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Mrs. Fielding: The Single Woman as the Incarnation of the Ideal Domestic Women

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Eighteenth-century female writers realized that single women were scorned and viewed with contempt. They tried to modify the negative stereotypes, found mainly in the work of male authors, by offering more attractive portraits of single, independent women. Elizabeth Hamilton dignified the figure of the "old maid" by creating the characters of Martha Goodwin, Maria Fielding and Mrs. Mason. The aim of this article is to analyse the similarities between Hamilton herself and Mrs. Fielding in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), as well as comment on how Hamilton used her fictional counterpart to explore her own ideas on women's education, marriage or spinsterhood. With a character like Mrs. Fielding, Hamilton not only created a positive role for old maids like herself but showed her readers that it was possible for an unmarried woman to have a varied, interesting, useful and fulfilled life.

Keywords: Elizabeth Hamilton; single woman; education; marriage; benevolence

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Mrs. Fielding: la mujer soltera como encarnación del ideal de la mujer en el hogar

Las escritoras del siglo XVIII eran conscientes de que a las mujeres solteras se las ridiculizaba y despreciaba. Por ello intentaron modificar los estereotipos negativos existentes, creados principalmente por los novelistas masculinos, ofreciendo atractivos retratos de mujeres solteras e independientes. Elizabeth Hamilton dignificó la figura de la solterona a través de los personajes de Martha Goodwin, Maria Fielding y Mrs. Mason. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las similitudes entre Hamilton y Mrs. Fielding en *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), así como el modo en que la autora utilizó a este personaje para explorar sus propias ideas sobre la educación de las mujeres, el matrimonio o la soltería. A través de Mrs. Fielding Hamilton no solo creó un papel positivo para "solteronas" como ella misma, sino que enseñó a sus lectores que era posible para una mujer soltera tener una vida variada, interesante, útil y reconfortante.

Palabras clave: Elizabeth Hamilton; mujer soltera; educación; matrimonio; benevolencia

In his analysis of women's fiction written between 1790 and 1820 Edward Copeland emphasizes how fiercely female authors displayed their awareness of the havoc society wreaked on economically limited women. They tell again and again the unhappy story of a bereft, penniless woman who is the victim of an unforgiving economy: "When contemporary authors turn from sentimental convention to economic injustice, to the fecklessness of men, to the vulgarity of the parvenu, and to the courage of the single woman alone and struggling in a hostile economy, their novels grow incandescent" (Copeland [1995] 1998, 13). It is true, as Copeland explains, that economic difficulties caused misery for both married and unmarried women but the case of the spinster was particularly poignant. Jane Austen's protagonist Emma Woodhouse describes the spinster's plight, showing just how much money mattered: "and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable, old maid! the proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else" (Austen [1816] 1987, 109). Without economic means the single woman faced social degradation, an additional diminishment since she was seen as much less than a wife or widow. This social marginalization of single women made spinsters an excluded category (Hill [1989] 2003). English society considered them a social failure and, in fact, families were not only ashamed of their unmarried daughters but tended to "erase" their very existence. Olwen Hufton summarizes perfectly why there was such social hostility towards single women: "All women lived in societies in which marriage and motherhood were regarded as the norm, spinsterhood and infertility as a blight" (1984, 355).

As Susan Lanser carefully argues, much scathing disparagement of never-married women found in many discourses not only deprecated them as social outcasts but actually served to both produce and augment that very social hostility. An old maid became (and remained) a despised social category (1999, 312-313). Not surprisingly, to avoid such pervasive social contempt women willingly married men they despised or did not love rather than face the sure-fire social opprobrium that remaining single guaranteed. In fact, as the historian Amy Froide indicates in her recent study, *Never Married. Singlewomen in Early Modern England*, never-married women were unhappy not because they lacked a man or a lover but because they were denied the social status and economic security enjoyed by a wife ([2005] 2007, 212).

It was in the eighteenth century when the negative stereotype of single women emerged and the word "spinster" took on a pejorative cast. The never-married woman became a figure of scorn, contempt and abuse. Thus, *A Satyr Upon Old Maids*, published in 1713, does not hesitate to describe single women as "odious" and "impure" "dunghills" and as "nasty, rank, rammy, filthy Sluts," so disgusting and dangerous that they would, as mentioned above, throw themselves into the "vilest" marriages just to avoid being single (quoted in Lanser 1999, 297). Daniel Defoe proposed the establishment of "[a]n Office for Marriages," which "would be particularly useful to a

set of despicable creatures, called Old Maids" ([1719] 1869, 115). This ill-natured and evil maid became a permanent feature of the English novel. Specifically, in eighteenth-century texts written by men, spinsters appeared as frustrated, pushy, nosey, greedy, disagreeable, and either sexually promiscuous or prudish creatures. While, as Lanser has explained, the term "old maid" had lost, by the end of the eighteenth century, much of its venom and the single woman had become an object of polite pity, she still remained a figure of ridicule.

