

## CARTER EPICTETUS and PLATO

Elizabeth Carter's translation of the works of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus was her means of introduction into society – or, to be precise, into the literary and intellectual circle around Elizabeth Montagu. Mrs Montagu was more of a society hostess than a woman who made a serious contribution to literature herself but her circle of friends became the world in which all the principal players in the Greek Revival, artistic or philosophical could meet. This was the circle of the Bluestockings. The name tends to be associated with the priggish and dry, but the originals were quite different, as the chatty and attractive Carter proves. Mrs Montagu held soirees in which conversation was the entertainment rather than cards and the conversation must have been of a very high order. Thomas Anson, typically for him, stands at the side of this circle. He may have been a regular visitor at Mrs Montagu's Hill St conversations, but there are no records of why was there or what was said. James Boswell met him at a dinner at Mrs Montagu's right at the end of his life. Thomas's close friend, a botanist and a musician, Benjamin Stillingfleet, was a mainstay of the meetings and it was his humble blue worsted stockings (he could not afford black silk) which gave them their name. This point is often disputed but Mrs Montagu confirms it in one of her letters.

Sir George Lyttelton, after 1756 Lord Lyttelton, was a long standing friend of Thomas Anson, a poet and historian and the owner of Hagley Hall, Worcestershire. Lyttelton had been a politician, was connected with the most powerful families, the Cobhams and Pitts, but he had always been a patron of poets, the most important of which was James Thomson. Lyttelton even contributed a few lines to Thomson's "The Castle of Indolence". By the end of the 1750s he was corresponding with Mrs Montagu, who visited Hagley, and encouraging Elizabeth Carter to publish her poems. Philosopher James Harris assisted Carter with her translation and Lyttelton with his history. Montagu and Lyttelton both supported James "Athenian" Stuart, who, in turn, became a close personal friend of Thomas Anson from the 1750s to Anson's death.

Thomas Wright's importance as the "Mercury" who introduced Elizabeth Carter to Catherine Talbot, is recognised by the editor to the Carter and Talbot letters, Montagu Pennington. Pennington, Carter's nephew, introduced the four volumes of correspondence with Wright's letter to Carter. Tragically, if he owned other letters they have vanished. The importance, to Pennington, of Wright's introduction of his friend to his student, is that it resulted in Carter's translation of Epictetus.

It was the first important classical translation by a woman, it sold enough to give Carter an income and make her one of the first women writers to make a living by her work, and it popularised Stoicism in the second half of the 18th century. It has never gone out of print. Stoicism had a popular appeal, in a simple form, as a =n acceptance of reality and an almost Buddhist detachment, but Carter would not have thought of herself as a Stoic and strongly disapproved of some of the Stoic attitudes. She, like most of her friends in the bluestocking circle, was a devout Christian. There was no problem adapting Greek thought to Christianity.

Carter's poetry reveals that she was a Platonist at heart. It is quite startling that a rector's daughter from Kent should have a thorough knowledge of Plato's Symposium. Plato's; book of love was considered virtually a dirty book by many because of its enthusiastic support for homosexuality. Plato was not treated seriously in the materialistic age.

Carter is sometimes claimed as a lesbian writer because of her Platonic poems to her friend Miss Lynch, but this is obviously absurd when they are read in the context of Carter's relationship with Thomas Wright and her other flirtatious relationships. She mentions in her letters that she was in love with a "Strephon" around 1739. She was pursued by several men, one of whom, John Dalton, (who may have been the same Strephon) may

have blotted his copybook by having an affair with poet and gardener William Shenstone's friend Lady Luxborough in 1739.

The significant point is that she is not writing of a physical love but using her Platonic knowledge correctly, thinking of love as a means to truth raising the mind to knowledge of the divine. The effect is certainly surprising for a 26 year old woman in 1743.

