

## CARTER EPICETUS 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 he 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 master 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.

This may seem a complex web of relationships but this particular web of the Greek Revival focuses on a very small network of creative and active people. Mrs Montagu is the hostess and letter writer, James Harris and Elizabeth Carter are, in slightly different ways, the philosophers who bring to life the spirit of the movement, James "Athenian" Stuart is the artistic keystone and Thomas Anson and Lord Lyttelton are the patrons.

There were, of course, other patrons of Stuart, but this small group holds the informal movement together. Thomas Anson, usually apparently on the sidelines and yet always present in the shadows, stepped into the light in the 1760s when Stuart built him his town house, 15 St James Square. This was the first Greek influenced house in London and was both externally and internally the creative work of Stuart. Stuart went on to build, very very slowly, a much grander house for Mrs Montagu. 15 St James Square was not just for external show. It was a house for social events. Such houses had to live. People had to enjoy the design and artwork.

In 1769 all the people of the golden web came together at Thomas's new house for a breakfast and concert in honour of Mrs Montagu. This is a climactic symbolic moment. James Harris and Elizabeth Carter were there, and we can take it for granted the house's proud architect Stuart was there. The only source for the names of the guests is a diary entry by the prime-minister's wife, Lady Shelburne and she only names a few – and high ranks and political importance impress her most. It's a fair guess that musical Benjamin Stillingfleet would be there too, and Lord Lyttelton. If not, they would have been at the other similar events over the next few years.

At this moment Thomas Anson steps out as the master of ceremonies and brings in another essential element to the artistic mix – music. The Greek Revival was not about building copies of authentic Greek buildings but bringing a new spirit into the contemporary world. That small group managed to draw together all the arts, which could never be thought of as separate. Buildings need music. Music, in the mind of James Harris and 18<sup>th</sup> century opera lovers, needs words. All express ideas.

From the point of view of the Shugborough story it is almost miraculously neat that the eccentric comet, Thomas Wright, should have played an essential role Carter's career as well as creating Shugborough, an idyllic country home for these ideas. 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 18<sup>th</sup> century. It has never gone out of print.

Stoicism had a popular appeal, in a simple form, as an 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 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the Cambridge Platonists, but it was extremely rare in the 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 9<sup>th</sup> 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 to 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.

James Harris (1709-1780) is a forgotten figure these days. He may not have made a very significant impact on the world in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He was the philosopher of the Greek Revival, as well as being MP for Salisbury and a musical enthusiast and organizer of the Salisbury music festival. He was devoted to promoting Greek thought through his own work at a time when there was very little serious interest in Greek philosophy. His own books are readable and elegant, and smuggle huge amounts of Greek text in through quite extravagantly extensive footnotes. Harris carefully translates enough of the Greek to make his case understandable to people who are not classicists.

His “Three Treatises”, Dialogues on Art, Music Painting and Poetry, and Happiness, published in 1744, could be seen as the text book to the Greek Revival. It would be the ideal book to read while strolling around a classical garden, pausing for refreshment at a Doric Temple. In fact the dialogues are written in the dramatic context, following the style of Plato, of a walk from Wilton House to Salisbury. Though there is a lot of thorough logical discussion there are occasional interruptions when characters are aloud to go off into fanciful or poetic speeches. The style looks forward to some of the conversations in Thomas Love Peacock’s novels of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

There was a copy of “Three Treatises” in the library at Shugborough, so it is perfectly possible that Thomas Anson did read them in his own garden.

Thomas’s association with James Harris dated from July 1761 at the earliest, when Anson, Harris, and Thomas’s cousin Sir Thomas Parker, were named as trustees in a codicil to Lord Hardwicke’s will. (4) Harris was remotely related to the Lord Chancellor. His half sister, Catherine, was Lord Hardwicke’s niece. Harris’s second book “Hermes”, published in 1751, was dedicated to Hardwicke. (5) In the later 1760s and early 1770s the Harris family papers are the main source of information about Thomas’s musical activities. There is evidence of at least one of Thomas’s entertainments where Harris, Elizabeth Carter. James Stuart (who designed frontispieces for Harris’s later editions) were all present. Harris’s last book “Philological Inquiries” (1781) is the source of the anecdote of Thomas Anson sailing to Tenedos.

Harris uses an elaborate literary device to distance himself from some of the attitudes in “Three Treatises”. Towards the end of the Treatises on Happiness the narrator (whom we assume is Harris himself) asks his companion on their walk for some thoughts on the religious dimension of their conversation. Up to this point it has been very Greek and very secular. Harris sets a very romantic scene for the rest of the dialogue. This is a very good illustration of how the classical and romantic are intertwined. Here romantic nature, on an evening walk through Wiltshire, is a setting for classical philosophy. Elsewhere a landowner, like Lord Lyttelton, might sit in a Doric temple and contemplate the romantic landscape. Lyttelton, curiously, may have been the original of the companion on the walk. In an unpublished dedication to Lyttelton Harris refers to just such a walk and conversation on a starry night at Hagley. This brings draws Harris and his book even closer into the very small classical circle of Lyttelton and Anson, Hagley and Shugborough.