In spite of the antipathy and harassment single women confronted in the eighteenth century, some of them chose to remain unmarried and had useful, interesting and fulfilled lives. Some even celebrated single life, like the poet Katherine Philips, whose poem, "A Married State," compared singlehood and wifehood and advised young women not to get married:

> A virgin state is crowned with much content,
> It's always happy as it's innocent.
> No blustering husbands to create your fears,
> No pangs of childbirth to extort your tears,
> No children's cries for to offend your ears,
> Few worldly crosses to distract your prayers. ([1667] 1994, 255)

Many single women echoed Philips' ideas, underlining the benefits singlehood offered. They emphasized that never-married women enjoyed more freedom since they did not have a husband or children to care for and could follow a vocation or develop close ties with other women. As Elizabeth Brophy has shown, many eighteenth-century women were convinced that upon marrying they lost their happiness and freedom, an idea already present in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), the highly significant publication of Mary Astell at the end of the seventeenth century (1991, 207-208). Astell did not hesitate to argue that women will only find true fulfilment in female bonding, and not in wifehood and motherhood as society wants them to believe ([1694] 1999).[1] In fact, Margaret Hunt actually dismisses the notion put forward by historical demographers that all early modern women wanted to get married but were deterred from doing so due to various factors such as poverty, lack of a dowry, unfavourable sex

[1] Lanser has also drawn attention to a 1709 publication by Bernard Mandeville, *The Virgin Unmask'd: or, Female Dialogues Between an Elderly Maiden Lady and Her Niece, on several Diverting Discourses on Love, Marriage, Memoirs and Morals, etc. of the Times*, which has been largely overlooked. Mandeville offers a compelling empirical case against marriage for women by praising the freedom and comfort single women enjoyed and by portraying men as the "destroyers." Mandeville, a medical doctor, highlights just what "the body of the *wife/mother*" endures in real terms (Lanser 1999, 300-301; Mandeville's emphasis). Although Lanser's reference to Mandeville is interesting, she ignores a text already published in 1975, "Bernard Mandeville's *The Virgin Unmask'd*," by Gordon S. Vichert, who asserts the purpose of his paper is "to do a little missionary work for Mandeville by describing his earliest prose work in English, *The Virgin Unmask'd.*" Vichert describes the book as a "moral dialogue devoted largely to a defense of feminism" (1975, 1).

ratios, etc. and asserts instead the plain fact that many eighteenth-century women did not want to be married since they were quite aware of the terrible risks of marriage: "'cruel servitude... for life' (as one eighteenth-century woman put it) to a physically or emotionally abusive man, the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, and the insecurity of living with another's financial ineptitude" (Hunt 1999, 278-279).

However, even though some women criticized marriage and praised singlehood, the fact is that whether the life of a never-married woman was pitiable or interesting depended primarily upon her financial position. A single woman with money had greater opportunities to determine the course of her life, although it is true, as Pamela Sharpe, as well as Brophy, indicate, independence in a single woman was very often ambiguous since it was difficult for her to be completely free of patriarchal family control: "It is an anachronistic idea based on more recent women's lives to think that economic means could free a woman from the bonds of a potentially suffocating web of connections who were both relatives and business associates" (Sharpe 1999, 226; Brophy 1991, 37). Nevertheless, the important point here is not whether single women with economic autonomy had to submit to male discipline or not, but the fact that, as Christine Peters has explained, economic security was a prerequisite for marriage to be a question of choice.[2] Only those women whose families had been supportive of their economic independence felt really free to choose not to marry: "In this process scripturally based ideas of the duty of marriage, the definition of chastity as a rare divine gift and the necessity of female subordination were not insuperable obstacles, but it was socio-economic attitudes which actively encouraged women's ability to decide to 'delight' in the single life" (Peters 1997, 342). Interestingly enough, as both Eva Figes and Olwen Hufton suggest, in higher circles money rather than love determined whether a woman remained single or married (Figes [1982] 1988, 8-9; Hufton 1984, 359). Daughters with a substantial endowment were more likely to get married than those who lacked one. It was also considered more prudent for an upper-class girl to remain single than to marry a man with no property or immediate prospects.

