

ENGL3041 – Adventures in the Literary Marketplace

Assignment 2:

An Introduction to *The Victim of Fancy* by Elizabeth Sophia Tomlins.

Elizabeth Sophia Tomlins' second novel *The Victim of Fancy* was published anonymously in 1787 'By a Lady'. She claims that the intention of her excessively sentimental novel is to justify the objective of the hugely successful but morally dubious work of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The central focus of this introductory essay will therefore address the situation of Tomlins' work in the sentimental genre and the effects of work such as Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* on the susceptible reader of the age. I will first delineate the plot of *The Victim of Fancy* and discuss the contemporary reception that Tomlins received. I will then consider the representation of novel reading in Tomlins' work and how this affects the sentimental heroine. The next section will consider the parallels between Tomlins' novel and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and finally, I will address the idea that Tomlins' representation of a sentimental heroine is intended to be read satirically.

- Plot Summary -

The heroine of this epistolary novel is Theresa Morven, who provides the central narrative with letters to her beloved brother serving in Gibraltar. It is clear from the beginning that Theresa is indeed, the sentimental heroine that the title suggests. The first letter is by Frederick Burell, a friend of Major Morven, and provides the reader with a first impression of the heroine before her own correspondence begins. Theresa is 'beautiful' and combines 'the softest feminine

delicacy' with an 'animation and energy' that immediately captivates Burell.¹ This first letter makes clear Theresa's passion for learning and the reader learns of her extreme admiration for *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. It is this enthusiasm that drives Theresa to discover and converse with the author, thus beginning the journey that motivates the plot.

Theresa prevails upon her aunt to begin the search and they travel towards Bath but the coach overturns, causing Theresa to faint, and they must stop at a house nearby. Here Theresa cultivates a close friendship with the mistress of the house, Ruth and her young daughter Sophy and is introduced to Ruth's lover Frank Hyde whom she immediately mistrusts. On arrival in Bath there is concern for Theresa's disposition when she faints at the pump-rooms on seeing a young soldier, 'pale, wan' emaciated', accompanied by his sister. (XXI). Theresa discovers the situation of the siblings and on passing their lodging finds the young man having fainted and his sister, Joanna in a state of extreme distress. Theresa revives the young man and in shock herself, waits to completely recover before leaving them. She discovers a copy of *Werther* and quietly reads until Joanna returns and tells her about a gentleman who has been kind to them. As Theresa leaves she encounters this gentleman and loses command of herself in her attraction to him.

Tomlins begins Volume Two with a letter to Burell from his brother Vincent. The reader learns that Vincent is the gentleman Theresa met and that, as a favour to Burell, he has come to Bath to pretend to be the author of *Werther*. Vincent speaks of his eagerness to meet the lady that has so enchanted his brother but also of the lady he has fallen in love with, unaware that Theresa is the object of both. Theresa's search for her author distracts the reader's attention from this discovery as the heroine

¹ Elizabeth Sophia Tomlins, *The Victim of Fancy, A Novel, In Two Volumes* (London: R. Baldwin and G. and T. Wilkie, 1787). Letter I.
All subsequent references to this text are from this edition and will appear in brackets in the text.

receives a note with an invitation to discover him. However, it is a trick orchestrated by Frank Hyde and, as he expresses his love for Theresa, Ruth arrives and suspects their betrayal. The entrance of both Burell and his brother awakens Theresa to their family connection and, despite the confusion, Frank's 'unworthy conduct' is realised by Ruth and concludes the drama. (XXXVII).

Burell visits Theresa and tells her he loves her and, through kindness to him she accepts his proposal, but Burell will not let her sacrifice happiness with his brother who 'doats on [her] to distraction'. (XXXIX). Frank's behaviour however had provoked both brothers to challenge him and Theresa learns that Vincent has been injured. On his recovery he is introduced to Theresa and their attachment to each other is beyond doubt. The imminent return of Theresa's brother marks the end of their stay in Bath and at this point Tomlins abandons the epistolary form to report Theresa's reunion with her brother. At Portsmouth this beloved brother is discovered to be dying, the shock and distress surrounding which endangers Theresa's own health. Major Morven dies and is quickly followed by Theresa's aunt which further weakens the young heroine. The novel is concluded by a letter from Vincent to his brother informing him of Theresa's anguish and her subsequent demise.

