

Emma, Lady Hamilton: Fêted or fated by Regency public opinion? The perception of class and women seen through two contrasting images

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***Abstract:** Emma , Lady Hamilton (1765-1815),¹ was one of the most famous and infamous of women when she arrived back in London from Naples with her husband, Sir William Hamilton, and her lover, Admiral Lord Nelson. The year was 1800, a time when the revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were the backdrop to everyday life, regardless of age, gender or class. This paper looks at two images of Emma; the first is a satirical cartoon, *Dido in Despair!*, published in 1801, by James Gillray (1765-1815), the ‘prince of caricaturists’.² This hostile print portrays Emma bereft of her lover. Like the Turner prize-winning work *My Bed* by Tracey Emin, it is a portrait of a woman at a ‘time of emotional trauma’.³ The second image is a more refined representation of Emma as Britannia, enamelled onto a Nelson memorial plate in 1805 by the Baxter enamelling studio, ‘the leading establishment of its day’.⁴ The plate shows Britannia/Emma proprietorially shielding Nelson within her cape, surrounded by scenes from his heroic achievements. This paper will assess how these images of Emma comment on the anxiety surrounding war and class in Regency Britain.*

Christened Amy Lyon, Emma was born into poverty with a tremendous ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Incredibly pretty and lively, she was a muse to ‘London’s most fashionable por-

¹ Henceforth to be called Emma in this paper.

² George Cruikshank description of Gillray: see Anita McConnell and Simon Heneage, ‘Gillray, James (1756–1815), caricaturist’, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) < <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/10754>> [accessed 10 January 2022].

³ Alison Cole, ‘Tracy Emin’s *My Bed* at Tate Britain, Review: In the flesh, its frankness is still arresting’, *Independent Newspaper*, 30 March 2015.

⁴ Thomas Baxter, plate, 1806, porcelain, Victoria and Albert Museum <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O9355/plate-baxter-thomas/>> [accessed 10 January 2022].

trait painter',⁵ George Romney (1734-1802).⁶ At twenty-one, she joined the widowed Sir William Hamilton,⁷ the British Minister Plenipotentiary in Naples, as his companion and later wife in the essential Grand Tour resort for 'families of the first distinction'.⁸ Emma, a quick and natural learner, soon becomes the centre of polite society, attracting much admiration in high circles for her 'accomplishments' despite a lack of education and background. Admiral Howe's sister Caroline writes in a letter to Georgiana, Countess Spencer: 'What a charming character L[ady] Hamilton is, notwithstanding the great disadvantages of her early education, and how different from many who have had every advantage and not allowed themselves to profit from such good fortune'.⁹ Social status was difficult to define, hereditary wealth and power were certainly important but also personal characteristics would be measured. Jane Austen highlights this view when the snobbish Miss Bingley insists that a lady must: 'possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions'.¹⁰

Emma displayed a graceful and feminine manner, but she lacked the retiring and modest behaviour society expected of women at that level of society. Instead, she uses her past theatrical experience to perfect a series of attitudes referenced in both images. These tableau-vivants represented classic figures, posed with a shawl and tambourine, and performed in a series of graceful, accurate, and rapid movements.¹¹ Dressed in a loose-flowing garment reminiscent of Greek dress, her attitudes

⁵ Kate Williams, *England's Mistress: The Infamous Life of Emma Hamilton* (London: Arrow, 2007) [quoting letter from William Hayley to Emma, 17 May 1804], p. 94.

⁶ Alex Kidson, 'Romney, George (1734–1802), painter', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 03 (Oxford: Oxford University Press) <<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2648/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-24051>> [accessed 29 January 2022].

⁷ Henceforth to be called Hamilton in this paper.

⁸ W. H. Long, *Memoirs of Emma, Lady Hamilton, with Anecdotes of Her Friends and Contemporaries*, ed. by W. H. Long (London: W.W. Gibbings, 1891), p. 45.

⁹ Arthur Marder, 'That Hamilton Women: Emma and Clio Reconciled', in American Historical Association meeting 1966 printed within Barry M. Gough, *That Hamilton Woman: Emma and Nelson* (Barnsley: Seaforth Publishing, 2016) p. 26-28.

¹⁰ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice 1813* (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), p. 39.

