



Emma, Lady Hamilton (26 April 1765; baptised 12 May 1765 – 15 January 1815), model and actress, is best remembered as the mistress of Lord Nelson and as the muse of George Romney.

Married Sir William Hamilton at St Marylebone Parish Church on 6 September 1791

Emma was born **Amy Lyon** in Ness near Neston, Cheshire, England, the daughter of Henry Lyon, a blacksmith who died when she was two months old. She was raised by her mother, the former Mary Kidd, at Hawarden, and received no formal education. She later changed her name to **Emma Hart**.

Details of Emma's early life are unclear, but at age 12, she was known to be working as a maid at the Hawarden home of Doctor Honoratus Leigh Thomas, a surgeon working in Chester. Then she worked for the Budd family in Chatham Place, Blackfriars, London, and met a maid called Jane Powell, who wanted to be an actress. Emma joined in with Jane's rehearsals for various tragic roles. Emma started work at the Drury Lane theatre in Covent Garden, as maid to various actresses, among them Mary Robinson.

Emma next worked as a model and dancer at the "Goddess of Health" (also known as the "Temple of Health") for James Graham, a Scottish "quack" doctor. The establishment's greatest attraction was a bed through which electricity was passed, giving paying patrons mild shocks. This supposedly aided conception, and many infertile couples paid high prices to try it.

At fifteen, Emma met Sir Harry Fetherstonhaugh, who hired her for several months as hostess and entertainer at a lengthy stag party at Fetherstonhaugh's Uppark country estate in the South Downs. She is said to have entertained Harry and his friends by dancing nude on the dining room table. Fetherstonhaugh took Emma there as a mistress, but frequently ignored her in favour of drinking and hunting with his friends. Emma soon formed a friendship with one of the guests, the dull but sincere Honourable Charles Francis Greville (1749–1809), second son of the then Earl of Warwick and a member of Parliament for Warwick. It was about this time (late June-early July 1781) that she conceived a child by Fetherstonhaugh.

Fetherstonhaugh was furious at the unwanted pregnancy but is thought to have accommodated Emma in one of his many houses in London. Soon thereafter, Emma formed a romantic attachment to Greville. Emma became Greville's mistress. When the child (Emma Carew) was born, she was removed to be raised by a Mr and Mrs Blackburn. As a young woman, Emma's daughter saw her mother reasonably frequently, but later when Emma fell into debt, her daughter, Emma Carew, worked abroad as a companion or governess.

Emma was at Greville's mercy and acceded to his request to change her name to "Emma Hart". Greville kept Emma in a house at Edgeware Row, but he was in love with her and, wanting a painting of her, sent her to sit for his friend, the painter George Romney. It was then that Emma became the subject of many of Romney's most famous portraits. In fact, so began Romney's lifelong obsession with her, sketching her nude and clothed in many poses he used to create paintings in her absence. Through the popularity of Romney's work and particularly of his striking-looking young model, Emma became well known in society circles, under the name of "Emma Hart". She was witty, intelligent, a quick learner, elegant and, as paintings of her attest, extremely beautiful.

George Romney was fascinated by her looks and ability to adapt to the ideals of the age. Romney and other artists painted her in many guises.

In 1783, Greville needed to find a rich wife to replenish his finances (in the form of eighteen-year-old heiress Henrietta Middleton). Emma would be a problem, as he disliked being known as her lover (this

having become apparent to all through her fame in Romney's artworks), and his prospective wife would not accept him as a suitor if he lived openly with Emma Hart.

To be rid of Emma, Greville persuaded his uncle, Sir William Hamilton, British Envoy to Naples, to take her off his hands. Greville's marriage would be useful to Sir William, as it relieved him of having Greville as a poor relation. To promote his plan, Greville suggested to Sir William that Emma would make a very pleasing mistress, assuring him that, once married to Henrietta Middleton, he would come and fetch Emma back. Emma's famous beauty was by then well-known to Sir William, so much so that he even agreed to pay the expenses for her journey to ensure her speedy arrival. A great collector of antiquities and beautiful objects, he took interest in her as another acquisition. He had long been happily married until the death of his wife in 1782, and he liked female companionship. His home in Naples was well known all over the world for hospitality and refinement. He needed a hostess for his salon, and from what he knew about Emma, he thought she would be the perfect choice.

Greville did not inform Emma of his plan, however, but instead suggested the trip as a prolonged holiday in Naples while he (Greville) was away in Scotland on business. Emma was thus sent to Naples, supposedly for six to eight months, little realising that she was going as the mistress of her host. She became furious when she realised what Greville had planned for her.

Living in Naples Emma developed what she called her "Attitudes" or *Mimoplastic art*, using Romney's idea of combining classical poses with modern allure as the basis for her act. Emma had her dressmaker make dresses modelled on those worn by peasant islanders in the Bay of Naples, and the loose-fitting garments she often wore when modelling for Romney. She would pair these tunics with a few large shawls or veils, draping herself in folds of cloth and posing in such a way as to evoke popular images from Greco-Roman mythology. This cross between postures, dance, and acting, was first revealed in spring 1787 by Sir William to a large group of European guests at his home in Naples, who quickly took to this new form of entertainment. It formed a sort of charade, with the audience guessing the names of the classical characters and scenes Emma portrayed.