- *Contemporary Reviews* -

Evaluation of Tomlins' novel appeared in both *The Monthly Review* and *The Critical Review* and both focus on the ideas of sensibility that dominate the text.² It is significant for Tomlins that both these periodicals paid attention to her work as

² I managed to obtain the relevant pages from *The Critical Review* but due to objections over the age of the book, The British Library would not photocopy *The Monthly Review*. I must therefore rely on a passage transcribed in the Raven text, *The English Novel, 1770-1829, Vol. I*.

Antonia Forster states ‘For the majority of authors and booksellers they were simply “the two Reviews” and the judgements delivered elsewhere [...] were not important.’³ Andrew Becket, in *The Monthly Review*, states that the anonymous text bears ‘no resemblance to any former work of the sort, that we have seen’.⁴ Yet Becket is confident in imagining it to be ‘the production of a young Authoress, whose head and heart abound, or rather overflow with sentiment, fancy, feeling and delicacy.’⁵ It seems strange when one considers the titles of fiction published in the same period as *The Victim of Fancy* such as *The Rambles of Fancy* by Lucy Peacock (1786) and Harriet Thomson’s *Excessive Sensibility* (1787) that Becket should proclaim Tomlins’ novel as original.⁶ In contrast, *The Critical Review* seems keen to place this novel in the context of the sentimental mode and is aware of the links with Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

In the three pages dedicated to reviewing Tomlins’ work, *The Critical Review* discusses ‘the design of this lady to delineate the adventures of an unexperienced enthusiastic child of Fancy’ who is ‘affected by every distress’.⁷ Whilst this review complains of some ‘inconsistency’ in the heroine which renders the story ‘very improbable’, Tomlins is praised for writing ‘with propriety and decorum’.⁸ Forster claims that ‘The *Critical* appears to see itself as having not only a right but a positive moral duty to censure and repress authors and determine which works may be fit or

³ Antonia Forster, ‘Introduction’ in *Index to Book Reviews in England, 1749-1774*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), p. 3.

⁴ Andrew Becket, a review from *The Monthly Review* quoted in *The English Novel, 1770-1829 : a Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles*, Volume One, ed. by Peter Garside, James Raven and Rainer Schowering, (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2000). Vol. I, p. 415.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century*, (London and New York, 1994), pp. 197, 208.

⁷ *The Critical Review* (1787) Volume 63. [107-109]. p. 107.

⁸ *ibid.* p. 108.

permitted to be successful with the public.’⁹ It is therefore significant they consider that in ‘this age, when the heart is often allowed to hurry away the judgement, when sentiment is allowed to usurp the place of reason, these volumes may be of use.’¹⁰ *The Monthly Review* opposes this view and criticises Tomlins’ novel for being ‘tinctured too strongly with the *extravagant*, and the *romantic*’.¹¹ This dispute locates Tomlins within an important debate of the period about the novel and its effects. I will address this in relation to *The Victim of Fancy* and its heroine in the next section of my introductory essay.

- *The Dangers of Reading* -

Samuel Johnson, in his 1750 essay *Rambler*, 4, observes that ‘the present generation seems more particularly delighted’ in ‘the works of fiction’ that abounded in the modern literary marketplace.¹² As such, ‘the most important concern’ for an author was to consider that ‘These books are written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life.’¹³ In Tomlins’ novel, Theresa Morven is one such reader: she is ‘easily susceptible of impressions [...] easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account.’¹⁴ Leaving her fascination with *The Sorrows of Young Werther* for later discussion, Theresa’s passion for literature is a recurring theme throughout the novel and it is undeniable that what she reads affects her greatly. In the first letter, Burrell expresses his ‘uneasiness’ that Theresa’s aunt ‘reads but little herself – but she leaves the world

⁹ Forster, p. 8.

¹⁰ *The Critical Review*. p. 109.

¹¹ Becket, p. 415.

¹² Samuel Johnson, ‘Rambler, 4’, (Saturday, March 31, 1750) in Ioan Williams, *Novel and Romance 1700-1800: A Documentary Record*, (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1970). [142-146]. p. 142.