¹¹ Marder, p. 28.

were so famous that they even inspired fashion á la mode in 1790s Britain.¹² However, not everyone was impressed. While the idea of living statues could express the utopianism of the Enlightenment, some contemporaries recoiled from her performances, seeing them as particularly licentious and denigrating her character.¹³ For example, the German philosopher Herder (1744 - 1803) describes her ‘thousand positions and characters in Greek garb’ were the antics of an ‘ape’; she is ‘at bottom a very common person in her heart, without fine feeling, I think, for something that is noble, great, and eternally beautiful’.¹⁴

In a society obsessed with social status, gentility ‘was the most prized possession of all’ but Emma was often described¹⁵ as ‘vulgar,’ a term associated with acting above her station’.¹⁶ Her broad Cheshire accent was commented upon negatively by the visiting British. Lady Holland turned away disgusted from Emma during a demonstration of her attitudes when she ‘exclaimed in a provincial accent “don’t be afraid, Sir William, I’ll not crack your joug.”’¹⁷ However, her French and Italian were exemplary.¹⁸ Society was happy to socialise with her in Naples when they required something from her, but they would not forgive her background, and she knew it. After a performance, she describes her audience: ‘I left some dying, some crying, and some in despair. Mind you, this was all nobility, as proud as the devil. But we humbled them’.¹⁹

¹² Amelia Rauser, ‘Living Statues and Neoclassical Dress in Late Eighteenth-Century Naples’, *Art History*, 38.3 (3 February 2015) 462–487). <<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2152/doi/full/10.1111/1467-8365.12147>>.

¹³ Rauser, quoting Aileen Ribeiro in *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France, 1750–1820*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹⁴ Rauser, quoting Letter of 21 February 1789, from *Herders Reise nach Italien, Giessen*, ed. by H. Düntzer and F. G. Herder, 1859), pp. 260–1.

¹⁵ Evan Wilson, ‘The Sea Officers: Gentility and Professionalism in the Royal Navy, 1775-1815’, (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford University, University College, 2014), pp. 257-8.

¹⁶ Williams, p. 154.

¹⁷ Albert Morrison, ART V-1, ‘The Collection of Autograph Letters and Historical Documents Formed by Alfred Morrison. Second Series: The Hamilton and Nelson Papers (1756-1815)’, *The Edinburgh Review, 1802-1929*, 183.376 (1896), pp. 384.

¹⁸ Marder, p. 29.

¹⁹ Letter from Hart to Greville, 4 August 1787, *Autograph Letters*, 130.

Despite marrying Hamilton, Emma and Nelson eventually became lovers in 1799. A new Ambassador replaced Hamilton in 1800, and the 'tria juncta in uno' left Naples for London via a celebratory tour overland.²⁰ However, on arrival, London society was not as enamoured as the general population. News of their scandalous living arrangements preceded them. One of Emma's closest companions, Miss Cornelia Knight (1757 -1837), who travelled back to London with them, immediately abandoned her on arrival following advice from Sir Thomas Troubridge (1757-1807,) uneasy that Emma's reputation would importune Miss Knight.²¹

London in 1800 was a very different city to Naples. The expansion of print culture and weak libel laws allowed Gillray and others to exploit aristocratic scandals for the public's insatiable interest. Gillray found a niche in providing satirical cartoons often 'impregnated with cruelty' and eagerly awaited.²² They were seen as so influential that the politician George Canning (1770-1827) was anxious to see himself caricatured to strengthen his political profile and, as a thank you to Gillray, helped acquire a pension for him.²³

Cartoons were available to wealthy collectors, the Prince Regent (1762 - 1830), for example, had a collection of satirical cartoons, but they were also a democratic medium. Publicly viewable through a print shop window or pasted on the walls within the male-dominated coffee bars, taverns and barbershops, the bourgeoisie and aristocrats viewed them along with apprentices and servants. The audience for this misogynistic cartoon would be predominately male. A tourist visiting London in 1802 described the arrival of a new caricature in a shop window: 'the enthusiasm is indescribable when the next drawing appears; it is a veritable madness. You have to make your way in through

²⁰ Williams, p. 211 [Translation 'three joined together as one'].

²¹ Gough, p. 81.

²² Anita McConnell and Simon Heneage, 'Gillray, James (1756–1815), caricaturist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) <<https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2648/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-10754>> [accessed 10 January 2022].

²³ Derek Beales, 'Canning, George (1770–1827), prime minister and parodist', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press. [accessed 10 Jan. 2022].

