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Female friendship in eighteenth-century English literature

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Abstract

The English literature of the long eighteenth century offers abundant portraits of female friendship as a frequent form of sociability among women – sometimes sentimentalised as true spiritual companionship between pure and innocent souls, sometimes demonised as a devious façade for unnatural sexual desire. As opposed to men's friendships, which centred on socialising in the public sphere, forms of attachment among women were associated with the intimate and the private. Whether it is through the refinement of romantic odes to female friends, the controversial lives of the Ladies of Llangollen, or literary explorations of lesbian desire, fictional portraits of female friendship in the long eighteenth century seem to have

provided women with the intellectual stimulus, the emotional support and the spiritual fulfilment that was often missing in their relationships with men.

The English literature of the long eighteenth century offers abundant portraits of female friendship as a frequent form of sociability among women – sometimes sentimentalised as true spiritual companionship between pure and innocent souls, sometimes demonised as a devious façade for unnatural sexual desire, but always giving us readers valuable insight into women's lives at that period. Whether it is through the refinement of the romantic odes to lady friends by Katherine Philips, the controversial lives of the Ladies of Llangollen, or the literary explorations of same-sex desire by Aphra Behn, literary accounts of the long eighteenth century reveal a fairly nuanced portrait of female friendship, which nevertheless seems to have provided women with the intellectual stimulus, the emotional support and the spiritual fulfilment that was often missing in their relationships with men.

As Jacques Derrida aptly observes in *The Politics of Friendship*, there is 'a double exclusion' in all philosophical discursive interpretations of friendship that seems to ignore both 'friendship between women, and [...] friendship between a man and a woman'.1 As opposed to men's friendships, which in the eighteenth century centred on socialising in the public sphere, forms of attachment among women were increasingly associated with the intimate and the private. In her capacity as editor of the *Examiner*, Delarivier Manley was nevertheless denied access to most of the spaces in the male public sphere. However, as Rachel Carnell contends, she effectively managed to 'challenge the confines of the male friendship that shaped public sphere debate' by using her voice to evidence that exclusion, that is, 'by writing as both a woman and a political exile'.2 Both Manley's *Letters Written by Mrs. Manley* (1696) and *The New Atalantis* (1709), as well as Eliza Haywood's periodical *The Parrot* (1746), for example, uncover the manifold ways in which female authors experienced their exclusion as women in a world dominated by the exclusively male spaces of public debate. As Carnell observes, 'we also must appreciate her [Haywood's] challenge to the foundations of a political public sphere dependent on an image of bourgeois, Anglican, male-only friendship'.3

As Naomi Tadmore explains, the concept of female friendship in the eighteenth century encompassed various meanings that may have involved bonds as diverse as 'kinship ties, sentimental relationships, economic ties, occupational connections, intellectual and spiritual attachments, sociable networks, and political alliances'.4 In her foundational book *Women's Friendship in Literature*, Janet Todd distinguished five types of female friendship in eighteenth-century literature: sentimental, erotic, manipulative, political, and social. Such division reveals the various nuances and complexities implicit in same-sex relationships as well as the many functions they served. Given the social pressure for a progressively more rigid separation of gender roles (and apt spaces for such roles), Todd argues that female communities 'nudge women into development, where marriage can only bewilder or become a too sudden closing of the gulf society has formed between the sexes'.5 Stuart Curran similarly contends that women's friendships were characterized by a bond of affection and

solidarity that contributed to the nurturing of 'women's culture and women's history'.[6] As Carolyn Woodward also observes, Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) or Sarah Fielding and Jane Collier's *The Cry* (1754) are characterised not only by fluidity of genre, but also of gender, as both narratives challenge hetero-patriarchal conventions and explore female subjectivity by imagining women-centred communities.[7] Indeed, the life choices of Sarah Ponsonby and Lady Elizabeth Butler, the Ladies of Llangollen, or those of Sarah Robinson Scott and Lady Barbara Montagu seem to attest to their desire for a society that would be less restricted by patriarchal expectations – even if the above mentioned women were extremely observant of gender roles and particularly careful that the public image they provided was compliant to moral standards.[8]

As Elizabeth Wahl observes, 'idealized representations of female intimacy' in the eighteenth century could be undermined by a 'spectre of female homosexuality',[9] although intimate friendships between women were generally not regarded as dangerous, either for the women involved or for the social order at large. In *Surpassing the Love of Men*, Lillian Faderman argues that even romantic friendships between women in the eighteenth century were rarely discouraged, as these relationships were seen as a positive way for women to interact socially.[10] In fact, and especially for very young women, Curran similarly observes that a strong commitment to a female friend was considered 'a safe surrogate to ward off the dangers of male seduction' (222). Such an intense relationship was however not limited to unmarried women: in fact, Katherine Philips's passionate poems to her beloved lady friends Lucasia (Anne Owen), Rosania (Mary Aubrey) or Philoclea (Malet Stedman) were written during her married years. While Philips's poetry seems to reveal no evidence as to the happiness of her marriage, the poems she dedicated to love in marriage generally seem to abide by an implicit hierarchical relationship between husband and wife, while her poems on female friendship feature an affectionate relationship based on equality.

