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‘SHE HAD RECOURSE TO HER PEN’  
Radical Voices in Elizabeth Hamilton’s  
*Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*

Yi-Cheng Weng



The public, that part of it, at least, with whom novels form the great portion of amusement, is infinitely obliged to [Elizabeth Hamilton] for this admirable exposition of Godwinian principles, and the more so, for having given it in the form of a novel; for the same means by which the poison is offered, are, perhaps, the best by which their antidote may be rendered efficacious. It will in this shape find its way into the circulating libraries of the country, whence is daily issued such a pestiferous portion of what are termed enlightened and liberal sentiments.

—*Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* (1801)<sup>1</sup>

*THE ANTI-JACOBIN REVIEW* was warm in its praise of Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, her second novel, published in 1800. The review writes that Hamilton’s ‘admirable exposition’ of the new philosophical principles ‘in the form of a novel’ rendered *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* worthy to be classified as ‘the first novel of the day’.<sup>2</sup> It regards Hamilton as an exceptional case among ‘female writers of the day [who are] corrupted by the voluptuous dogmas of Mary Godwin [Wollstonecraft], or her more profligate imitators’, and aligns her with Hannah More, one prominent conservative dubbed ‘the most unexceptionable female writer of the times’ by *The Anti-Jacobin Review*.<sup>3</sup> These remarks reflect wider negative views of novels in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, among them Vicesimus Knox’s sense of the age as ‘more corrupt than the preceding’ due to the widening market for fiction, and Charles Lamb’s description of popular novels as ‘scanty intellectual viands of the whole female reading public’.<sup>4</sup>

Like most commentators of this period who saw novels as a ‘complicated drug’ and were quick to characterise them as precipitating the degradation of society, Elizabeth Hamilton was aware of the perceived danger posed by novels to the growing reading public.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, she perceived the novel as a medium through which to communicate with her audience, and delineate her ideas of femininity, domesticity and religion. However, her outspoken ridicule and caricatures of contemporary radicals in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* ‘did not extend into the blanket condemnation of whiggish radical and liberal politics’, but presents a more complicated case when placed in the context of the early nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Our understanding of female writers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has been significantly revised by a growing body of scholarship in recent decades.<sup>7</sup> My investigation of Hamilton's novels aims to add to the existing scholarship on conservative writers, and to complicate our understanding of the much-neglected Hamilton, whose published work remains underappreciated and her influence, I believe, not yet fully acknowledged.<sup>8</sup>

In her 2010 *Women Writers and the Edinburgh Enlightenment*, Pam Perkins locates Hamilton within Edinburgh philosophical and literary culture, illustrating the capability of women writers for producing polemical and ambitious works and for participating in contemporary political debates. The first book-length monograph devoted to Hamilton appeared shortly afterwards, in 2012, by Claire Grogan. While Grogan examines Hamilton's literary output across a wide range of genres, this article will mainly focus on Hamilton's second novel *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, with other examples obtained from her other works and contemporary writings. I will situate her fictional representations of radical principles within the trajectory of the gradual decline of radical voices from the mid-1790s onwards, as a part of my wider project exploring women writers' divergent response to political and social disputes in the novel form in this period.

Jon Mee has suggested that '[t]he world of literary relations, including those between writers and their readers, and between readers and texts, was broadly construed in terms of a conversation of culture'.<sup>9</sup> Exploring Hamilton's fictional representations and caricatures in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* involves an investigation of the novel form and its capacity to deliver and influence social and moral values in this period—a capacity that can transform reading experiences into action, from the public sphere on the one hand to private domestic surroundings on the other. By the early nineteenth century, fear of the potential dangers posed by novels was widespread, and observations about the mass consumption of novels were well documented in contemporary writings. In 1805, Hugh Murray argued that novel readers 'seek only for amusement, and wish to find it without trouble or thought'.<sup>10</sup> In addition, he maintained that novels provide only 'false views of human life', 'inspire fantastic and visionary expectations' and generate in readers 'a disposition to choose the plan of conduct which leads to extraordinary adventures, rather than that which true wisdom points out'. Similarly Knox, writing in 1779, noted that 'the great multiplication of Novels has probably contributed to [the age's] degeneracy', for they were allowed to enter private domestic life, to 'pollute the heart in the recesses of the closet, inflame the passions at a distance from temptation, and teach all the malignity of vice in solitude'.<sup>11</sup> According to these views, novels almost imperceptibly influence injudicious and inexperienced readers, '[leading] the fancy through a beautiful wilderness of delights' and '[filling] the heart with pure, manly, bold, and liberal sentiments', which are 'perfectly well adapted to the young mind'.<sup>12</sup> These remarks suggest that readers were likely to indulge in wishful fantasy and imaginary utopia, and that such speculations were reinforced by novels. Accordingly, it is this 'predominance of imagination over reason' that rendered the novel 'a source of cultural and social

anxiety', and further engendered the frequent association between women and novels, which was seen as degrading morality and inflicting social conflicts.<sup>13</sup>

These radical utopias lay at the centre of the anti-Jacobin attack. In an atmosphere of political turmoil and social crisis, and amid a sense that decisive changes were necessary and imminent, anti-Jacobin writers reaffirmed the value of history and experience. In the preface to his anti-Jacobin novel *The Vagabond* (1799), George Walker denounces Jacobin reformers and their radical imaginations:

[M]any self-important reformers of mankind, who, having heated their imaginations, sit down to write *political romances*, which never were, and never will be practical; but which, coming into the hands of persons as little acquainted with human nature, the history of mankind, and the proofs of religious authenticity, as themselves, hurry away the mind from common life into dreams of ideal felicity; or, by breaking every moral tie (while they declaim about morals), turn loose their disciples upon the world, to root up and overthrow every thing which has received the sanction of ages, and been held sacred by men of real genius and erudition.<sup>14</sup>

Conservative novelists like Walker were not merely creating fiction, but were carefully culling progressive ideas from their radical contemporaries that 'never will be practical', and integrating these 'imaginings' into the composition of their fictional narratives to produce parodies of new philosophical ideas. The attack focuses on radicals' failure to distinguish fact from fiction and theories from realities in their often emotional arguments, attempting to suggest that radical principles are dangerous and misleading to an extent that even 'radicals themselves are unable to grasp the distinction between the real and the illusory'.<sup>15</sup> Following this vein, the aim of conservative commentators is to present radical principles as whimsical and subversive in nature, likely to be falsely adopted, and liable to destroy all fair domestic and public values.

Examples demonstrating the impracticality of new philosophical principles can be found in Hamilton's three-volume *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800). This novel is presented as half-destroyed and found by a pseudonymous editor Geoffrey Jarvis in the drawers in his lodging. Convinced that 'to expose that [evil] tendency [in works] to the unsuspecting, and to point it out to the unwary, is an office of charity, not only innocent, but meritorious', Jarvis subsequently submits the manuscript to George Robinson, the renowned London publisher who saw the publication of many Jacobin works in his time.<sup>16</sup> The novel centres on three main characters—Bridgetina Botherim, Julia Delmond and Harriet Orwell—and describes how each of them are influenced by the new philosophy respectively. The novel warns readers of the dangerous consequences of following revolutionary radicalism, through a series of events characterised by social disgrace, sexual forwardness, abandonment, elopement, familial destruction and premature death.

In *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, Hamilton candidly satirises William Godwin, a central voice within radical thought, and his intellectual circle, in particular Mary Hays. *The Anti-Jacobin Review* explicitly pointed out the close

affinity between Mary Hays and Bridgetina Botherim: 'Part of it we offer to our readers as an excellent imitation of that vicious and detestable stuff which has issued from the pen of M—y H—s'.<sup>17</sup> Hamilton's contemptuous caricature of Hays is undeniably explicit: as the *Anti-Jacobin* put it, 'the whole character of Bridgetina so strongly resembles that of this impassioned Godwinian, that it is impossible to be mistaken'. Bridgetina is portrayed as an ardent follower of Godwinian principles who 'never read[s] any thing but novels and metaphysics' (p. 38). This is partly attributed to her mother Mrs Botherim, who takes delight in observing Bridgetina's intellectual performance, and neglects to correct her flawed judgement and improper behaviour. The result is that Bridgetina enjoys the company of and freely converses with other New Philosophers. In *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, Bridgetina frequently parrots William Godwin's ideas in *Enquiry concerning Political Justice and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793), and employs his principles to justify her behaviour—openly declaring her love to Henry Sydney (who does not return her feelings), and wilfully pursuing him to London. Since she is 'never accustomed to pay any attention to the affairs of life, and ignorant of all the manners and habits of society' (p. 279), her own perceptions and interpretations of the new philosophical ideas are often presented as whimsical and erroneous. When questioned about the impracticality of her theories, Bridgetina justifies her treatment and understanding of these principles by arguing that her 'scheme [...] is too extensive for any but a mind of great powers to comprehend. It is not bounded by the narrow limits of individual happiness, but extends to embrace the grand object of general utility', which is 'beyond the comprehension of a vulgar mind' (p. 222). Her reading of and unquestioned enthusiasm for the new philosophical ideas, in this sense, only serves 'in a purely self-serving manner' that has no real use in society.<sup>18</sup>

Julia Delmond, another of the novel's central figures, perhaps named after the sentimental protagonist in Rousseau's notorious *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse*, also embraces the new philosophical ideas. Unlike Bridgetina, she seems to accept these ideas instantly without any reasoning at all, for she considers herself 'so much wiser than the rest of the world' (p. 87). Her unquestioning acceptance of radical ideas is partly due to her limited education and the influence of her dotting father Captain Delmond, who is reminiscent of Mrs Botherim in terms of their misplaced confidence in their daughters' wisdom and abilities. It is with this confidence that Julia is 'a being of a superior order' that Captain Delmond allows her to manage her time and to pursue knowledge 'with a free command of all the books which either the private collections of his friends or the circulating library could furnish' (p. 85). Although she reads 'with pleasure books of philosophy, history, and travels' (p. 85), Julia shows a particular appetite for novels, finding 'a pleasure still more poignant in devouring the pages of a novel or romance in her own apartment' (pp. 85–86). Bridgetina and Julia's unsupervised reading of novels and limited understanding of abstruse theories later lead to their misfortunes in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*.

