

Biographical Note: Elizabeth Carter

Born in 1717 in Deal, Kent, Carter was the eldest daughter of the Rev. Nicholas Carter and Margaret Swayne Carter; the latter died when Elizabeth was ten years old, a death attributed, by some, to the fact the family lost much of its wealth in the bursting of the South Sea bubble, the famous stock scandal of the early C18.

Carter was anxious to prove herself as a scholar, and took great pains at her studies. She also took snuff and tea in order to stay awake at night and study more, so much so that she suffered recurrent headaches for the rest of her life. An almost obsessive student, Carter routinely arose between 4 and 5 in the morning and was such a nightowl that her father once congratulated on her on sticking to her resolution of going to bed no later than midnight.

She published her first work, a collection of poems, in 1738. Carter also developed considerable proficiency in French, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, German, along with some proficiency in Portuguese, Arabic, and Hebrew; Carter herself liked to relate an anecdote in which Samuel Johnson once remarked, of a well-known scholar, that he spoke Greek better than anyone Johnson had ever met, except Elizabeth Carter. With skill also in mathematics and astronomy, Carter seems to have been a veritable Renaissance woman – a particularly impressive achievement in an age when most women were routinely provided only the rudiments of liberal education.

Carter never married, but seemed to have an active social life via her association with the “Bluestockings” and her acquaintances in the literary world, including such notable figures as Samuel Johnson and **Horace Walpole**. She was an active supporter of charitable causes as well; she was, for instance, one of the first subscribers to an organization that provided relief to “reduced housekeepers” in the western part of London.

A staunch supporter of the English Church and established modes of government, Carter was outspoken in her attacks on the French Revolution, even in its earliest years, and her conservatism was evident in her literary assessments as well. Carter, for example, was a severe critic of the work of **Charlotte Smith**, whose novels she found insufficiently moral, and detested **Mary Wollstonecraft**’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*; on the other hand, Carter thought very highly of the romances of **Ann Radcliffe**.

Carter died in the early hours of 19 February 1806.

The above information has been taken from *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Elizabeth Carter, with a New Edition of Her Poems*, by the Rev. Montagu Pennington, 4th edition, 2 vol., London: James Cawthorn, 1825.

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