Women with the right skills, training or/and education could also become economically independent and therefore have more freedom of choice. But the truth is that the opportunities for a woman to obtain financial independence through her own efforts were not only scarce but often demeaning. The chief practical alternatives women had to be self-supportive—becoming a governess or a companion, and school teaching—were rarely rewarding. By the end of the eighteenth century writing also became an established employment option for women from the middle and upper classes, but the chance of gaining a viable income from literary activity alone was very

[2] We must be careful, as Froide cautions, not to associate choice with happiness, since never-married women with an advanced social and financial position did not always represent singleness positively in their writings: "Single women did not live in a vacuum, they could not help but come into contact with popular ideas about singleness. How much they assimilated these sentiments and became victims of self-contempt varied by individual" ([2005] 2007, 199).

low. In general, female earnings were less than those of males and this explains why economic survival was so difficult for a spinster. Life was especially hard for middle- and upper-class women who had to earn a living because they were restricted in supporting themselves not only by their lack of professional training or the scarcity of employments available to them but by the stigma attached to women undertaking paid work: there was a widespread social opposition to genteel women working and earning a living.[3]

Life was easier and more satisfying for a spinster not only if she did not have to work to support herself but also if she was allowed to head her own household. Unfortunately, only a minority of never-married women were in such a position. In fact, as Richard Wall (1981) has shown, although the number of spinsters increased in the eighteenth century, widows were more likely to create their own households. The main reasons for this prejudice against single women heading households were the social expectation that women should be dependent on their fathers, male relatives or masters, and suspicions about the sexual morality of single women who lived alone. A minority of single women did manage to head their own households, but they generally shared three characteristics: advanced age, parental demise and high social status.[4] However, single women with no female relatives would sometimes opt to create households and mutually supportive relationships with other unmarried women. In fact, Hunt (1999) has pointed out that households headed by widows, single women, deserted or runaway wives, or a combination of these, were more common in the eighteenth century than most historians have tended to acknowledge.

Female writers realized that single women were scorned and viewed with contempt. They tried to modify the negative stereotypes, found mainly in the work of male authors, by explaining unmarried women's economic dependence, their loneliness, their sexual frustration. They also treated the lonely spinster positively and compassionately, thus offering more attractive portraits of single, independent women. Perhaps not surprisingly and as Kern points out ([1986] 1987, 201-202), the writers most sensitive to the plight of never-married women were "old maids" themselves—Fanny Burney, Sarah Fielding, Jane Austen. And amongst these renowned female authors we can and must include Elizabeth Hamilton, whose *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) and *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* (1808) also served to dignify the figure of the "old maid."

Hamilton, a talented, intelligent and educated writer, was very much aware of the prevailing negative stereotypes about single women. In her *Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), the Rajah, after reading the "authentic memoirs" of a nobleman, comes to the conclusion that marriage in Europe is constructed "from the most pure and disinterested motives" ([1796] 1999, 191) and that therefore it is only the obstinacy and folly of women that "alone can possibly prevent their advancement

[3] As Peter Earle has shown, since paid work was considered degrading for women, marriage was seen as an opportunity for upward mobility, "a change of status often symbolized by their ceasing to work for their livings at marriage" (1994, 153).

[4] Interestingly enough, as Palazzi has shown, in Italy we have exactly the same situation (1990).

to the very summit of felicity!" (192) The Rajah adds that there is a very peculiar and extraordinary punishment reserved for those females who choose to remain single:

> After a few years, spent, as it is generally believed, in vain repentance, and useless regret, they all at once, without any exceptions in favour of virtue, merit, useful or ornamental accomplishments, undergo a certain change, and incomprehensible transformation, and become what is termed Old Maids. From all that I have hitherto been able to learn of these creatures, the Old Maid is a sort of venomous animal, so wicked in its temper, and so mischievous in its disposition, that one is surprised that its very existence should be tolerated in a civilized society. (192)

Fortunately, both Martha Goodwin and Maria Fielding, the two spinsters that appear in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, are not frustrated single women, but the "cheerful, pleased, old maid" (Benger 1818, vol. 2, 95). Hamilton foreshadowed herself to be at the age of fifty-five when she was only twenty-five. Both represent Hamilton's ideal of the domestic woman: they are confident, educated, intelligent, yet feminine and domestic. But there is a very important difference between Mrs. Goodwin and Mrs. Fielding: whereas the former is economically dependent, the latter enjoys all the power and freedom that her privileged social and economic position grants her. It has been argued that Mrs. Fielding is Hamilton's fictional counterpart (Grogan 2000, 22-23) and that Hamilton divides herself and William Godwin among the characters of Martha Goodwin, Maria Fielding and Mr. Sydney (Thaddeus 1995, 412). I absolutely agree with these claims and will comment, in the following pages, not only on the similarities between Hamilton and Mrs. Fielding but also on how Hamilton uses this character to explore her own ideas on women's education, marriage or spinsterhood.