*“We were walking, not (as now) in the chearful Face of Day, but late in the Evening, when the Sun had long been set. Circumstances of Solemnity were not wanting to affect us; the Poets could not have feigned any more happy a running Stream, an ancient Wood, a still Night, and a bright Moonshine. — I, for my own part, induced by the Occasion, fell insensibly into a Reverie about Inhabitants in the Moon. From thence I wandered to other heavenly Bodies, and talked of States there, and Empires, and I know not what.*

*WHO lives in the Moon, said he, is perhaps more than we can well learn. It is enough, if we can be satisfied, by the help of our best Faculties, that Intelligence is not confined to this little Earth, which we inhabit ; that tho' Men were not, the World would not want Spectators, to contemplate its Beauty, and adore the Wisdom of its Author.”(6)*

The narrator's companion then reads a written by his friend “Theophilus”, further distancing what follows from Harris himself. “Theophilus” is probably inspired by Harris's penniless friend Floyer Sydenham, whom Harris supported and encouraged in his work to produce an English translation of Plato. Sydenham is the direct link between Harris and the romantic period as Thomas Taylor knew Sydenham at the end of his life and completed his project. Taylor's translation of Plato, based on Sydenham's work, became a vital influence on the romantics, particularly Coleridge and Blake, though Taylor, unlike Harris who was always working within his Anglican Christian tradition,, became an out and out classical pagan. Taylor was the Ficino of the English Romantics, translating Platonism into a language that could influence his contemporaries.

The following speech, in what the companion calls “a rapturous, anti-prosaic style” is the words of Theophilus:

*“THIS whole UNIVERSE itself is but ONE CITY or COMMONWEALTH - a System of Substances variously formed, and variously actuated agreeably to those forms— — a System of Substances both 'immensely great and small, Rational, Animal, Vegetable, and Inanimate. As many Families make one Village, many Villages one Province, many Provinces one Empire; so many Empires, Oceans, Wastes, and Wilds, combined, compose that Earth on which we live.*

*“Other Combinations make a Planet or a Moon; and these again, united, make one Planetary System. What higher Combinations subsist, we know not, their Gradation and Ascent it is impossible we should discover. Yet the generous Mind, not deterred by this Immensity, intrepidly passes on, thro' Regions unknown, from greater Systems to greater, till it arrive at that greatest where Imagination stops, and can advance no farther. In this last, this mighty, this stupendous Idea, it beholds the UNIVERSE itself, of which every Thing is a Part, and with respect to which not the smallest Atom is either foreign or detached. ”*

Harris's note explains that this view of the universe was a "Stoic doctrine". It is easy to imagine Elizabeth Carter delighting in this passage, which brings to mind the work of her "Endymion", Thomas Wright.

Harris's "Theophilus" ends with strongly Platonic language, which may represent the Platonic Floyer Sydenham. Harris seems to have been reluctant to appear as too much a Platonist, though his "Hermes" has very Platonic passages, an example of which has been quoted earlier. In this case the Platonic "forms", the universal Ideas that are the fundamental patterns of things and lie close to God, or the source of all things, lead us to contemplation of Deity. Harris is, at the very end of his book, and in the words of one character which are being read by another, is bringing a religious element into his otherwise very classical conversation:

*"HERE let us dwell ;— — be here our Study and Delight. So shall we be enabled, in the silent Mirrour of Contemplation, to behold those Forms, which are hidden to Human Eyes' — that animating WISDOM, which pervades and rules the whole — that LAW irresistible, immutable, supreme, which leads the Willing, and compels the Averse, to cooperate in their Station to the general Welfare — that MAGIC DIVINE, which by an Efficacy past Comprehension, can transform every Appearance, the most hideous, into Beauty, and exhibit all things FAIR and GOOD to THEE, ESSENCE INCREATE, who art of purer Eyes, than ever to behold Iniquity.*

*"BE these our Morning, these our Evening Meditations — with these may our Minds be unchangeably tinged — — that loving Thee with a Love most disinterested and sincere ; enamoured of thy Polity, and thy DIVINE ADMINISTRATION..."*

Samuel Johnson, who was a realistic with his feet firmly on the ground, found Harris's Platonic idealism hard to take and parodies his views in *Rasselas* (1759).

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 work-bag, 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.

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.

Summary of Epictetus from Carters intro

Both original Greek and Carters version at SHuigborough  
TA possibly a Stoic – no religious signs at all

Hard not to see an influence of Stoicism on the mysterious Shepherds Monument.

- 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-mss-catalogues/cats/port\\_londonpll.html](http://nottingham.ac.uk/mss/collections/online-mss-catalogues/cats/port_londonpll.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