Dear object of a love whose fond excess  
No studied forms of language can express,  
How vain those arts which vulgar cares controul  
To banish thy remembrance from my soul! ....  
To calm Philosophy I next retire,  
And seek the joys her sacred arts inspire,  
Renounce the frolics of unthinking youth,  
To court the more engaging charms of Truth :  
With Plato soar on Contemplation's wing,  
And trace perfection to th' eternal spring:  
Observe the vital emanations flow,  
That animate each fair degree below :  
Whence Order, Elegance, and Beauty move  
Each finer sense, that tunes the mind to love;  
Whence all that harmony and fire that join,  
To form a temper, and a soul like thine. (1)

This could hardly be more Platonic, particularly the lines:

Observe the vital emanations flow,  
That animate each fair degree below:

These directly refer to the key Platonic and Neo-Platonic theory that the world is an “emanation” of deity and all things are directly related to deity through a hierarchy of “degrees”. This is not what you would expect from vicar’s daughter from Kent in the middle of the eighteenth century. This would have seemed highly suspect to many conventional Christians but, in spite of being thought heretical by some, it is a theory that has reappeared throughout the history of thought. There is a particular tradition of Christian Platonism in England, most notably in the 17th century, with the Cambridge Platonists, but it was extremely rare in the 18th century, and here it is passing idea in a poem addressed to a female friend. Here, gently slipped in to an occasional poem, is the most important theme of Neo-Platonic philosophy.

How did this strike her readers? It would certainly have been appreciated by Lord Lyttelton, who encouraged the publication of the poems. In his “Dialogues of the Dead”, a series of dialogues between the shades of historical figures of different centuries, he has an opportunity to mention Marsilio Ficino, the great Renaissance Platonist. Ficino single handedly re-introduced Plato to Western Europe through his Latin translations and commentaries. Favourable mentions of Ficino seem extremely rare in the 18th century if searches in “Google Books” are anything to go on. (They have produced important discoveries in this research thanks to key word searching of 18th century texts).

Cosimo de Medici, talking to Pericles, says

“...I no less encouraged those who were eminent in my time for their eloquence and learning. Marcilius Ficinus, the second father of the Platonic philosophy, lived in my house and conversed with me...” Cosimo explains that he enabled him “to pursue his sublime speculations unmolested by low cares, I gave him an estate adjacent to one of my villas.” (7)

A few Dialogues of the Dead, including “Mercury - and a fine Modern Lady” were contributed by Mrs Montagu. Lady Anson mentions them in her last letter to Thomas in 1760.

Another of Elizabeth Carter’s poems to Miss Lynch, from 1744, refers to the myth of the two Venuses from Plato’s Symposium:

“With mystic sense, the poet's tuneful tongue

Of Urania's birth in glitt'ring fiction sung.”

And, again, directly praises Plato. Samuel Johnson may not have approved – though he admired as a poet as well as a maker of puddings:

What shining visions rose on Plato's thought!  
While by the Muses gently winding flood ,  
His searching fancy trac'd the sov'reign good ! -  
The laurell'd Sisters touch'd the vocal lyre,  
And Wisdom's goddess led their tuneful choir.

Presumably Miss Lynch understood the Platonic meaning of these poems. She lived in Canterbury and would have met Thomas Wright when he stayed with the Carters in Deal in August 1741. Carter wrote to her friend Mrs Underdown 9th February 1742:

Oh dear! Now I talk of hearing & seeing, Miss Lynch & I have clubb'd our wits to compose the strangest Letter that ever was seen or heard of to puzzle Endymion. Do not say any thing about it for tis a great Mystery but we will show it to you when you come here.

Miss Lynch & I lie & talk of a night till we fall fast asleep with a Sentence in our mouth & wake half choked with it next Morning.” (2)

Carter's attitude to Plato was a very traditional one as far as Plato's relationship with Christianity went. Plato could be praised for ideas that were compatible with Christianity and forgiven, or sympathised with, for philosophies that were incompatible. The same could not be said for Epictetus, who had lived after Christ.

“I must confess I have a much higher pleasure in reading Plato, and the other philosophers who wrote before our Saviour, than Epictetus, Marcus Antoninus, and the others who lived after. The remarkable difference in the clearness of their notions, shews that they must have been acquainted with the Christian Religion; and that such men should have been acquainted with it, and borrowed their best lights from it, and yet not be Christians, gives one a very painful feeling.”(3)

Catherine Talbot, a few years younger and living in a Bishop's household, was very sensitive to anything which might not be compatible with Christianity, especially the lack of belief in an afterlife.

