Lunarians and Reformers: Mary Hamilton's Utopian Writings

By Nicole Pohl

In the last three decades, the study of women writers and their careers in the eighteenth century has become a particularly rich field internationally. The range of women whose writing now receives critical and historical attention has expanded exponentially. Scholarship has moved from the simple project of recovering early modern and eighteenth-century women's writing to re-evaluating and, increasingly, complicating the relationship between gender and literary production. The extensive world of women's writing in late eighteenth-century England – novels, poetry, religious and educational works in particular – is now very well charted. Yet in spite of the flourishing of the Enlightenment in Scotland, very few Scottish women became writers in this period, even fewer writers of utopian literature.[1] There are no women at all listed in Richard Sher's authoritative study, *The Enlightenment and the Book* (2010) for that important generation of writers born between 1710 and 1739, the generation of David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. Nonetheless, there were a few Scottish women writing with reference to the concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment, though they chose to do so outside Scotland for a variety of reasons.

Lady Mary Hamilton née Leslie (1736–1822) was one of those writers. Her work was widely reviewed in the eighteenth century though it has received surprisingly little recent attention. Hamilton wrote five, mainly epistolary, novels, *Letters from the Duchess de Crui* (1776), *Memoirs of the Marchioness de Louvoi* (1777), *Munster Village* (1778), *The Life of Mrs Justman* (1782) (which has not survived) and *La famille du Duc de Popoli* (1810). All novels by Hamilton tapped into contemporary debates about the equality of the sexes and gendered education systems. Thus, particularly the *Letters from the Duchess of Crui and Others* and the *Memoirs of the Marchioness de Louvoi* are discourses on education and perfectibility and precede more radical works such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792, in particular Chapter XII: On National

Education).

Lady Mary Hamilton was the youngest daughter of Elizabeth Monypenny and Alexander Leslie, Earl of Leven and Leville.[2] In 1762, she married Dr James Walker. After bearing him six children, he deserted her and Hamilton struggled to support and educate her children, both by her writings and by her appeals to her family. She became the lover of Colonel George Robinson Hamilton, with whom she went to live in France, near Lille. She took his name, though they never formally married. George Hamilton died in 1797, and left Mary Walker his whole estate, including a Jamaica plantation. Sometime after Hamilton's death she moved to Amiens to set up house with the English scholar Sir Herbert Croft whose secretary, Charles Nodier, translated *Munster Village* and helped Lady Mary write her last novel in French, *La famille du duc de Popoli* (1810).

Munster Village was the most popular novel.[3] Originally published in London in 1778, it was reprinted in Dublin in 1779, translated by Charles Nodier and published in Paris in 1782 and 1811.[4] Hamilton herself declared the novel as her best.[5] *Munster Village* depicts the charitable life of the main protagonist, Lady Frances. After the death of her father, she inherits the entire family estate and decides that this inheritance demands social commitment and responsibility. As the narrator says, '[h]er education taught her, that virtue and abilities can only procure us real happiness, and that nothing but doing good, in that sphere of life in which we are placed, can afford true felicity to a noble soul.'[6] Lady Frances therefore founds a large charitable community on the grounds of the estate and at the same time, declines the marriage offer from a faithful admirer. Instead, she dedicates her life and assets to the community of Munster Village.

Munster Village promotes a fundamentally classical and humanist understanding of economy and society, an economic and political discourse that transpires in the eighteenth century as Country politics. It is based on a system of property and patronage and seeks to maintain the bond between property and social obligation against the contemporary movement towards commercial alienation of land. Although *Munster Village* is based on principles of education and perfectibility, it denies social mobility to those who pursue trade or commerce. While schooling is provided for a selected few of the population, there are no schools for factory or agricultural workers and there is no clear curriculum for women.