The performance was a sensation with visitors from across Europe. With the aid of her shawls, Emma posed as various classical figures from Medea to Queen Cleopatra, and her performances charmed aristocrats, artists such as Élisabeth-Louise Vigée-Le Brun, writers – including the great Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – and kings and queens alike, setting off new dance trends across Europe and starting a fashion for a draped Grecian style of dress.

"Attitudes" were taken up by several other (female) artists, among them Ida Brun from Denmark, who became Emma's successor in the new art form. The famed sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen admired her art. "Attitudes" were a form of "mime art", which disappeared for a long time, only to surface again in the 20th century. Emma developed her Attitudes from mere poses into small, wordless plays – in her later years she excelled most as Medea.

Emma was also a talented amateur singer. She sang one of the solo parts of Joseph Haydn's Nelson Mass and entertained guests at her home. At one point, the Royal Opera in Madrid tried to engage her for a season, in competition with their star, Angelica Catalani, but that offer was turned down.

After several months of waiting, Emma came to understand that Greville would not be joining her and, eventually, began an affair with Sir William, then in his fifties and more than twice her age. They were married on 6 September 1791 at St Marylebone Parish Church, Middlesex, having returned to England for the purpose; she was twenty-six and he was sixty.



Emma as the Magdalene painted by Romney in the year of her marriage

Obligated to use her legal name of Amy Lyon on the marriage register, the wedding gave her the title **Lady Hamilton** which she would use for the rest of her life. Hamilton's public career was now at its height and during their visit he was inducted into the Privy Council.

Lady Hamilton became a close friend of Queen Maria Carolina: the sister of Marie Antoinette, and the wife of Ferdinand I of Naples. She acquired fluency in both French and Italian, and showed capacity as a singer. Sharing Sir William Hamilton's enthusiasm for classical antiquities and art, she organised a series of "Attitudes" - tableaux vivants in which she portrayed sculptures and paintings before British visitors.

As wife of the British Envoy, Emma welcomed Nelson in 1793, when he came to gather reinforcements against the French. She is described in 1797 in the diary of 18-year-old Elizabeth Wynne as "a charming woman, beautiful and exceedingly good humoured and amiable." Nelson returned to Naples five years later, on 22 September 1798 (with stepson, Josiah, who was in his early twenties), a living legend, after his victory at the Battle of the Nile in Aboukir.

However, Nelson's adventures had prematurely aged him: he had lost an arm and most of his teeth, and was afflicted by coughing spells. Emma reportedly flung herself upon him in admiration, calling out, "Oh God, is it possible?", as she fainted against him. Nelson wrote effusively of Emma to his increasingly estranged wife, Fanny, Lady Nelson. Emma and Sir William escorted Nelson to their home – the Palazzo Sessa.

Emma nursed Nelson under her husband's roof, and arranged a party with 1,800 guests to celebrate his 40th birthday. They soon fell in love and their affair seems to have been tolerated, and perhaps even encouraged, by the elderly Sir William, whose own health was now failing and who longed for retirement.

Hamilton showed nothing but admiration and respect for Nelson, and vice versa. Emma Hamilton and Horatio Nelson were by now the two most famous Britons in the world. They were not only in love with each other, but admired each other to the point of adulation.

Emma had by then become not only a close personal friend of Queen Maria Carolina, but had developed into an important political influence. She advised the Queen on how to react to the threats from the French Revolution. Maria Carolina's sister Marie Antoinette had fallen a victim to the Revolution.

In 1799, Naples was the scene of a strange revolution led by members of the aristocracy; the common people did not agree with the revolution. The French troops were not welcome, but the royal family fled to Sicily. From here Nelson tried to help the royal family put down the revolutionaries. He had absolutely no support from the British government. He even executed one of the leaders of the revolution, Admiral Francesco Caracciolo. Emma Hamilton tried to draw a parallel between the revolution in Naples and the Irish uprising in 1798.

Nelson's recall to Britain shortly afterwards coincided with the government finally granting Hamilton's request for relief from his post. Nelson, Emma and William therefore travelled together – taking the longest possible route back to Britain via Central Europe (hearing the *Missa in Angustiis* by Joseph Haydn, now known as the "Nelson Mass" in Vienna in 1800), and eventually arriving in Britain to a hero's welcome. The three then lived together openly, and the affair became public knowledge and scandal, which eventually induced the Admiralty to send Nelson back to sea, if only to get him away from Emma.

Nelson perhaps had the idea that he could divorce his wife only after a decisive victory. Sir William also remained an obstacle. In fact the two lovers, who both loved and respected Hamilton, had to wait for his death to even contemplate marriage. Emma would not even consider the possibility of divorce. That would taint her for life, and, even worse, taint Nelson.