Mrs. Fielding is described from the very beginning as a woman "of superior information and extraordinary talents" (Hamilton [1800] 2000, 183), who employed those abilities to help the needy and, in particular, to uplift women intellectually by calling for and encouraging the reform of education for women: "To raise a little fund for deeds of charity, she had recourse to her pen; and in this retirement she composed several little treatises, chiefly intended for the benefit of her own sex, and calculated to restore that intellectual vigour which the whole course of their present mode of education tends so effectually to destroy" (252). Like her fictional counterpart, Hamilton was deeply concerned with the deficient instruction that women were receiving in England and used both her fictional and non-fictional work to make her contemporaries aware of the necessity of developing women's understanding through a more serious education, since the current options simply contributed to keeping them frivolous and intellectually shallow. She rejected the prevailing idea that women who cultivated their reason would despise the duties of their sex and situation: "toward a strict performance of the several duties of life, Ignorance was neither a necessary, nor an useful auxiliary" (Hamilton [1796] 1999, 72-73). She also challenged the

notion that ignorance contributed to the attainment of female perfection: "But the purity that depends solely on innocent ignorance, is liable to be soiled on the slightest exposure" (Hamilton [1801] 2010, 255). This very same idea is echoed by Dr. Orwell in *Memoirs*: "The light of the mind is necessary for the performance of every duty; and great is the mistake of those who think ignorance the guard of innocence and virtue" (Hamilton [1800] 2000, 103).[5] In fact, *Memoirs* provides us with a very good example of the negative consequences of women not receiving the intellectual training that will allow them to think for themselves. Bridgetina, one of the three heroines in the novel, lacks an enlightened mind and is incapable of fulfilling her domestic duties not because she is an inborn fool but because of her deficient education. And it is precisely Hamilton's Mrs. Fielding who makes this point: "It could not be expected from Miss Botherim, that with her limited opportunities of information she should be able to detect the pernicious tendency of the opinions she so unhappily embraced" ([1800] 2000, 326). Hamilton emphasizes in her writings the important role that mothers should play in their children's education, a role they will not be able to fulfil unless they themselves have cultivated their own intellectual understanding. Hamilton firmly believed that if women reformed themselves they would then be able to reform not only their children but society at large. This faith in women's power to change society was because Hamilton was convinced that intellectually men and women were equal. Thus, and as she argues explicitly, given that Providence has made no "manifest distinction between the sexes, by leaving the female soul destitute of the intellectual powers [...] it is incumbent upon us to consider, by what right we take upon us to despise the gift of God" ([1801] 2010, 266). Hence Hamilton supports and promotes the view that as there is no proof that the rational faculties are useless to women, their mental powers should be cultivated so that they can fulfil their duties as mothers, sisters, wives and members of society. In fact, in one piece of personal correspondence, Hamilton acknowledges that one of the things she most valued when she moved from Scotland to England was that "[m]en of learning addressed themselves to me, as to a being who was actually capable of thinking" (Benger 1818, vol. 2, 34-35).

As several critics note, Hamilton's position on women's education and their role in society was not very dissimilar from that of many liberal thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Catherine Macaulay and Mary Hays (Taylor 2000; Warburton 2001; Perkins 2010). But there are in fact some clear differences which distinguish her from them. First of all, Hamilton's feminism was, as Gary Kelly indicates, more religious and domestic ([1993] 1997, 142-143). Christian principles pervaded her work: she believed that by providing women with the right education society would be true to the

[5] Mary Wollstonecraft expresses a similar idea in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* when she affirms that many girls are "ruined before they know the difference between virtue and vice" ([1792] 1993, 150), thus emphasizing that the causes of women's degradation spring from their want of understanding and knowledge. Interestingly enough, in *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* Hamilton accuses parents of leading their daughters directly to prostitution "by means of an education which conducts them step by step from vanity to vice" ([1796] 1999, 133).