Emma is centre stage, dominating the picture, with arms flung out, parodying one of her attitudes, and looking enormously fat. Size, for contemporary viewers, was associated with over-abundance and a lack of control, not only of eating but also of morals.²⁷ Emma's vast body signifies her transgressive behaviour.²⁸ For those few in the know, the added in-joke would be that Emma had just given birth to Nelson's daughter, Horatia. Even the pincushion, often given as a nursery gift, alludes to her pregnancy.²⁹ Elements representing her life cover the floor, daybed and dressing table. The book, *Studies of Academic Attitudes taken from Life*, open on the daybed, mocks her attitudes, and the naked image could either be a reference to childbirth or sex. Her inappropriate 'foreign' habits, a glass and bottle of Maraschino liqueur, and rouge a la Naples, to create her famously healthy complexion, can also be seen on display on the dressing table.³⁰ Heavy war taxation meant foreign luxury goods were now inappropriate and seen as anti-nationalist.

Through the window, Nelson and his fleet sail to protect British shores. The rush in leaving reflects his desire to stay, and one of his awards lies abandoned on the floor. Like other navy wives, Emma pays the 'tax of quick alarm' when rumours of war begin.³¹ However, she still has a husband asleep behind her. Gillray's harsh treatment of Emma reflects both the moral disapproval shown by London society to the openness of the affair and the anxiety of a nation concerned about the impact of marital infidelity as men were away fighting for several years.³²

Whilst Emma appears oblivious to her husband, his identity is unmistakable.³³ A group of antiquities, including those from the cult of Priapus, are displayed at the foot of the dressing table along

²⁷ Freya Gowrley, Dr., 'Why were the Georgians fixated with fatness?' *History Extra*, podcast, 24 July 2021, <<https://www.historyextra.com/period/georgian/super-sized-georgians-why-satirists-fixated-fatness>> [accessed 20 January 2022].

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Lincoln, p. 25.

³⁰ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 250.

³¹ Jane Austen, *Persuasion, 1818* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 236 [Referencing Anne Elliott's marriage to Captain Wentworth].

³² Lincoln, p. 25.

³³ Wilson, p. 575.

with Hamilton's academic book *Antiquities: Herculaneum, Naples, Caprese*. This display echoes a portrait Hamilton commissioned for the British Museum from Joshua Reynolds (1723 - 1792), surrounded by his collection of Greek vases. Hamilton knew what was happening. 'I am determined that my quiet shall not be disturbed. Let this nonsensical world go on as it will,' he wrote in a letter to Emma, despite his carefully cultivated reputation³⁴ in London as 'an experienced virtuoso and respected diplomat' now in shatters.³⁵ Gillray uses Hamilton's interest in the priapic cult to deepen the salaciousness of their relationship. Many women remarked upon Emma's 'vulgarity of speech and manners',³⁶ and Gillray, who took great care over the speech in his cartoons, relishes this by emphasising her uneducated vowels while lampooning her concerns: 'He's gone to fight the Frenchmen, t'lose t'other arm and eye'.³⁷

The Dido figure is one that Gillray employs several times to illuminate the plight of women who had been cruelly abandoned or mistreated by their lovers, depicting the female victim in a sympathetic light. Despite conspicuous self-sacrifice, Emma's theatricality is on display rather than the fortitude required by the nation, and she is treated more harshly. Gillray mimicked how London society maligned her for 'her vulgarity, her exhibitionism, and her clear influence of Britain's greatest naval hero' in compromising Nelson rather than enhancing his position.³⁸ Mistresses were often the focus for perennial anxieties about immorality and an effeminate influence on decision-making. Emma was judged as 'exceeding her role in life' to the detriment of Nelson,³⁹ but in reality, this was not the case.⁴⁰ While it is true, Nelson convalesced in Naples far longer than the Admiralty

³⁴ Marder, p. 36.

³⁵ Peter Cannon-Brooks, 'Sir William Hamilton and the British museum', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 15.2 (1996), pp.196 - 201.

³⁶ Rauser.

³⁷ McConnell and Heneage.

³⁸ Brian Lavery, *Nelson and the Nile: The War against Bonaparte 1798* (Great Britain: Duckworth & Co., 1998) , p. 278.

³⁹ Stephanie Koscak, 'Rituals of Royal Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Frederick, Prince of Wales, Takes a Mistress', *The Court Historian*, 26:1 (2021), 71-92 <DOI: 10.1080/14629712.2021.1888443>, quoting Ingrid Tague, *Women of Quality Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690-1760* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2002), pp. 179-80.