"Every now and then I am shocked at the pride and harshness of the Stoic doctrines. If affections make me suffer I renounce them. I, the self-sufficient, proud and confident in the dignity of a soul that is what? To mingle with its elements. No! poor Epictetus! If laudable affections give me pain, I humbly submit to it as the due lot of frail and fallen human nature. If the giving a due check and restraint to those affections and sorrows is a difficulty, I thankfully and cheerfully undertake it, (satisfied that the goodness of God wills us to be as happy as we can, and to make the best even of this mortal state) nobly ambitious to exert myself as becomes a being restored to the hopes of a blessed immortality, and confiding in superior help to succeed its poor endeavours. Is it possible that Epictetus should have read St. Paul, or known any thing of Christianity, and not become a Christian?"

Montagu Pennington reported that it was Talbot who suggested Epictetus as project for translation. Samuel Johnson had earlier suggested Boethius's "Consolations of Philosophy", but that was one of the most translated classical texts throughout the middle ages. Epictetus was an inspired suggestion. It touched the mood of the times. Carter began her work in May 1749 and very quickly was sending extracts to Catherine Talbot for her approval.

MRS. CARTER TO Miss TALBOT. Deal, June 20, 1749.

"I have really no patience with the translations I have inclosed you, for they appear to me neither sense nor language; but I had much rather give you proof that I can write obscure and bad English, than that I could refuse to attempt at least any thing which you command me."

Talbot's guardian, Bishop Secker, approved of the translation:

"The Bishop of Oxford says your translation is a very good one; and, if it has any fault, it is only that of being not close enough, and writ in too smooth and too ornamented a style."

The work on the translation continued through the 1750s. By 1753 James Harris was being turned to for advice.

Bishop Secker (My Lord) was being the go between for Carter and Harris.

"Epictetus and company arrived very safely; and both he and I are very greatly obliged to my Lord, and the other gentleman, who have done him so much honour; and I will as soon

as possible find, to my sorrow, that Mr. Harris insists on the translation of that wicked logical chapter from which my Lord had in great clemency absolved me. To be sure it would be an excellent piece of revenge to prevail on him to do it himself; but I really know not how to make him such a request; so I must even attempt to do it as well as I can. It is but leaving it just as unintelligible as I find it I am greatly obliged to Mr. Harris ; and I hope my Lord will be so good, when he has an opportunity, as to mention my grateful acknowledgments of the favour he has done me."

Catherine Talbot was passing material to James Harris by way of Lady Anson's brother Charles Yorke.

Miss TALBOT TO MRS. CARTER. Cuddesdon, Sept. 8, 1753.

"The Bishop of Oxford has given me a large parcel for you, consisting of your translation, his own excellent remarks, some of Mr. Harris's and a Letter from Mr. C. Yorke; I have packed them all safely and forwarded them to Deal."

By 1755 the bulk of the work was ready.

Miss TALBOT TO MRS. CARTER. St. Paul's, Feb 7th, 1755,

"MANY thanks, dear Miss Carter, for your noble and excellent volume. How much rather would I stay at home this evening, and study good Epictetus, and reflect on every page how infinitely we are obliged to you for taking such intense pains to introduce him to us, than go out shivering in the cold to pay half a score unedifying visits! But Epictetus would not allow me to give such a useless preference to what is not in my power, and Miss Carter would chide me were I to grow unsociable; so to oblige you both I will visit to-night, and go and see masks at an early hour to-morrow. Make no scruples about your cap, you old-fashioned creature! its only fault is being too large, and too formal and grave. Even I myself wear one that is not half so big as my hand."

There is a great deal of discussion caps in the correspondence. Epictetus mixes with fashion and gossip.

Elizabeth Carter saw James Harris as more of a Stoic at heart than she was. There were aspects of Stoicism which were against her deep Christian faith and she carefully distanced herself from them.

“Mr. Harris was not absolutely of a different opinion, from that turn which he gives to one passage in Aristotle's poetics, by which he represents him as declaring, that the end of tragedy is to eradicate the passions of terror and pity. I have often desired you to look upon this passage. Mr. Harris is so accurate a judge, both of the Greek language, and the Greek philosophy, that it ought to be with the utmost diffidence that I dissent from him ; yet I cannot help suspecting, that his Stoical prejudices warped his judgment, and gave a twist to the meaning of the author in this place.”(1)

Sir George Lyttelton, one of the key figures in the Greek Revival circle, became aware of Elizabeth Carter as poet before he would have been aware of her translation. He visited her unexpectedly in Deal. It appears Carter had written to him herself about a “person in distress” and he must have recognised who the writer was. It says something of the Carter’s attraction that he would be drawn all the way to Deal.