Emma gave birth to Nelson's daughter Horatia, on 29 January 1801 at Sir William's rented home in Clarges Street, 23 Piccadilly, London. By the autumn of the same year, Nelson bought Merton Place, a small ramshackle house on the outskirts of modern-day Wimbledon. There he lived openly with Emma, Sir William, and Emma's mother, in a *ménage à trois* that fascinated the public.

The newspapers reported on their every move, looking to Emma to set fashions in dress, home decoration and even dinner party menus but Emma's great days were over. She had become fat, and Nelson did not like the social life she craved. She had turned down the offer from the Royal Opera in Madrid to sing for money. Now she and Nelson tried to create a new, quieter life.

Sir William died in 1803, and Nelson returned to sea soon after to fight in the Napoleonic Wars, leaving Emma pregnant with their second child. She was desperately lonely, preoccupied with attempting to turn Merton Place into the grand home Nelson desired, and frantic for his return. The child, a girl, died a few weeks after her birth in early 1804. Emma reportedly distracted herself by gambling, and spending lavishly. Now she was free to marry Nelson, if he could only obtain a divorce.

On 21 October 1805, Nelson's fleet defeated a joint Franco-Spanish naval force at the Battle of Trafalgar. Nelson was seriously wounded during the battle and died three hours later. When the news of his death arrived in London, a messenger was sent to Merton Place to bring the news to Lady Hamilton. She later recalled

They brought me word, Mr Whitby from the Admiralty. 'Show him in directly,' I said. He came in, and with a pale countenance and faint voice, said, 'We have gained a great Victory.' – 'Never mind your Victory,' I said. 'My letters – give me my letters' – Captain Whitby was unable to speak – tears in his eyes and a deathly paleness over his face made me comprehend him. I believe I gave a scream and fell back, and for ten hours I could neither speak nor shed a tear.

After Nelson's death in 1805 at the Battle of Trafalgar, an annuity from Sir William's estate could have ensured a comfortable, if modest, lifestyle for Emma. However she quickly exhausted this small pension and fell deeply into debt. Nelson had willed his estate to his brother; he gave Merton Place to Emma, but she depleted her finances by trying to keep it up as a monument to him. In spite of Nelson's status as a national hero, the instructions he left to the government to provide for Emma and Horatia were ignored. They showered honours on Nelson's brother instead.

Emma spent a year in a virtual debtors' prison, in the company of Horatia, before moving to France (despite the ongoing Napoleonic War) to try to escape her creditors. Turning to drinking, living in poverty in Calais, she died in January 1815, aged 49, of amoebic dysentery – an illness she probably contracted during her years in Naples. Sir William Hamilton had also suffered from amoebic dysentery. Emma was buried in Calais but her grave was subsequently lost due to wartime destruction.

Horatia subsequently married the Rev. Philip Ward and lived until 1881. She had ten children: Horatio Nelson (born 8 December 1822); Eleanor Phillipa (born April 1824); Marmaduke Philip Smyth (born 27 May 1825); John James Stephen (13 February 1827 – 1829); Nelson (born 8 May 1828); William George (born 8 April 1830); Edmund Nelson (1831); Horatia Nelson (born 24 November 1833), Philip (born May 1834) and Caroline (born January 1836).

Horatia never publicly acknowledged that she was the daughter of Emma Hamilton.

Paintings of Emma have been featured as cover artwork for many books, including *Lady Hamilton as Circe* on the cover of the Bantam Classics publication of *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë.

She was the subject of a 1926 operetta, *Lady Hamilton*, by the German composer Eduard Künneke. The operetta was revived in Cologne in 2004.

A 1921 silent German film *Lady Hamilton* directed by Richard Oswald with Liane Haid as Hamilton and Conrad Veidt as Nelson

Emma Hamilton is mentioned in the play *La Tosca* by Victorien Sardou.

In the 1929 Vitaphone part-silent film, *The Divine Lady*, Corinne Griffith played Lady Hamilton & Victor Varconi played Admiral Nelson

In the 1934 film *Boots! Boots!*, George Formby mentions Lady Hamilton and her relationship with Nelson in his song *Why Don't Women Like Me*

The 1941 film *That Hamilton Woman* tells the story of Emma's affair with Horatio Nelson. It stars Vivien Leigh as Emma and Laurence Olivier as Horatio. Leigh took publicity photos for the film arranged in poses very similar to paintings of Emma.^[15]

The 1968 film *Emma Hamilton* depicts her relationship with Nelson. She was played by Michèle Mercier.

In the 1973 film *Bequest to the Nation* (released in the United States as *The Nelson Affair*), Glenda Jackson plays her, and Peter Finch plays Nelson.

In the 1980s sitcom *Blackadder the Third*, the show's antihero, Mr. E. Blackadder (Rowan Atkinson), repeatedly mocks both Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton.

Susan Sontag's 1992 novel *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* is a fictionalised portrait of Lady Emma and the times in which she lived.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma,_Lady_Hamilton