⁴⁰ Wilson, K., p. 573.

wished, Emma's 'thrill of response to his daring' inspired Nelson to form his sense of destiny.⁴¹ Nelson appreciated her support and this can be seen when he writes to Emma, 'If there were more Emmas there would be more Nelsons'.⁴²

The commemorative plate by Baxter portrays a different image of Emma and the war. In contrast, this is an object suitable for a home environment, the preserve of women. This time it is a supportive image of Emma as Britannia and a glorious impression of the stirring victories the British navy had achieved. The people adored Nelson and, when he arrived home in 1800, crowds lined the streets to welcome the great hero.

Following his death in 1805, there was also an outpouring of national grief.⁴³ Vice-Admiral Collingwood reflected: 'Never did a man's death cause so universal a sorrow than Lord Nelson'. Seen as a man of the people, Nelson helped give a face to mass mobilisation as above one in five of the population were directly involved in the war. His death allowed the public to re-imagine ordinary soldiers and sailors as potential heroes and patriots, his battle-torn body a reminder of the physical sacrifices that were required.⁴⁴ Moreover, the government saw his death as a propaganda opportunity to promote national patriotism as the war was far from over.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Gough, pp. 39-42.

⁴² Kathleen Wilson, 'Nelson's Women: Female Masculinity and Body Politics in the French and Napoleonic Wars', *European History Quarterly*, 37. 4 (2007), 562-581, quoting Robert Southey, *The Life of Nelson* (London: John Murray, 1811), p. 319-20.

⁴³ Lavery, p. 284.

⁴⁴ Wilson, K., p. 572.

⁴⁵ Williams, p. 317.



Figure 2. Baxter: *Emma as Britannia* © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Enamelled on the plate, Emma, representing Britannia, is once again centre stage, arms outstretched in a figure-hugging dress. In contrast, here, she appears in control. Standing tall with one arm resting on the bust of Nelson in a proprietorial claim, Emma directly echoes an image from one of her attitudes. Together Emma and Nelson appear as a single, unified entity as she shelters him beneath her cloak. She is a part of his success. Emma is gazing out at the viewer while the eyes of Nelson are directed firmly towards her. Her shape emphasises not the excess of the Dido caricature but the imposing strength of character and native wit. The artist, James Baxter, was a personal friend of Nelson and Emma, and this image was taken directly from sketches he made in the family home.⁴⁶ Like Nelson, Emma was popular with the people, who seemed to take great pleasure in her ability ‘to take the winds out of the sails of elite snobbery and self-regard,’ and this confidence shows here.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Victoria & Albert, <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O9355/plate-baxter-thomas>> [20 January, 2022]

⁴⁷ Wilson, p. 573, quoting *Gentleman's Magazine*, 72 (1802), 271–4.

Regency society might prefer women's power to remain in the home, and for them to be 'content to be inferior to men'.⁴⁸ In reality, however, the war catapulted Emma, like so many other women, into direct activism that placed extraordinary demands upon them.⁴⁹ In Naples, Emma was friend and confidante to the politically-active Queen Maria Carolina when her kingdom was increasingly important in the wars, and power and government were highly personalised. By 1795, with Hamilton ailing, Emma was 'to all intents and purposes, the British Ambassador' and her role as 'courtier, fixer, political aide,⁵⁰ and diplomatic advisor' was significant.⁵¹ Returning victoriously from the Battle of Aboukir Bay (1798), Nelson was a hero but also wounded and in pain. It was not unusual for wives, sisters, and mothers to be involved in nursing the wounded and Emma and Mrs Cadogan, her mother, nursed Nelson back to health.⁵² Emma also put herself in physical danger guiding the Royal Court from Naples through subterranean passages to escape a pro-French mob, worked through a tempest on board HMS Vanguard, and comforted the sea-sick.⁵³ Britannia represents the women of Britain both celebrating, and essential, to the country's success.

The plate was a standard dinner plate made by Coalport in hard-paste porcelain and used as a base for the all-over enamel decoration from the workshop of Thomas Baxter Senior in 1806.⁵⁴ Enamelling was an expensive process, and buyers of the plate would have anticipated putting it on long-term display. The plate memorialises Nelson's three 'great triumphs' where he is victorious against all odds: his death in victory at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, his previous triumph in Egypt (1798), and Copenhagen (1801).⁵⁵ Regularly interspersed between these images, a Sphinx conjures

⁴⁸ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character & Responsibilities* (New York: J & H G Langley, 1845), p. 11.

⁴⁹ Wilson, p. 563.

⁵⁰ Gough, p. 65-68.

⁵¹ Gough, p. 65-68.