Based on her construction of the new philosophers in this novel, Hamilton is able to show that “‘things as they are’ [can] go horribly wrong under the direction of individuals betrayed by their haphazard reading of novels and political theory’.<sup>19</sup> Julia’s undisciplined novel reading produces a ‘wild and ungoverned imagination’ that is ‘paramount in her breast’, and prevents her from ‘the investigation of truth [for it] had no longer any charm’ (p. 86). Thus, her sentiment and imagination are nourished against the cultivation of her judgment, and Julia becomes engrossed in her own chimeras with the result that ‘in vain’ can ‘her reason revolt at the absurdities’ in radical theories. In this respect, she is seduced both by her own unsupervised, uncritical reading and by the villainous philosopher Vallaton’s artful eloquence and interpretation of the new philosophical theories. This is made clear in a scene in which Julia is rendered practically speechless when Vallaton attempts to talk her down by illustrating the concept of parental tyranny:

The false views in which things appear to your understanding is truly to be regretted. And so you are indebted to this gentleman, because, forsooth, *in the hateful spirit of monopoly, he chose by despotic and artificial means to engross a pretty woman to himself.* [...] Was it not because he believed himself your father, that he thus provided for you? In what a contemptible light does philosophy teach us to view this prejudice? [...] *In a state of equality, it will be a question of no importance to know who is the parent of each individual child. It is aristocracy, self-love, and family pride, that teach us to set a value upon it at present.* And for this offspring of aristocratic prejudice, this selfish affection which your father had for you because you were *his*, and not the offspring of some other man, haply more worthy than himself, he is entitled to your duty and your gratitude! Mistaken Julia! I wish you would exert the energies of your mind, to conquer prejudices so unworthy of your understanding. (p. 92)

In this speech, key Godwinian terms are italicised for the reader by Hamilton, and annotated by a footnote which explicitly indicates that quotations are from Godwin’s *Political Justice*. Here Vallaton alludes to Godwin’s idea that the institution of marriage is ‘a system of fraud’ and ‘the most odious of all monopolies’, and his view of self-love, notoriously set out in *Political Justice*.<sup>20</sup> Vallaton illustrates what he considers ‘a glaring proof of the most odious selfishness’ (p. 92) by referring to Julia’s father. Julia, unable to respond to the forceful eloquence conspicuously displayed here ‘with her heart palpitating with various contending emotions’, is ‘[a]bashed at the conviction of her filial weakness’, and finally fails to utter her own defence (pp. 93, 92).

Julia’s ability to respond to and resist Vallaton’s radical ideas is stripped away by her limited comprehension. In this respect, Julia is completely deprived of voice and agency and thus is liable to surrender to Vallaton’s elopement plan when he contends that the act of elopement is ‘a duty of a very serious nature’ (p. 236) later in this novel:

Has it not been to demonstration proved, that the prejudices of *filial duty*, and *affection, gratitude to benefactors*, and *regard to promises*, are the great barriers to the state of perfect virtue? These obstacles to perfection it is the glory of philosophy to demolish, and the duty of every person, impressed with a sense of perfectibility, to remove.  
(pp. 235–36)<sup>21</sup>

In his arguments Julia now sees 'the grand effort of a noble mind, that rose superior to the vulgar prejudices of an ill-constituted society' (p. 236), so eventually agrees to elope with him. Despite Vallaton's persuasive eloquence and Julia's flawed judgment, it is noteworthy that she is ruined partly by her own desire to be considered radical and to some extent avant-garde. This leaves Julia receptive to the new philosophical ideas, which in part imply that 'denying revelation is but one step towards the state of perfection to which the human mind is so speedily advancing' (pp. 87–88). Therefore, by agreeing to their elopement, Julia considers herself setting 'an example of moral rectitude, by throwing off the ignoble chains of filial duty' (p. 236), and contributing to promote the happiness of the public.

As Miriam L. Wallace reminds us, 'education and persuasion are central content elements of [the novels of the 1790s], with erroneous education as important as good education in driving the narrative'.<sup>22</sup> Hamilton's fictional representations of Julia and Bridgetina creates a space for the exemplary character of Harriet Orwell, as well as indicating her own response to radical theories of the 1790s. In *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, Harriet is presented as an amiable, careful, considerate and modest heroine. Readers learn that Harriet possesses 'so little [...] of the prying spirit of curiosity', and that 'so easily could she controul the feelings of her well-regulated mind' (p. 151). This sets Harriet drastically apart from the radical Julia and Bridgetina. Harriet's admirable qualities can be attributed, at least partly, to her being a committed Christian and her firm adherence to religious principles. In a scene when she reasons with Julia about the power of Christian faith, Harriet argues for God's 'immutability' to 'fix as well as to exalt our virtue':

Our reason far from shining with unvaried lustre, is perpetually liable to be obscured by passion or prejudice, we cannot, therefore, always trust to its decision; but when we are in the constant habit of referring our actions to the judgment of a Being whose moral attributes are unchangeable, the clouds of passion and prejudice are dispelled, and reason again shines forth with steadiness and vigour. (p. 164)

