

Elizabeth Hamilton (c. 1756 –1816)

'Who would compare the pleasure enjoyed by a cultivated mind in perusing the exquisite compositions of a Homer, a Shakespeare, or a Milton, to that which a novel-reading Miss receives from the eventful tale that beguiles her of her midnight slumber?'

Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education (1801), vol II, p. 239.

by Gillian Dow

Born in Belfast to a Scottish merchant and his wife, Elizabeth Hamilton was sent by her widowed mother to be raised by a paternal aunt, Mrs Marshall, near Stirling when she was five or six years old. She seems to have received great benefit from her Scottish education, attending a day-school near Stirling for four or five years, and reminiscing fondly in later life on both her schooldays and her childhood more generally. In her article on Hamilton for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Pam Perkins points out that this semi-rural idyll was by no means free from any challenges: she 'was not exempt from the pressures faced by intellectual girls in the late eighteenth century. Mrs Marshall was apparently disturbed by her niece's intellectual interests, and Hamilton recalls hiding her copy of Lord Kames's *Elements of Criticism* in her chair to prevent visitors from seeing what she was reading'.

Hamilton published her *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* in 1796, when it met with reasonable success and favourable reviews in six of the major literary journals of the day, including the *Monthly* and the *Critical*. The work owes much to Montesquieu's popular *Lettres Persanes* (1721), but also to an extremely popular mid-eighteenth-century French novel, Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Peruvienne* (1747). As a faux-translation, the *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* also appealed to late eighteenth-century tastes for translations, a considerable literary vogue despite the turbulent state of European politics. Hamilton's next publication, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), met with even greater success. A satirical attack on radicals such as William Godwin, this work tapped in to the contemporary zeitgeist, including the fear of revolution.

In her works on education, however, Hamilton was no conservative. She is represented in this exhibition by her popular *Letters on Education* (1801), which was quickly

republished the same year as *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education*, and saw four editions by 1808: the copy on display here is the third edition from 1803. The work is influenced by earlier educationalists such as Locke and Rousseau, and concentrates on how children learn, thus offering a practical method of teaching them. She rarely differentiates between the male and female child, believing that both deserved a rounded education that will fit them for their future lives. Hamilton's most popular work was her novel *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* (1808). It is therefore amusing, but not untypical of other women novelists, that she gives the majority of novels extremely short shrift in her *Letters on Education*: Frances Burney's are among the few that escape censure, and only then because they are 'admirable pictures of life, (which for want of an appropriate term, likewise go under the denomination of Novels)'. Hamilton argues further that a woman reader who has been instructed on critical thinking will get both further instruction and a great deal of pleasure from novels.

Hamilton's work on education travelled across Europe, gaining the attention of the famous French educationalist, Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis (1746-1830). Maria Edgeworth seems to have been somewhat put out that Genlis had read Hamilton's *Letters on Education*, but not her own *Practical Education*, when she gave an account of her visit to Genlis in Paris in 1803:

Forgive me my dear Aunt Mary if, even after you begged me to see her with favorable eyes[...] I could not like her. [...] I might be prejudiced or mortified by Mme de Genlis' assuring me that she had never seen anything I had written except *Belinda* – that she had heard of *Practical Education* – had seen it mentioned in *Miss Hamilton* which she was just reading – heard it much praised but had never seen it.