⁵² Lady de Lancey, *A Week at Waterloo in June 1815: Lady de Lancey's Narrative, Being An Account of How She Nursed Her Husband, Colonel Sir William Howe De Lancey, Quartermaster-General of the Army, Mortally Wounded in the Great Battle*, ed. by Major B. R. Ward (London: John Murray, 1906).

⁵³ *Memoirs of Emma Lady Hamilton with Anecdotes of Her Friends and Contemporaries* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lipincott Company, 1891), p. 166, Wilson, p. 573; Williams, p. 215.

⁵⁴ Baxter, plate.

⁵⁵ Wilson, p. 570 [quoting J.E. Cookson, *The British Armed Nation, 1793-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 214-15].

up the image of his first significant victory, the Battle of the Nile, to the viewer. This was a battle with particular relevance to Emma. She convinced Maria Carolina to reverse her husband King Ferdinand's commands in supplying Nelson's ships for the Egypt expedition.⁵⁶ Nelson's victory at Aboukir Bay devastated French naval power which denied them Egypt and points leading to India.⁵⁷

Visions of female nature oscillated between impossibly pure and irredeemably depraved, Mary or Eve, saint or sinner, and these two images reflect this dichotomy. However, this binary division is further complicated by how Regency women were seen within society and judged by their class. While Emma mainly operated outside the networking web of patronage within society that supports individuals, her impoverished background probably motivated her to strive for acceptance, and her inherent character allowed her to succeed. Although initially a victim of this network, Emma was originally gifted to Hamilton by her lover, she later created sufficient agency to make her own choices. Throughout her life, she is worthy of the positions she plays: that of muse, performer, hostess, wife, diplomat, nurse, and lover.

However, during a time of war, the establishment was in no mood to forgive her station. Society was under threat from unorthodox revolutionary ideas, and Emma and Nelson exposed the reality of social life in England during this time. In times of war, masculinity is not the sole preserve for patriotism, and nobility not the sole source of leadership. Society's preference was that 'women's dignity depends on remaining unknown'.⁵⁸ However, during these years, many women were required to step up to the table and face tasks that involved them in seemingly masculine activities. Patriotic celebrations at the ending of the war acknowledged this support when, for the first time, bourgeois women 'dressed as Britannia' alongside gentleman dressed as the Duke of Wellington.⁵⁹ Women had now become 'actors, not just spectators' as Emma had shown.

⁵⁶ Ibid., See Sichel, *Memoirs of Emma, Lady Hamilton* (London: W.W. Gibbings, repr. 1910), p 8; 'Nicolas', letter 22 July 1798.

⁵⁷ Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 288-307.

⁵⁸ Colley, pp. 239-40.

⁵⁹ Colley, p. 273.

On a cursory inspection, these two images provide a snapshot of Emma Hamilton, wife of Sir William and lover of Nelson, in contrasting images portraying both a traumatised woman bereft of her dignity and as Britannia, strong, stable and supportive. They also represent every woman in the contradictory position that life often demands. They are required, and capable, of taking the burden of support when circumstances demand while still seen as inferior and not worthy of serious acknowledgement. Alternatively they are placed upon a pedestal and worshipped as an icon rather than a real woman. Within the Dido caricature, Emma's humble background and exuberance for life allows Gillray to further distinguish her as 'other' within society and therefore a fair target for ridicule. Underneath these representations of Emma, we can also read the angst of a nation. Concern about the impact that lower moral standards will have on families and home life; concern about the inappropriate influence of a lover on decision making; concern about how the war is developing and the subsequent stresses on the country. Even the glorification of the image of Britannia is being used as a sticking plaster to encourage the population to glory in the successes despite the government realising the war is far from over. Emma's image was commodified in portraits throughout her life. Her natural beauty was exploited by wealthy men primarily for the male gaze; 'a possessed object'.⁶⁰ However, through these two contrasting images, we can see Emma reflecting back to the viewer the position of women in a society at war, both as victim and victor. Performing her attitudes, Emma is claiming the right of a public presence emancipating herself and other women from the constraints of society, as she writes: "I wish to be an example of good conduct, and to show the world that a pretty woman is not always a fool".⁶¹

⁶⁰ Thomas Malcomson, 'That Hamilton Woman: Emma and Nelson', *The Mariner's Mirror*, 103.1 (2017), page span (pp. 111-112) <DOI: 10.1080/00253359.2017.1273474>.

⁶¹ Alfred Morrison, *The Collection of Autograph Letters and Historical Documents Formed by Alfred Morrison*, 2nd ser. 1882-1896 (London: Strangeways and Son, 1896) 1.189 [Letter January 1791, Emma Hart to Charles Greville].

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