religious principles it had abandoned. Secondly, although Hamilton wanted to expand women's opportunities for self-improvement, she maintained that the domestic sphere was the most appropriate for women.[6] Hamilton's emphasis on domesticity may suggest conservatism; however, I totally agree with Kelly and Taylor when they argue that hers was a strategy to advocate women's rights within social norms, since Hamilton knew her domestic and religious feminism would be more acceptable in the post-revolutionary period when prejudices against the bluestockings or "learned ladies" not only rose but prevailed. Thus, she warns the readers in *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education*: "Let it not be imagined that I mean to engage my sex in the nice subtleties of logic or metaphysics. It is not for the purpose of exercising their minds in speculation, that I exhort them to the species of inquiry alluded to; but it is to enable them to discharge, with fidelity and honour, the momentous duties to which Providence has been pleased to call them" (Hamilton [1801] 2010, 259). Hamilton knew very well that women should be careful not to display their knowledge in order to avoid accusations of pedantry or "too much learning": "Nothing but experience could have convinced me, that the cultivation of the rational faculties, should, among the Christian women of England, be so rare, that no sooner can one of them emerge from the depths of ignorance, than she is suspected of assuming the airs of self-improvement and conceit" ([1796] 1999, 275). This explains why, from her very first book, Hamilton describes female characters who incarnate the ideal domestic woman as being not only well-read and intelligent but also modest, gentle, humble and tender, though none of them is ostentatious or vain about their knowledge. Of course, Mrs. Fielding is an example of a woman who, although intellectually superior, is not pretentious, but polite, sweet and gentle: "An air of heroick fortitude mingled with the native meekness and gentleness that characterised her manners" ([1800] 2000, 245).[7]

Mrs. Fielding and all the other ideal domestic women created by Hamilton are not only defined by their propriety of sentiment and conduct but also by their benevolence. Hamilton argues again and again that when intellectual powers are cultivated but benevolent affections neglected, "the character will be imperfect, unhappy in itself, and useless to society" ([1801] 2010, 263). Hamilton believed the cultivation of benevolent affections vital for the happiness and well-being of the individual as well as society because they produce in us a desire to promote the happiness and relieve the miseries of our fellow creatures: "It disposes the mind to sociality, generosity, and gratitude, and is the fountain of compassion and mercy" ([1801] 2010, 225). Hamilton warns her female readers in *A Series of Popular Essays* that women too often become trapped in their own

[6] Even more liberal women such as Hays and Wollstonecraft, who openly advocated the need to treat women as rational creatures and to teach them to think, considered that motherhood and marriage were women's primary functions.

[7] Although Hamilton's stance here may seem conservative, she was actually revolutionary in lamenting that feminine virtues—such as meekness, gentleness, temperance, chastity, command over passions, willingness to sacrifice every selfish wish to the happiness of others—actually demeaned the dignity of male characters. If these prejudices were questioned and men proved to value themselves on no superiority but that of virtue, "man would become more worthy, and woman more respectable" ([1801] 2010, 252).

emotions, which prevents them from being of use to others in emergencies: "Even though our sympathy in the feelings of others should be productive of the strongest emotions, these emotions, if they do not prompt us to active exertion, though they may be of the benevolent class, do not entitle us to be denominated benevolent" (1813, 292).

One way in which women could show their usefulness to society or, as Hamilton would have it, that their benevolence be active not passive, was by undertaking philanthropic and charitable work. Women such as Hannah More, Sarah Trimmer and Hamilton herself insisted that the privileged of their sex should divert surplus money and time into fruitful and morally uplifting projects,[8] and they themselves participated actively in numerous philanthropic enterprises.[9] Hamilton, for instance, managed a number of charitable institutions, in particular the Edinburgh House of Industry for indigent women.[10] All the ideal domestic women created by Hamilton fulfil their social duties by trying to help those in need, but Mrs. Fielding, her own fictional counterpart, is, without any doubt, the most perfect incarnation of the spirit of benevolence and philanthropy. When under Lady Brierston's roof and therefore still economically dependent, Mrs. Fielding uses her ascendancy over her benefactress "to promote the interests of the humble children of poverty" ([1800] 2000, 251). And even when forced to leave the house and accept shelter in the house of a respectable farmer, "she found means of employing her time to the advantage of the little circle by which she was surrounded. By her instructions she improved the young; by her sympathy she consoled the unfortunate" (252). Later, upon inheritance of Lady Brierston's fortune she decides to use the money to help the indigent and afflicted, who are so grateful to her that they do not hesitate to describe her as "a ministering angel" (278), "a superior being, the dispenser of happiness and joy" (297) or a "worthy benefactress" (298). In the same way as Hamilton helped found the Edinburgh House of Industry, Mrs. Fielding erects the Asylum of the Destitute, "a large house destined for the reception and temporary abode of such of her own sex as, from being destitute of friends in London, were (when by sickness or misfortune thrown out of employment) in danger of being driven, through fear of want, into habits of infamy" (299).[11]

[8] Kelly has emphasized that the middle and upper classes in the Revolutionary aftermath used new philanthropic programmes to control the "lower orders" ([1993] 1997, 168). He has also argued that women's sympathetic role beyond the domestic sphere—caring for the poor, the "fallen," the oppressed—was in part a recognition of women's own subordinate social position (8).