> *One angle of the tribuna is entirely dedicated to the education of women. Twenty young ladies are admitted, and there are funds for their perpetual maintenance, as that of the two hundred scholars. In the selection of these young gentlewomen, she always gives the preference to those who labour under any imperfection of body – endeavouring, by increasing their resources within themselves, to compensate for their outward defects. When it is found that any of these ladies have a taste for any manual or mental art, they cultivate it, and assist them in the pleasantest means, and by various little attentions confirm these inclinations with all the spirit of pursuit requisite to preserve minds (in general) from that state of languidness and inactivity, whereby life is rendered irksome to those who have never found it unfortunate. In this establishment she entirely runs counter to that of Madame de Maintenon's at Saint Cyr; where the young women, who should have been instructed in rural labours, and œconomy in the duties of a family, in the employments of Solomon's virtuous women, by their education, were only fit to be addressed by men who were rich enough to require in a wife nothing but virtue. (82)*

The first volume is in essence the description of the utopian project, its architecture and spaces. Munster Village is a geometrically planned town based on the model of Athens. In its centre is a circular building, a *tribuna*, which houses an academy, a public library, an observatory, a gallery, and further exhibition rooms for natural history and antiquities. The city also holds a hospital, botanical gardens, and manufactories and recommends a retirement home for animals. Farming land and hunting grounds are integrated into the grounds, and the aim is self-sufficiency. In the academy, two hundred male and twenty female scholars are educated, 'from the first elements of letters, thought the whole circle of the sciences; from the lowest class of grammatical learning to the highest degrees in the several faculties' (82). The education is aimed to further the natural dispositions and abilities of the scholars.

The second volume of *Munster Village* contains exemplary histories in the mode of conduct and commonplace books and reflects on issues of femininity, conduct, inequalities in marriage, and morality; these themes run throughout Hamilton's work and are central to the immensely popular conduct literature by writers of the Scottish Enlightenment such as John Gregory and James Fordyce. Yet, *Munster Village* delineates an epistemic shift from a (fundamentally republican) understanding of civic virtue as a primarily public and political quality to a

'privately oriented civic virtue, i.e., a quality that disposes to behaviour beneficial to the public but not for publicly oriented reasons'.[7] The social theory that underpins this utopian community is based on a revised but still conservative version of the 'Great Chain of Being'. Thus, as a utopian novel, *Munster Village* needs to be read in the context of Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) and Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple: Volume the Last* (1753). Particularly, *Millenium Hall* and *Munster Village* share an interest in a revised social contract that sees sympathy and polite sociability as the foundation of civic society.

Hamilton's work is in conversation with, if not somewhat derivative of, contemporary works. Alessa Johns suggested in *Women's Utopias of the Eighteenth Century* (2003) that Hamilton plagiarised passages from Daniel Defoe's *Political History of the Devil* (1726) in order to take issue with Defoe on gendered literary voices and social reform proposals such as the *Political History, An Essay upon Projects* (1697) and *The Protestant Monastery* (1727).[8] Hamilton also references Milton, *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce: Restor'd to the Good of Both Sexes, From the Bondage of Canon Law* (1643) as *Munster Village* promotes equality of the sexes in marriage. Johns rightly reminds us that this form of intertextuality, a feature particularly also in *Memoirs of the Marchioness de Louvoi*, serves to create a community of readers, the commonplace book a 'utopian space where authority and ideas mingle'.[9] Moreover, these ideas were protofeminist engagements with education, and gender equality, particularly economic independence – the latter Hamilton herself struggled with all her life.

In the unpublished celestial voyage of Hamilton's *The Manuscript* (1784), Mary Hamilton abandons the domestic utopia of *Munster Village* in favour of speculative fiction.[10] This voyage references the eighteenth-century mania for ballooning, especially after the Montgolfier brothers' first flight in 1783; it may be no coincidence that the first flight in Britain by balloon was by James Tytler, in Edinburgh, in August 1784.