Harriet's remark is determinedly founded upon her religious faith, and her belief in the power of the 'Divine standard' (p. 164) to refrain passions from leading to 'the most egregious mistakes' (p. 165). Unlike Bridgetina and Julia, Harriet has, in the words of her aunt, been 'early instructed in the necessity of submitting the passions to the authority of reason' and 'ha[s] learned to control the throbbing tumult of the heart, when it beats for selfish sorrows' (p. 188). Therefore, even when Harriet 'beam[s] with a superior expression of delight', that delight is so well 'regulated by the transcendant delicacy of her mind, that it require[s] a delicacy similar to her own to read its full extent' (p. 74). These qualities allow her always

to judge 'by the eternal rules of impartial truth and justice' (p. 188). Even before she perishes, Julia regrets that

If, like them, I had been taught to devote the actions of every day to my GOD; and instead of encouraging a gloomy and querulous discontent against the present order of things, had employed myself in a vigilant performance of the duties of my situation, and a scrupulous government of my own heart and inclinations, how very different would my situation now have been! (p. 383)

The importance of Christian faith is a common theme in Hamilton's works. In her first novel *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796), Hamilton shows how atheism, which was 'purveyed to the middle classes by Godwin and to the lower classes by Paine', may render domestic women morally impure through the example of Miss Ardent.<sup>23</sup> In a similar way, in *Memoirs of the Life of Agrippina, Wife of Germanicus* (1804), the fall of Rome is attributed at least partly to the lack of a firm Christian religion, while Agrippina's lack of a firm religious faith engenders her misery. It can be seen that, in Gary Kelly's words, 'Christian virtues are equated with those conventionally ascribed to women, and society is envisaged as a family'.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, a lack of religion undermined the 'ideological defence against the passions and ambition of [the] time [...] and thereby unintentionally contributed to the decline and fall of [the] country'. In *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, Hamilton appeals to the power of religious faith in defiance of new philosophical ideas, and to the possibility of employing religion in the cultivation of women's rationality, further making worthy Harriet the opposed counterpart to the irrational Bridgetina and Julia. However, as Pam Perkins notes, 'Harriet and her quietly unexciting virtues will seem all the more pallid and dull by force of contrast with Bridgetina' and she also 'fades into the background even in contrast with Julia'.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, in her juxtaposition of these three heroines (or anti-heroines), Hamilton presents 'a model of three different versions of feminine intellectual pursuits, and [...] suggests that it is the dispassionate intellectualism of Hume (at least in his role as a historian) that offers the best model for women of literary tastes'. This can be seen in the scene when Henry Stanley visits the Orwell family. Harriet, who has already 'performed every domestic task, and [...] regulated the family economy for the day', is engrossed in listening to the Scottish philosopher David Hume's *History of England* (1754–62) read by 'a little orphan girl she had herself instructed' (p. 73). Hamilton clearly thought highly of Hume and his historical writings, if not so much his philosophical ideas.<sup>26</sup> Placing Hume's *History of England* in the hands of the virtuous and judicious Harriet does more to affirm the respectability of Hume's work and celebrate the 'dispassionate' tone of historians, than to underline Hamilton's links with the Edinburgh intellectual circle and the Common Sense Philosophy illuminated by her mentor Dugald Stewart.<sup>27</sup> In so doing, Hamilton to some extent sought to enlist her philosophical connection with Scottish philosophers in order to validate her own assumptions and integrate moral philosophy in her characterisation of Harriet's committed religious beliefs.

In the fictional character of Harriet, Hamilton is able to illustrate her appeal for the cultivation of the female mind and places it on a firm Christian foundation.

Hamilton's treatment of the fallen heroines in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* diverges greatly from that of other anti-Jacobin novelists. In many anti-Jacobin versions of the seduction of women, innocent heroines are prone to be attracted by the courtly manners and cogent eloquence of their villainous seducers, and eventually abandoned by their family and deprived of emotional and economic securities. Their own errors and sexual indiscretions can only be atoned for through either permanent outcast from society or premature death. One pertinent example featured in the conservative Jane West's novel *A Tale of the Times* (1799), in which the protagonist Geraldine is seduced by the villain Fitzosborne, who is characterised by his unbridled lust and adherence to libertine values. Although Geraldine is portrayed as a woman of firmness and with great mental strength, such that even a man as experienced as Fitzosborne 'had never yet encountered the resistance of a firm superior mind' as hers, his unrivalled eloquence proves to be too great to be conquered in the end.<sup>28</sup> After she becomes a fallen woman, Geraldine recognises that 'judging from what is known, the world is right in its renunciation of me. No rules are prescribed for my future conduct, except seclusion, repentance, and death'.<sup>29</sup> Geraldine's fall is portrayed as an irrevocable one, and she is doomed for the severe consequences it invokes. However, it is important to note that, unlike West, Hamilton does not portray an irredeemable fate for her heroines, at least not for both of them. It is Julia who exemplifies the typical fallen heroine beguiled by her own imaginations and judgments, and who, eventually abandoned by the villain, breaks her parents' heart, becomes an outcast of society, and can only atone for her mistakes through death. Unlike her treatment of Julia, Hamilton takes a different view of Bridgetina, enabling her to recognise her erroneous behaviour and to redeem her previous errors. This is channelled through Julia's final words:

Ah, Bridgetina! could I indeed impress you with a sense of what my mind now feels, I should not die in vain. [...] What, my Bridgetina, are the fruits of the doctrines we have so unhappily been led to embrace? *In me you behold them!* In vain will you exclaim, in the jargon to which we have been accustomed, against the *prejudices of society*, as if to them were owing the load of misery that sinks me to a premature grave. Ah! no. Those prejudices, against which we have been accustomed so bitterly to rail, I now behold as a salutary fence, which, if I had never dared to overleap, would have secured my peace. [...] it was my own pride, my own vanity, my own presumption, that were the real seducers that undid me. [...] Go home to your mother, my Biddy; and in the sober duties of life forget the idle vagaries which our distempered brains dignified with the name of philosophy. (pp. 382–83)

Although in the end, Julia's transgression proves too great to be ignored or even redeemed, Hamilton allows Julia to impart her experience and changed attitudes

to Bridgetina. This move arguably reveals her tolerant position on indiscretion, and provides an alternative rendering of the trope of the fallen women.

The necessity of cultivating women's intellect in order for them to become rational thinkers is highlighted here. Hamilton's belief therefore unexpectedly aligns with that of the pioneering feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, who argues that like men, women 'must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in'.<sup>30</sup> Hamilton's characterisation of Godwinian figures illustrates the ways in which the blurring of fact and fiction bewilders readers and obscures their immature judgement. This concern is also articulated by Clara Reeve in the preface of her *Memoirs of Sir Roger de Clarendon, the Natural Son of Edward Prince of Wales, Commonly Called the Black Prince* (1793):

Many attempts have been made of late years to build fictitious stories upon historical names and characters; the foundations were bad, and the structures have fallen down. To falsify historical facts and characters is a kind of sacrilege against those great names upon which history has affixed the seal of truth. The consequences are mischievous; it misleads young minds eager in the search of truth, and enthusiasts in the pursuit of those virtues which are objects of their admiration, upon whom one true character has more effect than a thousand fictions.<sup>31</sup>

These remarks underline her uneasiness that the failure of such attempts may risk misguiding injudicious readers. Thus, Reeve intends to provide the 'young and ingenuous minds [not] yet uncontaminated by the vile indolence, effeminacy, and extravagance of modern life and manners' with a work that can 'entertain their minds without corrupting their hearts'.<sup>32</sup> She believes that

[i]f reflecting upon these faint sketches of illustrious characters should stimulate a few readers to imitate those virtues they can admire; [...] if surveying both with candour and impartiality, they should select the good and reform the evil—this will be a noble reward for the labour and industry of the author:—then will she take leave of the public with the sentence of the Roman actor:

Valete et Plaudite!<sup>33</sup>

Reeve aims to cultivate readers to become rational thinkers themselves who can exercise judgement to point out the inadequacies of flawed discourses. This conception was clearly shared by Hamilton, who argues for the necessity for readers, in particular female readers, to cultivate their own intellect in order to reach more mature judgements. It is with this intention that Hamilton takes 'recourse to her pen [...] to restore that intellectual vigour which the whole course of their present mode of education tends so effectually to destroy' (p. 252).

It is also noteworthy that Hamilton's response to the abuse of radical principles was constructed in the context of the philosophical principles of Revolutionists in the late eighteenth century. As David Simpson reminds us, there were noticeable transformations in French Revolutionary thought in the course of the 1790s. His observation about the French Philosophers and the development of their rational

thought leads to his argument that 'it was the Jacobin revolt *against* rational system that accompanied and sponsored the most violent phase of the Revolution in 1792 and 1793'; Rousseau, one of the most notorious emblems of sensibility and radicalism, was then 'invoked as the apologist not of rational perfectibility but of natural virtue and spontaneous emotionalism'.<sup>34</sup> According to Simpson, it was during this time that 'France transferred its national imagination from an excessive worship of reason to an equally excessive celebration of sensibility'. Therefore, when 'the middle ground of common sense and gradual evolution was imaged as unavailable' to them, the radicals started to behave as 'sentimentalists, rakes, and libertines'. This wild enthusiasm for sensibility provided their anti-Jacobin counterparts with a vantage point from which to write against the excessive expressions of emotions and sentiments in radical writings, and was taken negatively especially by some female writers of the 1790s as morally deficient.

In addition, what is also noteworthy is that references to and representations of Godwin's ideas in this novel are often presented as fragmentary. Although Godwin's principles are quoted substantially in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, they constitute only part of the dangerous principles delineated in the novel. As M. O. Grenby reminds us, 'literary anti-Jacobinism [...] did not think of itself as waging a war against ideas, but against a more worrying menace still—the absence of any guiding principle whatsoever'.<sup>35</sup> By putting the ideas as 'a set of non-principles cobbled together to give the most flimsy of theoretical bases to the desire of malicious individuals to act as they liked without restraint or compunction', these individuals become 'part of the heritage of new philosophy, irrespective of what their philosophy might have been'. Here Grenby contests the notion that anti-Jacobin novels 'were designed to counter some specific protagonists and tenets of the new philosophy'. Instead, he argues that these 'tangential' quotations from radical texts is one method anti-Jacobin novelists used not only 'to attack new philosophy whilst never actually engaging in debate on its ideas and issues' and 'construct new philosophy in its most vulnerable form', but perhaps most importantly, to 'forge an alloy of new philosophy which they then contorted to fit their own purposes'.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, it can be argued that these citations are, to some extent, embellishments employed chiefly to enhance readers' empathy by identifying fictional characters with radical dangers. In her reply, written on 13 March 1797, to the accusations made by Mary Hays that Hamilton's first novel *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* carried out a satirical attack on her, Hamilton claimed:

In my opinion it is a strange sort of a compliment you pay your friend Mr Godwin, in taking it for granted that he has made a monopoly of all the absurdity, and extravagance in the world; and that it is impossible to laugh at any thing ridiculous without pointing at him.<sup>37</sup>

Grenby's observation helpfully reinforces my previous argument that Hamilton's primary intention is not to discuss or revolt against the new philosophical ideas themselves, but to reveal the threat underlying these principles when presented to the injudicious and unwary reader. This also signifies, I think, that Godwin and his radical principles serve only as the pretext for Hamilton's attack on Jacobin

radicalism in this novel. Hamilton's reply, quoted above, further backs up this supposition that her disparaging quotations in *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* were not designed to counter individual radicals; what underlies such apparent caricatures is her aim to highlight and later to castigate the follies of their principles.

Only a few years after this quarrel, in 1800, Hamilton published *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, and launched an even more comprehensive satirical attack on her radical contemporaries, Hays in particular. The purpose of her ridicule is elucidated in the novel:

Of the keen weapon of ridicule, it must be confessed, [Hamilton] has not been sparing. Were there the least appearance of its having been pointed by personal prejudice towards any individual, I should certainly advise you to consign the work to everlasting oblivion; but it is opinions, not persons, at which the shafts of ridicule are in the present work directed. (p. 36)

Two years later, in the second volume of her *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education* published in 1802, Hamilton defends again her satirical writing in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*. She writes in a note that she is

apprehensive, that many who have been amused with the fiction which she at that time made the vehicle of her sentiments, have failed in drawing the inferences from it, which it was her wish to have rendered obvious. [...] Those who are incapable of general reasoning, think it impossible to draw genuine pictures of human character but from particulars. They are, therefore, for ever hunting after the originals from which such pictures must, in their opinion, have inevitably been drawn; and thus they lose the advantage that might have been derived from making proper inferences.<sup>38</sup>

Readers who insist on identifying the individuals satirised in this novel, contends Hamilton, run the risk of failing to give proper attention to her arguments about 'the utility of abstraction' and 'the fatal consequences arising from the incapacity for generalization'.<sup>39</sup>

In a personal letter written to one Dr S— in September 1802, Hamilton laments that 'so very few people read with any other view but that of amusement, that the hope of being useful must be confined within very narrow limits'.<sup>40</sup> Underlying this passage are Hamilton's views on women's education, which were greatly influenced by the educational theories of Dugald Stewart, Edinburgh professor of moral philosophy and also mentor of Hamilton, who argued for 'the need for women's education to enable them to fulfil their social obligations and to contribute to the progress of society as a whole'.<sup>41</sup> In fact, it was also Stewart who 'encouraged [Hamilton] to resume the idea' of composing *Memoirs of the Life of Agrippina*, for he believed that the characters were 'so well adapted' that they would make a strong case for her enlightened educational principles.<sup>42</sup> Although here Hamilton's nineteenth-century biographer Elizabeth Bengier is referring to Hamilton's 'philosophical application of history and biography' in composing *Memoirs of the Life of Agrippina*, these remarks reveals her enlightened under-

standing of the mind.<sup>43</sup> The improvement of mind, she believes, can be achieved through the cultivation of reason and judgment. This is also suggested in the following passage that prefaced *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*:

it appears to me to have been the intention of [Hamilton] not to pass an indiscriminate censure on the ingenious, and in many parts admirable, performance, but to expose the dangerous tendency of those parts of his theory which might, by a bad man, be converted into engine of mischief, and be made the means of ensnaring innocence and virtue. [...] The ridiculous point of view in which some of the opinions conveyed to the young and unthinking through the medium of philosophical novels, is exhibited in the character of Bridgetina, appears to me as an excellent antidote to the poison; [...] Upon the whole, I do not hesitate to give it as my opinion, that in publishing this work, you will deserve the thanks of society. (pp. 35–37)

This account of the novel recognises the ways in which Hamilton illustrates the consequences of being ignorant of the new philosophical ideas, and appeals directly to readers for a fair judgement of the impracticality and dangers lurking behind libertinism.

Such a view of *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* prefigures Maria Edgeworth's 1816 obituary, 'Character and Writing of Mrs Elizabeth Hamilton', in which she sees Hamilton's intention as 'to expose those whose theory and practice differ; to point out the difficulty of applying high-flown principles to the ordinary but necessary concerns of human life; and to show the danger of bringing every man to become in his own moralist and logician.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Hamilton skilfully displays the threat brought by contemporary novels and conveys her anxiety to the reader through her fictional representations in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*. Her intention is fully illustrated in one of her letters:

By most of the pious people and pious writers I have met with, the imagination is treated as a sort of evil spirit, that must be exorcised and laid at rest; but in my opinion, it is very impious, and surely very ungrateful, thus to treat the first of blessings, without which judgment will be but a sour old maid, producing nothing.<sup>45</sup>