[9] As Francis K. Prochaska illustrated in "Women in English Philanthropy, 1790-1830" (1974), contribution to charities increased with evangelical inspiration between 1790 and 1830.

[10] Kelly has argued that both the Edinburgh House of Industry and *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* were "intended to contribute to social control by replacing the lower-class lottery mentality with a middle-class investment mentality" ([1993] 1997, 278). Susan B. Egenwolf expresses herself in similar terms when she asserts that Hamilton believed that charitable education was inextricably tied to industry and that her aim in writing *Cottagers* was to elevate the poor without disturbing the higher classes (2009, 129-155).

[11] Like many other eighteenth-century women, Hamilton was aware of the fact that prostitution was often the unglamorous result of females not being able to earn a living in any other way. Already in *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* Hamilton criticizes the lack of sympathy British people show for "these Christian women, being yearly suffered to perish in the streets of their great metropolis, under the accumulated misery of want, disease, and infamy!" victims of the licentious passions of unprincipled men who took advantage of their destitution ([1796] 1999, 131-132).

It is in the Asylum of the Destitute, where Julia, the third heroine of the novel, seduced and abandoned by a villain, finds shelter, that Mrs. Fielding's behaviour serves to illustrate Hamilton's own ideas on how to treat and help fallen women. Hamilton believed that a woman who had "renounced all those obligations, which, as a Christian, a wife, a mother, a member of society, she was bound to fulfil" (1813, 311) should be pitied and comforted: "[T]he vicious are certainly the proper objects of our compassion; nor can a truly benevolent mind consider their unhappy state, without feelings of pity and commiseration" (308). She insisted that a pure, active benevolence would relieve the fallen woman from the bondage of sin and guilt, from the passions that had led her to make a terrible mistake and from the false notions and ideas that had made her prey to vice. She warned, as well, of the dangers of sentimental sympathy which removes all those restraints that society has imposed on itself, thus breaking the boundaries between vice and virtue and placing the bad and the good upon the same level. Hamilton referred to this false sentiment as an "excess of charity" and cautioned "that the period is not far distant when the adulteress and chaste matron will be universally received upon equal terms" (314). Thus, Hamilton did not condemn fallen women to eternal fire, but instead felt sorry for them and believed it the duty of all to soothe their pain and relieve them from their terrible circumstances by awakening their consciousnesses to their own errors.

Mrs. Fielding's attitude towards Julia demonstrates an active benevolence, not merely sentimental sympathy. Not only does she show compassion for Julia, but, aware of the prejudices against fallen women, she has a plan to restore her to society:

> It was her opinion, that the support of reputation being found to be a strong additional motive to virtue, it ought not to be put out of the power of the unfortunate female, who, conscious of her error, is desirous to retrieve it by her after conduct. On this account, in the next conversation she held with Julia, she was led again to propose a plan she had suggested for her going first into the country, where she could enjoy all the privacy her circumstances required; and then removing to a situation, where the past incidents of her life might remain for ever buried in oblivion. ([1800] 2000, 371-372)

It is, however, true that in spite of Mrs. Fielding's good intentions Julia dies, this being because, as Janice Thaddeus states, in "Hamilton's didactic world, if not in her moral world, a seduced woman must be punished" (1995, 409), but the encounter between the "sinner" and the virtuous spinster allows Hamilton to give voice to her own principles concerning fallen women, unshared by more conservative thinkers such as Hannah More, who endorsed the removal of fallen women from society and total social ostracization as the only and most proper treatment.

Although Mrs. Fielding's main aim in life is to fulfil her social duties and afford relief to those in distress, it is obvious that she would not have been so efficient in promoting the happiness of others if it had not been for her ample fortune. The fact that Mrs. Fielding is a wealthy woman is vital in the novel since her economic security

grants her power and independence. Although Mrs. Fielding never violates the rules of female decorum, she is presented as a strong woman who speaks with the same authority as certain male characters in the novel. Her privileged social and economic status allows her to be the mistress of her own household and to choose to be surrounded with "a select party of friends" ([1800] 2000, 253), with "people of talents" (259): "Her situation in life gave her an opportunity of selecting her acquaintance, and her discernment and discrimination afforded her the means of employing this inestimable privilege to the best advantage" (286).[12]

