

## Hester Chapone (1727-1801)

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'It is not from want of capacity that so many women are such trifling insipid companions [...] it is much oftener from the neglect of exercising the talents, which they really have, and from omitting to cultivate a taste for intellectual improvement.'

*Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773) Vol. II, p. 224.

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by Gillian Dow

Born Hester Mulso in Northamptonshire in 1727, Chapone had literary pretensions from an early age. A romance, written at age nine, did not, however, meet with her mother's approval: the elder woman seems to have felt it both inappropriate and unbecoming to encourage her only surviving daughter's precocious talents. After her mother's death, Chapone took over the running of the household for her father, and devised her own programme of education, studying both the modern and ancient languages, and teaching herself drawing and music.

Chapone was to become a key member of the Bluestocking group. A close friend of Samuel Richardson, she corresponded with the author of *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-48) on the duty of a daughter to accept her parents' choice of a husband. Chapone argued that it was a daughter's right to refuse a suitor she could not find acceptable, where Richardson claimed that a daughter owed her parents obedience in all matters. This debate must have been at the forefront of Chapone's mind when she married John Chapone, an attorney and friend of Richardson, in 1760, against her father's wishes. John Chapone died just nine months after the wedding, and Chapone's friends testified to the extent of her grief on being widowed shortly before her 34<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Chapone's writing career began with a contribution to Samuel Johnson's *Rambler* number 10 in 1750. She went on to both translate and compose original poems on topics such as friendship and the beauties of nature. Her ode to Epicetus was included in the preface of Elizabeth Carter's translation of the Greek philosopher's work.

It was for her *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773) that Chapone became best-known, to her contemporaries and indeed to posterity, and it is with the new edition of 1787 that she is represented in this exhibition. Dedicated to Elizabeth Montague, Queen of the Blues, who had recommended publication, the preface to the *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* contains a typically 'modest' disclaimer on the act of publication, addressed to Montague herself. 'Perhaps', Chapone writes, 'it was the partiality of friendship, which so biased your judgment as to make you think them capable of being more extensively useful, and warmly to recommend the publication of them'. There is nothing modest about the plan of education, however. The 'letters' had originally been composed for Chapone's young niece, and the work presents a plan for the private education of girls. Alongside the typical 'accomplishments' of French, dancing and etiquette, a letter 'On the Study of the Scriptures' and another 'On the Regulation of the Heart and Affections', Chapone insists on a solid grounding in reading in various genres: moral philosophy, geography, selected works of fiction and history. This reading is designed to form rational human beings, and is described as the most serious work a young woman can undertake, since a good education remains when fortune and youth have gone. *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* was extremely popular, going through around sixty editions in Britain, France and the United States between 1773 and 1851.