In this respect, it can be argued that through the discursive space provided by the novel form, she was able to challenge and destabilise political radicalism in the early nineteenth century, and more importantly, to pass this message to her audience in an effective manner. This point speaks to what Perkins claims as Hamilton's 'cultural importance', which, as implied in Edgeworth's obituary, is founded upon her 'graceful evasion of the supposed dichotomy between proper femininity and a desire for a public intellectual or literary life'.<sup>46</sup> What Hamilton does is to negotiate a discursive space for herself, and to shed light upon the gendered conventions of public participation, which infiltrated almost every level of political life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Such a strategy obviously received positive responses from contemporary readers, as *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* went through two editions during the first year

of publication, and as her biographer Benger records, Hamilton received 'a most pleasing testimony in a letter from a young woman [...], who confessed she had detected herself in Bridgetina, and instantly abjured the follies and absurdities which created the resemblance'.<sup>47</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The point that women writers in the Revolutionary period were concerned about contemporary political and social issues is explicitly made by Charlotte Smith in the preface to her novel *Desmond*. Writing in 1792, Smith remarks that 'But women it is said have no business with politics.—Why not?,—Have they no interest in the scenes that area acting around them, in which they have fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, or friends engaged!'<sup>48</sup> My investigation of *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* has developed a sense of the complexity of anti-Jacobin women writers' thought, and revealed a much more complicated and accommodating literary strand lying behind the work of individual woman writers of this period. Although there are distinctive differences between women writers of this period, regardless of either their radical or conservative approaches, the diversity of their views does not seem to override their shared concern for the improvement of women's education in general. A considerable number of literary works on female manners and education were published during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including Mary Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and Catharine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790). The epistolary form Hamilton employed in *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education*, so frequently seen in late eighteenth-century works, provides her writing on women's education with 'the veneer of private sociable discourse', and it influenced later women writers who were 'varied in their political and social views', such as Laetitia Matilda Hawkins, Hannah More, and Jane West.<sup>49</sup> When placing Hamilton in the context of the cultural and literary prominence of women writers in this period, she may seem far from unique in articulating her concerns. However, as this study demonstrates, she reconsiders women's roles in both domestic and public discourses and challenges the disparate and uneven standards for women's education and for the cultivation of female intellect.

A closer inspection of Hamilton's presentation of the new philosophical ideas and the ways in which these ideas may bewilder unwary and inexperienced readers reveals 'a new discursive strategy' which is 'capable of capturing the loyalty of readers and, through them, securing the authority of the state', as employed in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*.<sup>50</sup> This notion helps advance our understanding of how women writers in the period produced and shaped their literary production whilst negotiating a space between their private and public duties and expectations, and enables us to better understand the reworking of the new philosophical ideas in anti-Jacobin novels in the early nineteenth century. Conditioned by the atmosphere of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Hamilton's characterisation of contemporary radicals and the new philosophy in *Memoirs of*

*Modern Philosophers* allows her to educate her audiences through her presentation of radical principles and reaffirmation of the importance of Christian religion in sustaining domestic and national peace. This is pertinently shown when Edgeworth wrote in an Irish paper that Hamilton 'does not aim at making women expert in the wordy war', but 'she has not, on the other hand, been deceived, or overawed, by those who would represent the study of the human mind as one that trends to no practical purpose, and that is unfit and unsafe for her sex'.<sup>51</sup> 

## NOTES

1. *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*, 7 (1801), 375.
2. 'New Philosophy' is a term used to describe British support for French revolutionary principles in general.
3. *Anti-Jacobin Review*, pp. 39, 374, 376.
4. Vicesimus Knox, *Essays, Moral and Literary* (London: Dilly, 1779), p. 185; Charles Lamb, *Essays of Elia, to Which Are Added Letters, and Rosamund, a Tale* (Paris: Baudry, 1835), p. 207.
5. Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 2 vols (London: Cadell & Davies, 1799), I, 34.
6. Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750–1810* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 329. For Guest's discussion of Hamilton's sense of the 'neutrality of middle-class women's domestic situation', see especially pp. 328–34.
7. See e.g. Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution, 1790–1827* (Oxford: OUP, 1993); Norma Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of the Woman of Letters* (London: Pimlico, 2004).
8. For scholarship that focuses on conservative discourses in this period, see e.g. M. O. Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005); Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790–1832* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010); Lisa Wood, *Modes of Discipline: Women, Conservatism, and the Novel after the French Revolution* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2003).
9. Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: OUP, 2011), p. 207.
10. Hugh Murray, *Morality of Fiction; or, an Inquiry into the Tendency of Fictitious Narratives, with Observations of Some of the Most Eminent* (Edinburgh: Mundell & Son, 1805), p. 40.
11. Knox, 'On Novel Reading', in *Essays Moral and Literary*, pp. 68, 70.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
13. Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution*, p. 13.
14. George Walker, *The Vagabond, a Novel* (London: G. Walker, 1799), pp. ix–x.
15. April London, 'Novel and History in Anti-Jacobin Satire', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 30 (2000), 74 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3509243>>.
16. Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, ed. by Claire Grogan (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1999), p. 35. Subsequent quotations are from this edition, and are given parenthetically in the text. Jacobin works published by George Robinson include William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794), *Enquiry*