¹³ *ibid.* p. 143.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

of books open' to the young heroine. (I). Although Theresa possesses 'taste and native delicacy', Burell still fears that 'her lively imagination should mislead her; since whatever she peruses, she enters into with a warmth of disposition'. (I) For example, Theresa visits the grave of Milton and is so overcome with emotion that she feels 'for a moment' that Milton infuses 'his spirit in to [her] breast' and she 'wetted his grave with the enthusiastic tears of admiration.' (IV).

Homer, Shakespeare, and the more contemporary Richardson grace Tomlins' pages and Theresa's learning yet there is also praise for modern female authors. Frances Burney is praised as 'one of the first female writers of [the] age' and the author of *The Recess*, Sophia Lee is depicted within the narrative as 'the *Temeraire*' whom Theresa admires at the pump-house. (XXIII). Indeed, Theresa speaks of 'that elegant work' as one that is 'charming to the heart and the imagination' and 'conveys images the most enchanting to the fancy' so much that 'she felt all the pains of suspense at [her] heart, and [...] was frequently affected beyond the power of weeping.' (XXX). In such a fit of agitation, Theresa had to persuade her aunt to let her read the final volume, which produced such a reaction that she developed 'a slight fever'. (XXX). Johnson's argument that the novel 'has a duty to be moral and virtuous' had, by the late eighteenth-century, escalated to a widespread concern.¹⁵ In his essay series *The Observer*, Richard Cumberland argues that 'Novels whose moral design may be unquestionable are nonetheless morally suspect because of their form as novels.'¹⁶ The rise in the popularity of the novel and the anxiety it produced is certainly witnessed in Tomlins' work. Adopting Cumberland's estimation, Theresa is just such a heroine: 'so apt to be tinctured by what [she] reads' that morally

¹⁵ Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 201.

¹⁶ Richard Cumberland referenced in Ellis, p. 207.

questionable novels are ‘apt to lead’ her ‘into affectation and false character.’¹⁷ Tomlins certainly seems to emphasise the weakening effect of Theresa’s reading on her already delicate frame.

In ‘Of the Peculiar Management of Daughters’, James Burgh suggests that the ‘proper education of a daughter, if a parent has a mind she should ever be fit for filling a place in society, and being a suitable companion and help meet for a man of sense, is, first, Reading with propriety and life’.¹⁸ However, *The Victim of Fancy* would preach that reading, or any form of learning is an unattractive quality in a heroine. Burell sees ‘too plainly an application to study’ and makes it his ‘endeavour to dissipate her attention a little, if possible.’ (I). Theresa’s aunt repeatedly lectures the young heroine about her ‘love of learning’, warning her that men ‘charge it to affectation only’ but when they ‘believe it real [...] they at once envy and despise’ it. (IV). Indeed, ‘learning is a qualification seldom necessary’ for a woman and can only be ‘disgusting’ so Theresa is cautioned to ‘keep secret [her] ardent desire of knowledge’ else her brother should ‘not love [her] the more for it.’ (IV). In *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft speaks at length about national education and its failings regarding women. Indeed, she claims ‘the education which women now receive scarcely deserves the name’ for it ‘is merely relative to accomplishments’ instead of the academically based male education.¹⁹ The level of knowledge to which Theresa aspires is therefore considered inappropriate for her sex in this period. However, even Wollstonecraft, one who champions female learning, will not condone the type of sentimental novel that so influenced young women. She claims the sentimental novel, along with music and poetry of the period

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ James Burgh ‘Of the Peculiar Management of Daughters’ from *The Dignity of Human Nature*, (London, 1767) [126-128], p. 126.

¹⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman*, (New York and London: Norton, 1988), p. 170.

‘all tend to make the women the creatures of sensation’ in whom the ‘overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents [the] intellect’ which makes ‘a rational creature useful to others.’²⁰ Taking in to account the generic terms in which the dangers of reading are acknowledged in Tomlins’ work, I am now going to look at the link between this novel and the work of Goethe which it aims to defend.

