

## Biography of Elizabeth Bonhote

Elizabeth Bonhote, a novelist and educational writer, was born in 1744 in Bungay, Suffolk. The daughter of James Mapes, a baker of Bungay, she grew up near the castle ruins, which were later to inspire her perhaps best-known novel, *Bungay Castle*. There is not a great deal of information about her personal life, although it is known that she married Daniel Bonhote, a local solicitor and Captain of the Second Bungay volunteers between 1770 and 1774, with whom she had several children. Following their move to Bury in 1800, her husband died in 1804. Elizabeth died in Bungay in July, 1818.

Her first two works, *The Rambles of Mr. Frankly* (1772) and *The Fashionable Friend* (1773), were both published anonymously by T. Becket and P. A. Dehondt. This anonymity allowed her to establish her reputation with readers, providing her with more confidence for her following works. *The Rambles of Mr. Frankly* consisting of a series of sketches contrasting city and country life was inspired by Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, and was translated into German in 1773. Her anonymity led *The Critical Review* to comment upon *The Rambles of Mr. Frankly* using the masculine pronoun: 'We shall be very glad to see a new performance of this author's in the same style of composition, as we think he would shine in the pathetic; but we shall be sorry to find him continuing to tread upon the heels of Sterne.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.185.

*The Fashionable Friend* can be found listed as a new publication in the eighteenth-century periodical, *The Gentleman's Magazine* of the year 1773.<sup>2</sup> Although it still does not provide Elizabeth Bonhote's name, its inclusion in such a periodical suggests it is likely to have moderate success. *The Fashionable Friend* was also included in *The Critical Review*:

When the ancient romances were exploded, and the pictures of real life were substituted in their stead, such a variety of characters and incidents presented themselves, that novel-writers easily met with materials; a wide field was opened for them to range in, and they might avoid treading in each others steps. But since almost every track is become beaten, authors are obliged to make the most of what is left them; for this reason most of our later novels are very barren of incidents, and the writers seem to aim less at diversifying their tales, than at working up a single circumstance in the most striking manner. In that before us we have little variety; but the author of it endeavours to interest us in behalf of injured innocence, by painting the misfortunes of his heroine in the strongest colours. In this he certainly succeeds, as the reader who is susceptible of pity will scarcely peruse this little tale without emotions of sympathy.<sup>3</sup>

Bonhote's other works include, *Hortensia* (1777), *Olivia or the Deserted Bride* (1787), *The Parental Monitor* (1788), *Darney Vale or Emma Fitzroy* (1789), *Ellen Woodley* (1790), *Bungay Castle* (1796) and *Feeling* (1810). The majority of these works were published by William Lane's well-known publishing house, the Minerva Press. In 1798 William Lane compiled a list of ten 'particular and favourite authors' on the Minerva list; notably, all were women and Elizabeth Bonhote was indeed one of the ten.<sup>4</sup>

Her didactic work *The Parental Monitor* was published by subscription and whilst written during a spell of ill health was claimed by Bonhote to offer guidance to her

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<sup>2</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, July, 1773, p.342.

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain 1750-1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.201.

children in the event of her early death. The work in two volumes, one directed at girls and one directed at boys, encouraged acceptance of one's situation and dependence on adults. Bonhote explained her reasons for publishing *The Parental Monitor*:

Another very interesting inducement for making them public arose from the pleasant reflection, that by so doing they might possibly be useful to others; that the orphan, the uninstructed, the thoughtless, neglected, or distressed, might find, in the monitions of the mother and the friend, a guide to direct their unguarded steps through the devious and dangerous paths of life. The earnest desire of being serviceable to my fellow-creatures, and in some degree supplying the place of a parent to those deprived of a parent's tender care, armed me with trembling resolution to encounter censure, rendered me indifferent to all illiberal reflections, and encouraged me to hope I should meet with the indulgence of the generous and candid for the attempt, however I may have failed in the execution of it.<sup>5</sup>

Her Gothic novel, *Bungay Castle* was set during the Wars of the Roses and included conventional Gothic features of mystery, wicked uncles and long-lost sons. It was set at her own home, Bonhote having bought and converted the ruins. The novel was dedicated to the Duke of Norfolk, to whom she sold the castle ruins in 1800.<sup>6</sup> Bonhote often stressed her regional loyalties, becoming Mrs. Bonhote 'of Bungay'. Her final work was *Feeling*, a book of verse that was published anonymously in 1810.

Word length: 800

### Bibliography:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.33.

<sup>5</sup> Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen: Women writers in the eighteenth century* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 218-9.

<sup>6</sup> Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy, eds. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Batsford Ltd., 1990),p.113.

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Other Resources:

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