Aided by a Faustian pact with a Demon, the narrator balloons to another planet where he discusses natural sciences, politics, and ethics with the local Royal Academy and a Chief Minister modelled on William Pitt the Younger – the trope of the platonic dialogue is common in early modern utopian writings.[11] *The Manuscript* closes with a contribution to the contemporary luxury debate that is a

common theme also in utopian writings of the time.[12] Hamilton's lunar narrative is uneven and heterogeneous, hesitantly edited in the draft that is available to us.[13]

It is intriguing that the first section of Hamilton is dedicated to the epistemology of scientific knowledge. 'The unsteady progress of balloons', writes Claire Brant, 'produced uncertain knowledges'.[14] In the *Manuscript*, the planetary moon voyage is a means to cement the idea of uncertain knowledge, be it of extra-terrestrial life, or of extrasensory knowledge and experience – here, Hamilton seems to nod to Jonathan Swift and his *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). The anonymous narrator is a gentleman scientist, dabbling in 'aerostatics, pneumatics and hydrostatics in order to 'guide an air-balloon in every horizontal direction'.[15] Intrigued by Fontenelle's *Conversations on the Plurality of World* (*Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes*), 1686, the narrator battles with the limitations of his knowledge and expertise to construct an air-balloon 'to visit some of the rigid stars, planets of which Astronomers assure us are habitable worlds!'[16] The narrator is enticed by curiosity and imagination to take his experience beyond the bounds of the known. The literature the narrator reads consists of a mixture of applied and theoretical works by Claude François Milliet Dechales, *L'art de naviger demontré par principes et confirmé par plusieurs observations tirées de l'experience* (1677), Pierre Gassendi, *Institutio astronomica* (1658), Newton, *Principia Mathematia* (1687), 'etc etc'.[17] He however remains underwhelmed, 'these profound authors, I could not understand.'[18] Interestingly he does not mention more contemporary works on ballooning such as Tiberius Cavallo, *The History and Practice of Aerostation* (1785) and Thomas Baldwin's *Airopaedia* (1786). Still searching for the answer to his aerial project, the narrator is susceptible to the Demon's allure whose endeavour it is to humble those scientists who have been guided by arrogance and hubris. The Demon narrates his century-long efforts to guide Earth's scientists and natural philosophers towards a true understanding of scientific epistemology with partial success and no acknowledgement of his intervention: 'The genius of man (…) cannot penetrate into unfathomable abysses without supernatural assistance!'[19] The Demon thus promises the narrator to provide him this assistance, to make an air-balloon journey to another planet, 'which is another world said he resembling that, you have inhabited') possible.[20] On his return, the narrator then should write about his journeys to humble the

inhabitants of this planet and in particular, their Royal Society – an obvious 'imaginative analogy'.

Hamilton's call to man's 'moral' duty to imagine beyond the known aptly closes what begins as a fantastical lunar adventure and ends as a political allegory. In the celestial voyage of *The Manuscript,* moral and civic duty demanded to reinsert imagination into scientific discourses to attain a truly enlightened state as individuals and as a society. The oscillation between imagination and scientific scepticism in *The Manuscript* is aptly symbolised in the balloon itself; balloons 'imagined, airily, or they doubted'.[21] Indeed, the formal techniques of Hamilton's manuscript mirror the different modes and paradoxes of Enlightenment inquiry.In the last three decades, the study of women writers and their careers in the eighteenth century has become a particularly rich field internationally. The range of women whose writing now receives critical and historical attention has expanded exponentially. Scholarship has moved from the simple project of recovering early modern and eighteenth-century women's writing to re-evaluating and, increasingly, complicating the relationship between gender and literary production. The extensive world of women's writing in late eighteenth-century England – novels, poetry, religious and educational works in particular – is now very well charted. Yet in spite of the flourishing of the Enlightenment in Scotland, very few Scottish women became writers in this period, even fewer writers of utopian literature.[22] There are no women at all listed in Richard Sher's authoritative study, *The Enlightenment and the Book* (2010) for that important generation of writers born between 1710 and 1739, the generation of David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. Nonetheless, there were a few Scottish women writing with reference to the concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment, though they chose to do so outside Scotland for a variety of reasons.

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(c) The Bottle Imp