- *A Female Werther?* -

Tomlins precedes her novel with an ‘Advertisement’ that outlines her intention in writing *The Victim of Fancy*. She praises ‘those striking traits of originality and spirit’ in Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* that ‘have excited attention and admiration almost universal’.²¹ First published in 1774, *Werther* became an instant success and within just a few years ‘it captured the imagination of European readers as well.’²² Numerous imitations of the *Werther* story appeared in the years following its publication. Michael Hulse reports that there were poems, plays, operas and songs and even a fireworks display in Vienna.²³ The criticism of Goethe’s book, which Tomlins describes as ‘the blot which tinges those beautiful pages’, centres on the tragic consequences ‘of *Werther* fever’.²⁴ The narrative depicts *Werther* as a man of excessive feeling who is so consumed by his unrequited love for Charlotte that he is driven to suicide. This was held responsible for sparking a suicide epidemic across

²⁰ *ibid.* p. 61.

²¹ Tomlins, ‘Advertisement’ in *The Victim of Fancy*.

²² Martin Swales, *Goethe, The Sorrows of Young Werther*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 1.

²³ Michael Hulse, ‘Introduction’ to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, (London and New York: Penguin Classics, 1989), p. 13-14.

²⁴ Tomlins, ‘Advertisement’; Hulse, p. 14.

Europe and whether true or not, the myth was enough to suggest ‘the novel might exert a corrupting influence’.²⁵

It is this censure of Goethe’s novel that Tomlins hopes to eradicate in addressing his moral and though the plot is not a direct equivalent there are certainly parallels to be drawn between the two texts. I think it is possible to consider Theresa as a female Werther in the sense that she embodies the idea of a sentimental protagonist. Janet Todd claims that in this age of sensibility, ‘women were thought to express emotions with their bodies more sincerely and spontaneously than men; hence their propensity to crying, blushing and fainting.’²⁶ Theresa certainly possesses these emotions. On seeing the pathetic situation of the young soldier Theresa feels such anguish for him that ‘the glass dropped from [her] hand, and [she] seemed surrounded by darkness and confusion.’ (XXI). In her essay ‘Oscillations of Sensibility’, Patricia Meyer Spacks argues that ‘The hero of sensibility allows himself to feel. His female counterpart can’t help herself.’²⁷ In *Werther* this idea is somewhat confused. Whilst he does not suffer from fainting fits, Goethe repeatedly emphasizes the irrepressible nature of Werther’s emotions. He resolves not to see Lotte but each day cannot help but visit her. Indeed, he states ‘I only want to be near to Lotte again, that is all. And I laugh at this heart of mine – and do as it dictates.’²⁸ He seems to suffer therefore from the same uncontrollable sensibility as Theresa.

However, Tomlins also seems to suggest a connection between Theresa and Lotte. The confusing love triangles in *The Victim of Fancy* between Theresa, Ruth and Frank, and Theresa with Burell and his brother Vincent seem to refer to the one

²⁵ Hulse, p. 13.

²⁶ Janet Todd, *Sensibility, An Introduction*, (London : Methuen, 1986), p. 19.

²⁷ Patricia Meyer Spacks, ‘Oscillations of Sensibility’ from *New Literary History*, Vol. 25, No. 3, (Part 1). (Summer, 1994), [505-520].

Jstor Scholarly Journals <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0028-6087%28199422%2925%3A3%3C505%3A00S%3E2.0.CO%3B2-M>> [Accessed April 2007]. p. 506.

²⁸ Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. p. 88.

involving Werther, Lotte and Albert. In both instances Theresa must deny someone her affection, causing distress and, for Burell, provoking 'the tears of a manly and sensible soul.' (XXXIX). Tomlins' main acknowledgement of Goethe's work however, is not in the subtle allusions to his plot but in Theresa's impassioned defence of the work as a book she has been so charmed by. In a discussion with Dr. C____, Theresa finds an opponent who talks of Werther's 'cruelty and his crime to Charlotte' and also of 'the evil tendency of those books which set forth the violence of a passion at first sight, and the impossibility of ever subduing it.' (XXXV). Theresa however, relies on a popular argument of the period, that of Charlotte's culpability, to defend her sentimental hero. William Rose documents the 'considerable moral indignation at the alleged unfeeling behaviour of Charlotte towards Werther.'²⁹ Indeed, Theresa goes further in her attack of the heroine accusing her 'want of prudence, of propriety, of strength of mind' for 'the fall of Werther, the distress of Albert, the failure of her own heart from virtue'. (XXXV). Theresa attacks Lotte, the woman who with 'the self-controlled tone of the noblest sentiment' rejects Werther's 'fiery' embraces, in order to defend a man whose passions overwhelm him.³⁰

