity* that highlights the artificiality of social expectations. The women are terrified that their actions, their very thoughts, are unforgivable, and they desperately wish to resolve this anxiety: "Accept, just Heav'n, my penitence sincere, / My heart-felt anguish, and my fervent pray'r!" (dialogue III 28/33).

Ambiguity resides in the fact that the very qualities they need to eradicate are the ones that turn them into desirable creatures. Vanity is related to female beauty, an external aspect that develops into a dangerous weapon when indulged too much, as it could make women believe their beauty entitles them to have some power over others. As Schofield notes: "the importance of beauty consists in its effects on the beholder. Beauty thus provides a metaphor for female power, that is, capacity to attract and control others" (1986:138).

Ignorance mirrors the innocence that women were expected to possess in order to be desirable at the eyes of possible suitors, since there was a tendency "to estimate women's value precisely according to her passivity" (Poovey

1984:94). Fame and imagination are both elements that have the potential to agitate women's senses and, thus, to deviate them from their role as devoted mothers and wives. Women had to "accept a definition of 'female nature' that was derived from a social role" (Poovey 1984:15) and anything that prevented them from satisfactorily fulfilling such role ought to be eradicated.

Hence, the faults the protagonists are guilty of the need to be modified because they point towards the very aspects that were believed to pose a threat to social order. This reflects More's own anxiety, as she saw "revolution as an assault on all that she held sacred [...] It was an attack on the social hierarchy of rank and status, on order, deference and subordination, that showed an irreligious discontent and a desire to anticipate the joys of heaven and earth" (Hole 1996:int xxiv).

In this sense, the play's constant insistence on the four women's faults and their need to urgently alter them reflects More's concerns —and those of her society— on what would occur to the social order if women were granted too much freedom and were not submitted to constant and exhaustive monitoring, since "the fear that with one slip, one lapse, one moment of inattention, woman is plunged into some cataclysmic encounter with her own wild, undisciplined, disordered, and chaotic nature" (Kowalesky-Wallace 1991:53). The four women personify this fear, and their struggle to overcome their unrestrained desires reflects their society's demand for a "proper policing of female desire both before and after marriage" (Watson 1994:10).

However, in spite of this preoccupation, as we have seen, in the play many elements point to the necessity to allow a certain degree — however limited — of self-command. This struggle between the urgent need to maintain the status quo, and thus relegate women to their proper domestic sphere, and the need to open new possibilities for female expression is a constant element that permeates the whole play. Women are

urged to remain in their proper sphere, but within that sphere there is no need for them to feel limited in any way, as:

...within that arena women could be intelligent, rational, virtuous, and noble creatures, capable of great intellectual and moral achievements. They had potential for immense influence of their husbands and sons (Hole 1996: xvii).

Thus, their relegation to the domestic sphere is by no means a limitation, as within that place they have the opportunity to become creatures capable of immense intellectual and moral accomplishments. The four women are instructed on how to remain in their proper sphere but, at the same time, that proper sphere provides them an opportunity to achieve moral and intellectual advancements that will benefit their lives, as long as they understand that their social role needs to exist in harmony with the role they set for themselves. It becomes imperative for them to learn how to “reconcile desire and satisfaction, conventional manners and genuine self-expression” (Poovey 1984:41).

Another source of anxiety is how to accommodate the notion of a woman who counters the misogyny of her time but never ceases to replicate that very notion that she opposes:

she deploys an image of woman designed to counter contemporaneous, misogynist stereotype. Yet paradoxically (as we shall see) that same image perpetuates aspects of the very misogyny it is designed to contradict” (Kowalesky-Wallace 1991:45).

The four women’s renewal process somehow allows them to counter contemporaneous stereotypes on the supposedly weak nature of women, and their limited role in society, but that same process also perpetuates their society’s insistence on the need to keep women under control. This duality is constantly reflected upon, as it displays a double function “first, to show the injustices and sufferings of women in the present state of

society and, second, to show the utopian possibilities of new roles and structures” (Costlett 1988: 70).

The four protagonists are constantly fighting to liberate themselves from those aspects that separate them from the right path, and thus they willingly submit to external pressures. However, they are also instructed to trust their own instincts first and foremost, something that reflects the conflict between “empowerment and containment, agency and dispossession” (Kowalesky-Wallace 1991:57), and which ultimately “reveals the interdependency of gender and class in British women’s history” (Kowalesky-Wallace 1991:57).

This dual nature is surrounded by paradoxical elements. The four women are trapped between the narrative within which they are embedded and the possibilities that are offered to them. They need to find ways to somehow expand such narrative, as Kowalesky-Wallace argues:

...to live a life as a daughter of Eve is to live a paradox, for it is simultaneously to find one’s place within a preexistent narrative that dictates women’s marginality and to be allowed to adapt the strictures of that narrative (1991:int 23)

The women exist within a narrative that certainly “dictates women’s marginality” but what is noteworthy is that, under Urania’s advice and guidance, these women understand that narrative is by no means fixed, it can be, and *must* be, extended to fit their own purposes. More’s depiction of these female characters “both challenged and validated conventional female roles” (Ford 1996:11) and there resides its potential to expand the parameters within which to subscribe women’s experience. This is related to Gilbert and Gubar’s argument that:

From a female perspective, however, such inconsistency can only be encouraging for – implying duplicity – it suggests that women themselves have the potential to create themselves as characters, even perhaps the power to reach toward the woman trapped at the other side of the mirror/text and help her to climb out (1989:16)

The four protagonists are given the opportunity to build themselves as characters in the sense that, under Urania's guidance, they examine the limits of their prescribed role and are willing to ascertain more possibilities for self-expression so that they can attempt to find the woman that is trapped at the other side of the text, a woman that they can and *must* become.

As Schofield notices, many women writers "used their works to give urgent and meaningful expression to their female consciousness" (1998: 216) and Hannah More was no exception. In her pastoral drama, through the four protagonists she manages to produce a common female experience. As we have seen, what impels them are personal reasons, not social or cultural pressures. The women's voyage, in spite of being directed towards meeting societal expectations, is ultimately motivated by a personal quest that arises from the wish to give meaning to their existence. The most valuable lesson they learn is that their happiness needs to be understood as an inner condition, as Urania proclaims:

—A virtuous mind is Happiness secure!  
No *accident* can ever make it less,  
Nor any *outward* circumstance increase.  
CONTENT alone in VIRTUE we can find,  
And HAPPINESS exists but in the MIND (dialogue III 29/34).

To sum up, in ASAH the four women embark on a quest in which they learn that the happiness they seek should not be sought in others' admiration, nor in externalities such as appearance, fame, and fiction. The real state of happiness is to be found within themselves. In their journey, they pose a question, they want to know what happiness really consists of, and they expect the answer to be based on something external. Paradoxically, they are confronted with the realization that the answer resides within their own hearts. Only there can they find the strength to bring forth the change they desire.

Inner happiness is what they should be seeking to find. They may look for guidance in external figures, such as Urania,

but the ultimate truth they learn is that felicity is an internal condition, not external. In this pastoral drama, the young Hannah More brilliantly demonstrates a high state of maturity by stating and defending the importance of female agency and empowerment. In their cathartic journey, the four protagonists learn that their conformance to social expectations and demands should be undertaken in a way that does not limit their particular possibilities but rather that allows them to exert some self-determination in order to take the decisions that best suit their own personal yearnings.

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