Female friendships as portrayed by women writers of the period thus seemed to create a female space for intellectual development, while they provided solace, companionship and very probably a listening ear to their discontents. However, as Catherine Ingrassia contends, the dominant philosophy behind female communities often tended to perpetuate 'the shared reinforcement of behavioural norms'[11] and observance of patriarchal standards. Conduct books of the period, as Herbert[12] and Tague[13] among others have argued, encouraged women not only to be watchful of themselves but also to survey the bodies, behaviours, and moral characters of their female friends, while advising women to 'stress their sensibility, to conceal their sense and ability to reason, to remain deferential and contingent'.[14] As regards the negotiation of same-sex relationships within patriarchal structures, Ingrassia examines how Eliza Haywood incorporated reflections about same-sex relationships throughout her literary production.[15] Both early novels such as *Masqueraders: Or Fatal Curiosity* (1724) and her last work of fiction *The History of Jemmy and Jenny Jessamy* (1753) show the many complexities involved in female friendship, both in its positive and negative features. In the first novel, the young widow Dalinda cannot but trust her friend Philecta with the account of her affair with Dorimenus. Instead of faithfully keeping her secret, Philecta becomes jealous and plots to seduce her friend's lover, which causes Dalinda's rage: Dalinda then ruins Philecta's reputation through slandering, and the latter ends up exposed while pregnant with

Dorimenus's child. In the second, the moral uprightness of reflective and rational Jenny is put to the test while vacationing in Bath in the female company of Lady Speck and Miss Wingman. There she encounters various stories of wayward female behaviour – those of Mrs M., the Fair Stranger and Sophia – to which she admirably reacts with compassion rather than with contempt.

Similarly, Jane Austen also provides beautiful examples of female relationships that show genuine sisterly affection, while abundantly showing that others are informed by patriarchal standards and thus tainted by frivolity, jealousy and competition over men. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Elinor Dashwood remains generous and honest to Lucy Steele despite being devastated by the news that she is engaged to her beloved Edward Ferrars, without suspecting that Lucy is only taking advantage of her good-natured discretion. Similarly, in *Mansfield Park* (1814), Mary Crawford displays superficiality and dishonesty in her association with the Bertram sisters, who are in turn too shallow-minded and too infatuated by Mary's brother Henry to perceive Mary's nature, and instead compete for Henry's attention. Emma Woodhouse's kind-minded but patronising friendship with Harriet Smith in *Emma* (1815) is a pseudo-mentoring relationship aimed at providing a solvent husband for the socially inferior Harriet, but in which Emma carelessly manipulates Harriet's life and neglects her feelings. Even Maria and Jemima's unconventional relationship in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) (with the even more unconventional prospect of raising Maria's daughter in a highly subversive all-women family) is a result of both women's devastating encounters with men and their subsequent victimisation by patriarchal structures.

Even when women manage to create powerful, compromised connections with each other, the privileged position and the ubiquitous presence of the hetero-romantic plot seem to distort and preclude that bond, as Woodward aptly contends:

> Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747) and Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752) are novels that tease representations of women's frustrated longing for one another but then silence that longing as a way of keeping "realist" patriarchal narrative: in the end, a woman must turn from her female friend(s) and become either "his" in the marriage bed or "dead" in the narrow bed of the coffin (Woodward 840).

In the light of the literary accounts discussed above, and regardless of whether female friendships were critical or supportive of social mandates, erotic or nurturing, as Carmen Maria Fernández-Rodríguez notices in her analysis of female friendship in Frances Burney's novels, female relationships seem to have been 'the place where the woman writer could negotiate with and between the dominant images of female identity in patriarchal society'.16 While these relationships, Fernández-Rodríguez contends, 'encourage intimacy and mutual sharing of a domestic environment, they also express women's intense yearning for freedom' (120). In short, and despite its many nuances, female friendships signified a space where women could define and construct their identity not in relation to men, but to each other.

1. Jacques Derrida, The Politics of Friendship, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), p. 278-279.

2. Rachel Carnell, ‘Protesting the Exclusivity of the Public Sphere: Delarivier Manley’s Examiner’ in Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell (eds), Women’s Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690–1820s (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p. 153-164), p. 160. Carnell adds that such image ‘two and a half centuries later, has not fully been shaken’.

3. Rachel Carnell, 'It's Not Easy Being Green: Gender and Friendship in Eliza Haywood's Political Periodicals', English Faculty Publications (vol. 24, 1999) https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub/24

4. Naomi Tadmore, Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), p. 167.

5. Janet Todd, Women’s Friendship in Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 315.

6. Stuart Curran, ‘Dynamics of Female Friendship in the Later Eighteenth Century’, Nineteenth-Century Contexts (vol. 23, no. 2, 2001, pp. 221–239), p. 233.

7. Carolyn Woodward, ‘’My Heart so Wrapt’: Lesbian Disruptions in Eighteenth-Century British Fiction’, Signs (vol. 18, no.4 - Theorizing Lesbian Experience, 1993), p. 838-865.

8. Elizabeth Mavor, The Ladies of Llangollen: A Study in Romantic Friendship (Ludlow: Moonrise Press, 2011).

9. Elizabeth Susan Wahl, Invisible Relations: Representations of Female Intimacy in the Age of Enlightenment (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.121.

10. Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present (New York: William Morrow, 1981), p.77.

11. Catherine Ingrassia, ‘Eliza Haywood’s Periodicals in Wartime’ in Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell (eds), Women’s Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690–1820s: The Long Eighteenth Century (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018, p. 178-189), p.182.

12. Amanda E. Herbert, Female Alliances: Gender, Identity, and Friendship in Early Modern Britain (New Haven: Yale UP, 2014).

13. Ingrid H. Tague, Women of Quality: Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690-1760 (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2002).

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15. Catherine Ingrassia, ‘’Queering’ Eliza Haywood’. Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies (vol. 14, no.4, 2014, p.9-24), p.9.

16. Carmen Maria Fernández-Rodríguez, 'Frances Burney and Female Friendships: Some Notes on Cecilia (1782) and The Wanderer (1814)', Journal of English Studies (vol. 9, 2011, p. 109-123), p.112.

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