Hulse asserts that the flaws in Werther's character 'are there for a reason. They are there as an essential portrait of a man ill-equipped to cope with his life.'³¹ This is perhaps the moral Tomlins wants to replicate in her own work and emphasise in Goethe's. It is possible to suggest that Theresa's flaws, her 'weakness' that she is 'a child of fancy', render her similarly unable to survive in the world. (XXXV). Swales suggests that Goethe 'wrote the tragedy, not just of one flawed individual, but

²⁹ William Rose, 'Goethe's Reputation in England During his Lifetime' in *Essays on Goethe*, ed. by Rose, (London and Toronto: Cassell & Co. Ltd, 1949). [141-206] p. 152.

³⁰ Goethe, p. 126, 125.

³¹ Hulse, p. 19.

of the radically unaccommodated human sensibility’ and Tomlins does the same. In each text, excessive sensibility has tragic consequences and as such I don’t believe either promotes the sentimental nature that is at once so disabling and inevitably destructive.

- Tomlins’ moral -

With frames and constitutions weaker than Men
Have, the passions of Women are warmer; and the
Rays of their genius concentrate to the object on
Which they engage themselves more strongly – it
Absorbs all other considerations.

PROGRESS OF FASHION.³²

This passage, chosen by Tomlins as an epigraph to *The Victim of Fancy*, is taken from a work that, within the narrative, Theresa describes as ‘solid’. I considered, in my ‘Publishing History’ assignment, that the selection of this epigraph provokes speculation that Tomlins wanted her reader to interpret the novel satirically. Further research has confirmed this view. *The Progress of Fashion* intends to ‘awaken our attention to female merit’ and asserts that ‘genius is not confined to sex’.³³ Indeed, its main criticism is that women are taught to concern themselves with accomplishments such as ‘painting, music [and] dancing’ and therefore miss an education in reason.³⁴ The anonymous author warns that it is ‘this alone, which never fails in the end to degenerate into evil.’³⁵ The significance of this work seems clear, and it indicates that Theresa, who displays little reason in her representation as a sentimental heroine, is not an exemplar in Tomlins’ work.

³² *The Progress of Fashion: exhibiting a view of its influence in all the departments of life.* (London, 1786.) ECCO. <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO>> [Accessed March 2007]. p. 73-4.

³³ *ibid.* p. 75.

³⁴ *ibid.* p. 73.

³⁵ *ibid.* p. 74.

This is a sentimental novel that exposes the unregulated feeling which can only end in tragedy and, as such, escapes the criticism levelled at the “irresponsible” novels of the period. *Tributes of Affection*, the collected poems of Tomlins and her brother includes a poem entitled ‘To the Authour of the Victim of Fancy; A Novel’. Written by Tomlins’ brother, it confirms the author’s intention in the novel to defend Werther through the actions, and fate of Theresa. He claims that Goethe writes to ensure ‘Each youthful heart may shun the fatal snare, / And, early warn’d, of lawless love beware.’³⁶ Therefore, Tomlins was encouraged to depict her heroine, ‘A needful lesson to the Fair she gives’ as ‘Fair SENSIBILITY’s enchanting fire, / If uncontroul’d by Reason’ is unrestrained and ‘O’erpow’rs the tender soul which it most warms.’³⁷ Tomlins intended Theresa to be a warning for her readers against the extreme sensibility by which her heroine is governed.

- Conclusion -

Janet Todd states that ‘From the 1780’s onwards, sentimental literature, and the principles behind it were bombarded with criticism and ridicule [...] By the 1790’s almost all serious novelists noted the selfishness, irrationality and amorality of the cult of sensibility.’³⁸ Published in 1787 therefore, *The Victim of Fancy* acquaints the modern reader with the changes in the fiction of sensibility in that period. Tomlins is aware of her readership and therefore of her responsibility as an author to relate a moral in her fiction. The value of this novel manifests itself in the way Tomlins uses the sentimental genre to expose the great concern at the end of the eighteenth century over its consequences.

³⁶ Elizabeth Sophia Tomlins, *Tributes of Affection: with The Slave; and Other Poems. By a Lady; and her Brother.* (London, 1797). *Eighteenth Century Collections Online.* Gale Group. <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO>> [Accessed May 2007] p. 77.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Todd, p. 141, 144.

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