Mrs. Fielding's privileged financial position also gives her the freedom to make the most important decision of her life: to reject a marriage proposal. We have to remember that most women in the eighteenth century married in order to achieve economic security and that therefore a single woman who was already economically independent lost one of the main incentives for becoming attached to a man. Mrs. Fielding's decision not to marry is very significant in a novel in which the notion of companionate marriage is celebrated through the union of Mr. Sydney and his wife, Harriet and Henry, and Maria and Churchill. Hamilton had already encouraged a more egalitarian and humane model of marriage in her first book: "In that enlightened country, a wife is the friend of her husband. Motives of esteem influence the choice of both" ([1796] 1999, 88). In the very same text she gives us more than one example of unions based on mutual esteem and affection, in which the husband not only loves his wife but respects her opinions and intellect as well. Even for herself, personally, Hamilton sustained such an ideal for a marriage partner, quite evident in the letter she wrote to her brother Charles refusing his offer to join him in India in order for him to find her a husband:

> [S]ome antiquated notions of refinement might stand in my way, such as that there were some other requisites besides fortune essential to happiness, a similarity of disposition, an union of heart and sentiment, and all those little delicacies, which one, whose only ambition is to possess wealth, and whose most ardent wish is the parade of grandeur, may overlook, but which one of a different education, and another manner of thinking, could not dispense with. ([1796] 1999, 336)

However, although the notion of companionate marriage gained adherents during the eighteenth century, and female writers used their novels to encourage this new model of marriage, they also recognized the idea of a union based on mutual esteem leading inevitably to marital bliss to be mere chimera. In fact, Martha Goodwin, the other cheerful spinster of the novel, affirms the gap between an enticing ideal and raw

[12] Although Hamilton did not possess Mrs. Fielding's fortune, she was also economically independent, which allowed her to be an active participant in the intellectual society of Edinburgh. She presided over literary gatherings, which, as in the case of Mrs. Fielding, were attended by a select circle of friends: "to spend the winter months in Edinburgh, I shall derive from it the advantage of literary conversation, in a very chosen circle of society" (Benger 1818, vol. 2, 49).

reality with her claim that "the beautiful union of congenial souls is a sight seldom to be beheld on earth!" ([1800] 2000, 188). Hamilton, like other female novelists, knew that in a society where married women had no legal status and the law sanctioned the husband's absolute power and authority within marriage, there was nothing a woman could do to defend herself if the husband turned out to be a tyrannical brute. Neither Hamilton nor her Mrs. Fielding show the slightest willingness to sacrifice the freedom that each enjoyed and that marriage with its concomitant constraints threatened. Both knew that one of the benefits of being single was the liberty to follow a vocation, and if Hamilton was reluctant to give up her literary career for a conventional marriage, Mrs. Fielding's preference was to devote her life to affording relief to the distressed. She too does not want to give up the peace and happiness she enjoys:

> From the day I heard of his [Mr. Sydneys's] marriage, I have devoted myself to a single life. I have endeavoured to create to myself objects of interest that might occupy my attention, and engage my affections. These I have found in the large family of the unfortunate. My plan has been successful in bringing peace to my bosom; and peace is the happiness of age—it is all the happiness of which on this side the grave I shall be solicitous. ([1800] 2000, 388)

Of course, Mrs. Fielding does not overtly acknowledge that the main reason for remaining single is the desire to preserve her freedom and happiness, since by doing so she would go against the social rule that dictates a woman's main aim in life should be to become a wife. Instead, she argues that "[w]ithout solid and mutual esteem, no marriage can be happy […] But cold esteem is not sufficient. Love too must lend its aid; and what can be more ridiculous than a Cupid in wrinkles!" (388). The reader does need to be provided with an explanation for Hamilton's decision that Mrs. Fielding's refuses to marry Mr. Sydney, since it is quite contradictory that in a novel clearly celebrating companionate marriage these former lovers, whose relationship was based on mutual esteem as well as a similarity of tastes, sentiments and dispositions, do not end up together. Maybe Mrs. Fielding's argument for not marrying Mr. Sydney is not totally convincing, but Hamilton with her characteristic irony and sense of humour makes it clear that for an economically independent woman like Mrs. Fielding, who leads a fulfilled and useful life, the choice was obvious: "Such was the decision of Mrs. Fielding, which no intreaty could prevail on her to alter. To our fair readers we shall leave it to pronounce upon its propriety" (388).

If, at the time, one of the benefits of singleness was the freedom to determine the course of one's life, another was the absent burden of children. It is true, that single women in the eighteenth century were encouraged to help other children and families if they did not have one of their own: "Through their assistance to their siblings' children, never-married women discovered one of the most appreciated and condoned positions available to them, that of the surrogate mother" (Froide [2005] 2007, 66). In fact, in order to present Mrs. Fielding as a character who is willing to play the role that society