- concerning the *Principles of Political Justice* (1793), *St Leon* (1799), and Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), among many others.
17. *Anti-Jacobin Review*, p. 371.
  18. Grogan, 'Introduction', in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, p. 20.
  19. April London, 'Radical Utopias: History and the Novel in the 1790s', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 16 (2004), 798 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/ecf.2004.0045>>.
  20. William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*, 2 vols (London: Robinson, 1793), II, 849–50. See especially the chapters 'Of Co-operation, Cohabitation and Marriage' and 'Of Self-Love and Benevolence'.
  21. Also see Godwin's *Political Justice*, especially the chapter 'Of Justice'.
  22. Miriam L. Wallace, *Revolutionary Subjects in the English 'Jacobin' Novel, 1790–1805* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2009), p. 25.
  23. Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution*, p. 141.
  24. *Ibid.*, p. 273; see also pp. 269–74 for a more in-depth discussion on *Memoirs of the Life of Agrippina*.
  25. Pam Perkins, *Women Writers and the Edinburgh Enlightenment* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 91–92.
  26. Mark Towsey notes that Hamilton 'treated Hume's skeptical philosophy with utmost severity' in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*—see "The Book Seemed to Sink into Oblivion": Reading Hume's *History* in Eighteenth-Century Scotland', in *David Hume: Historical Thinker, Historical Writer*, ed. by Mark G. Spencer (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), p. 94.
  27. In Maria Edgeworth's obituary of Elizabeth Hamilton, which was widely printed in several magazines in 1816, she praises Hamilton as an established and successful writer of fiction, but remarks that 'her claims to literary reputation as a philosophic, moral, and religious author, are of a higher sort'. See Edgeworth, 'Character and Writings of Mrs Elizabeth Hamilton', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 119 (1816), 624. Karen O'Brien and Pam Perkins both locate Hamilton in the history of Scottish Enlightenment. See O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009); Perkins, *Women Writers*.
  28. Jane West, *A Tale of the Times*, 3rd edn, 3 vols (London: Longman, 1803), II, 272.
  29. West, *A Tale of the Times*, pp. 328–29.
  30. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), p. 86. See especially chapter 2: 'The prevailing opinion of a sexual character discussed'. Wollstonecraft is treated rather favourably in *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*.
  31. Clara Reeve, *Memoirs of Sir Roger de Clarendon, the Natural Son of Edward, Prince of Wales, Commonly Called the Black Prince*, 3 vols (London: Hookham & Carpenter, 1793), I, xx–xxi. Gary Kelly further observes that 'Reeve's preface signals her old Whig allegiances by quoting [Plutarch's] justification for applying history to contemporary political events in order to rouse patriotic spirit in national crisis'—see 'Clara Reeve, Provincial Bluestocking: From the Old Whigs to the Modern Liberal State', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 65 (2002), 119.
  32. Reeve, *Sir Roger de Clarendon*, I, xxi.
  33. *Ibid.*, I, xxi–xxiii.
  34. David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt against Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 76.
  35. Grenby, *Anti-Jacobin Novel*, p. 75.

36. Ibid., pp. 76, 78.
37. Letter from Elizabeth Hamilton to Mary Hays, 13 Mar 1797, Pforzheimer Library, MS 2210; quoted in *The Idea of Being Free: A Mary Hays Reader*, ed. by Gina Luria Walker (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2006), p. 313. This quarrel between Hamilton and Hays is also recorded in Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution*, p. 143. Also see Gina Luria Walker, *Mary Hays (1759–1843): The Growth of a Woman's Mind* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), especially the third section: 'The Buried Life'.
38. Elizabeth Hamilton, *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education*, 2 vols (Bath: Cruttwell, 1802), II, 452n.
39. Ibid., II, 452.
40. Quoted in Elizabeth Benger, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Elizabeth Hamilton. With a Selection from her Correspondence, and Other Unpublished Writings* (London: Longman, 1818), p. 48.
41. O'Brien, *Women and Enlightenment*, p. 204. For a discussion on the association between women and history, and the use of history in educating women in the nineteenth century, see chapter 6.
42. Quoted in Benger, *Memoirs*, p. 49.
43. Ibid., p. 48.
44. Edgeworth, 'Character and Writings', p. 623. This obituary was widely printed in 1816, including *The Times*, *Monthly Magazine*, *Monthly Repository*, *Weekly Entertainer*, *Literary Panorama*, *Gentleman's Magazine* and also Benger's *Memoirs of Hamilton*. For the identification of these sources, I am indebted to Jane Rendall's "Elementary Principles of Education": Elizabeth Hamilton, Maria Edgeworth and the Uses of Common Sense Philosophy', *History of European Ideas*, 39 (2013), 613–30, n. 1.
45. Benger, *Memoirs*, p. 141.
46. Perkins, *Women Writers*, p. 63.
47. Benger, *Memoirs*, pp. 132–33.
48. Charlotte Smith, *Desmond*, ed. by Antje Blank and Janet Todd (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2001), p. 45.
49. See Perkins, *Women Writers*, pp. 61–62.
50. London, 'Novel and History', p. 72. Here, London refers to the close connection between literature and government, as explored by Thomas Mathias in his *Pursuits of Literature: A Satirical Poem in Four Dialogues*, first published in 1794.
51. Benger, *Memoirs*, pp. 210–11.

#### REFERRING TO THIS ARTICLE

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