MRS. CARTER TO Miss TALBOT. Deal, May 3, 1756. "

“Will you pity me for a trial I lately went through, from which I received a great deal of honour at the expence of looking, as you have very often seen me do, most grievously foolish ? It was no less than a visit from Sir George Lyttelton. To my great consolation, however, it was very near dark when he came, and I had taken special care not to have candles introduced till I might reasonably hope some few, at least, of the idiot features might vanish from my countenance. By this contrivance, and the assistance of a workbag, from which he must conclude me extremely notable at a time when it was impossible for one to see a stitch, I behaved myself with tolerable fortitude; and if he had staid a quarter of an hour longer, it is very probable I might have so far improved as even to speak articulately. I forget whether I mentioned to you some time ago my taking the liberty of writing to Sir George Lyttelton , to solicit his favour for a person in singular circumstances of distress. He answered me with a politeness and humanity with which I am sure you would have been charmed; and it is to this correspondence that I owe the favour of his visit." (3)

It was probably Lyttelton who introduced Elizabeth Carter to Elizabeth Montagu’s circle. By the end of the 1750s she had become a close friend of Mrs Montagu and a key member of the Bluestockings. In 1761 she was on holiday with her and Lord Lyttelton, as he was by then, was encouraging her to publish her “Poems on Several Occasions”. She had published a small collection of work that had appeared in the Gentleman’s Magazine in her youth, but this was the only collection she considered to be worthwhile. It included her poems in honour of Endymion (Thomas Wright), Miss Lynch, and her Ode to Wisdom, the only one of her poems to survive in anthologies.:

From envy, hurry, noise and strife,  
The dull impertinence of life,  
    In thy retreat I rest:  
Pursue thee to the peaceful groves,  
Where PLATO’S sacred spirit roves,  
    In all thy graces drest.

This poem was first published anonymously in "The Gentleman's Magazine" but it became more famous when it was included, without permission, in Samuel Richardson's novel "Clarissa" in 1748, where it plays the part of a poem by the novel's heroine, and appears with a musical setting. Carter was astonished, and wrote to Richardson asking for an explanation. She wrote to her friend Catherine Talbot

I immediately wrote a twinkation to Mr. Richardson about it, to which I received so civil an answer I knew not how to be angry with him.

(Twinkation seems to be a very rare word!)

This raised Carter's profile, but it is also significant that Richardson had recognised the unusual Platonic thinking of the poem's author. He referred to her as a "female Norris", Norris being the 17<sup>th</sup> century Salisbury Platonist, and opponent of John Locke, John Norris.

As her nephew and memoirist Montagu Pennington wrote:

"However, in the beginning of the summer of 1761, when she had been for some time in very bad health, Mrs. Montagu earnestly requested her to accompany her to Tunbridge Wells, and at length succeeded; and there the plan was arranged. This excursion had the happiest effects on Mrs. Carter's health and spirits. Both Lord Bath and Lord Lyttelton were there at the same time; and Mrs. Carter always spoke with great delight of the time which she passed there."

Her "Poems on Several Occasions" were published in 1762 with a dedication to Lord Bath and some verses in her honour by Lord Lyttelton.

1) Elizabeth Carter memoirs, 2) Elizabeth Carter 1717-1806. An edition of Some Unpublished Letters, edited by Gwen Hampshire, University of Delaware Press, 2005 3) Talbot/ Carter letters 4) [http://nottingham.ac.uk/mss/collections/online-msscatalogues/cats/port\\_londonpl.html](http://nottingham.ac.uk/mss/collections/online-msscatalogues/cats/port_londonpl.html) 5) Clive T Probyn "The Sociable Humanist. The Life and Works of James Harris 1709-1780"; Clarendon Press 1991 6) James Harris, "Three Treatises", 1744 <http://books.google.com/books?id=5oomAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=james+harris+treatises> 7) Lord Lyttelton, Dialogues of the Dead, 1760, The Echo Library, 2005