expects of a single woman, she is described as a figure with maternal instincts. Thus, when Julia seeks refuge in the Asylum of the Destitute, Harriet assures her friend that Mrs. Fielding "will be as a mother to you, till the arrival of your own" (368). Later the narrator tells us that "the sympathetic tenderness of her [Mrs. Fielding's] address was so truly maternal, that it quickly re-assured her confidence, and restored her serenity" (370). Also from the very first time Mrs. Fielding sees Henry, Mr. Sydney's son, she decides to become his benefactress and adoptive mother. She gives him a book and "[o]n opening it, a paper dropped out, addressed to *Master Henry Sydney*; it contained two bank-notes for a hundred pounds each, and these words—*An annual gift from the most affectionate of friends to the child of her adoption*" (250; emphasis in the original). We are told that she "felt for Henry all the affection of a parent" (334) and that she calls both Henry and Harriet her children. But although Mrs. Fielding claims that Henry is like a son to her, and the narrator continually describes her as a maternal figure, the fact is that Mrs. Fielding plays the role of the mother "from a distance"—unlike Martha Goodwin, who has taken the responsibility of educating Harriet after her mother's death, mainly because she is economically dependent and does not want to be a burden on her family.[13] Mrs. Fielding goes on with her life and helps Henry, though we never see her teaching or nursing him, not even when he is accidentally wounded. It is true that while his life is in danger she receives no visitors in her house, but we do not see her by his bedside soothing his pain. Indeed, although she encourages his career as a doctor, her fortune allows her to hire others to do "dirty work" of manipulating a position for him: "The day of the election of the physician for the hospital at length arrived; when the rival candidate having, in consequence of a private visit from Mrs. Fielding's agent, relinquished his pretensions" (290). It is true that Mrs. Fielding confesses to Henry that he is like a son to her, but by then he is already an adult and therefore the only thing he needs from her is financial or professional advice, not the tender care of a mother. In fact, she becomes his patroness not so much because he has awakened her maternal instincts, but because he reminds her of the man she so passionately loved, Mr. Sydney. As he explains to Henry: "You soon caught her attention, and the ardour with which she pressed you to her bosom, while tears stole from her eyes, convinced my wife that she had a more than ordinary interest in him from whom you sprung" (250).

Unlike Charlotte Percy, in *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, melancholic and depressed because of "how circumscribed are the limits of those duties to a female, who has no longer any parent to attend on: no family to manage" (Hamilton [1796] 1999, 302), Hamilton, in *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education*, stresses how the absence of the burden of a husband and children has allowed her to be useful to other women:[14]

[13] As Kern explains, making the old maid play the role of the mother was "one way eighteenth-century novelists came to terms with the inevitability of numerous unmarried women" ([1986] 1987, 208).

[14] Although there are obvious similarities between Hamilton and Charlotte—both are orphaned, unmarried women who have cared for a widowed uncle, and in a sense Charlotte could be considered a self-portrait—the fact is that, as most critics have pointed out, Hamilton distances herself significantly from this figure. Unlike

> Placed by Providence in a situation undisturbed by the pressure of life's cares […] I should have deemed myself highly culpable, if I had declined the task to which I was called by friendship, and urged by the hope which is dear to every generous mind—the hope of being in some degree useful. […] But to be an humble instrument in routing my sex from the lethargy of quiescent indolence, to the exertion of those faculties which the bounty of a kind Providence has conferred […] ([1801] 2010, 269-70)

With a character like Mrs. Fielding, Hamilton is not only rejecting negative stereotypes about single women but also creating a positive role for spinsters like herself. She showed her readers that it was possible for an unmarried woman to have a varied, interesting, useful and fulfilled life. Dr. Orwell explains this very well in the novel. After asserting that Jesus Christ came to abolish any distinction between the sexes and fix purity and humility in human hearts, he concludes:

> And believe me, my children, the heart that is thus prepared, will not be apt to murmur at its lot in life. It will be ready to perceive, that true dignity consists not in the nature of the duty that is required of us, but in its just performance. The single woman whose mind is embued with these virtues, while she employs her leisure in cultivating her own understanding, and instructing that of others, in seeking for objects on which to exert her charity and benevolence, and in offices of kindness and good-will to her fellow-creatures, will never consider her situation as abject or forlorn. ([1800] 2000, 103)

Mrs. Fielding never regrets being single. On the contrary, her life subverts the idea that marriage and motherhood are the only routes to happiness. Both the character, Mrs. Fielding, and her creator, Elizabeth Hamilton teach the female reader that a woman does not need the protection of a male to achieve self-fulfilment, that there are other ways in which a woman can use her superior mind and exercise her benevolent affections for the good of society.

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Charlotte who is incapable of overcoming her grief and has sunk into a purposeless existence, Hamilton herself followed the advice that Mr. Denbeigh gives Charlotte by publishing her work "for the instruction, or innocent amusement of others" ([1796] 1999, 303).

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