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Enemies and false friends

PULLIN Naomi



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Abstract

Friendship held an important place in the long eighteenth century. But one of the major challenges of everyday life was identifying friends from enemies. Few periodicals or treatises explicitly dealt with the subject of enmity, but it was always a central feature of the literature on friendship from this period, which contained abundant warnings about the perils of false friendship. The deepest enmities resulted from the closest friendships. Yet the candour and honesty of enemies had important social utilities. Probing the association between enmity and friendship opens up discussion about the tensions inherent in the sociability described, performed, and enacted during this period.

Friendship held an important place in social relations. But one of the major challenges that men and women faced in their everyday lives was identifying a friend from an enemy. In fact, friendship and enmity were far from simple binaries: they were closely connected. Theorists and writers spoke of both the benefits and potential dangers of friendship throughout the long-eighteenth century, acutely aware of the ease with which an intimate relationship might tip over into an enmity. It is noteworthy that few printed periodicals or treatises from this period explicitly dealt with the subject of enmity. However, it was always a central feature of the literature on friendship and politeness, which contained abundant evidence of the perils that came from contracting close intimacies with those who might later betray you.

Choosing a friend was a matter of utmost importance. In the ancient literature on friendship, the likes of Aristotle and Cicero emphasised that true friendship – *amicitia perfecta* – was a rare and once in a lifetime relationship. *Amicitia* describes the absolute loyalty of one friend to another as exemplary of and foundational to civic virtue.1 Yet even within the most perfect of friendships, there remained an undercurrent of concern that they might later end in betrayal, which had both personal and political repercussions. Lord Chesterfield advised his son Philip in 1774 that a 'constant attention' was essential for a young man's ability to navigate the social world. The ultimate aim, Chesterfield advised, was 'to make as many personal friends, and as few personal enemies as possible'. 'Personal friends', he noted, were not intimate confidantes, but individuals 'who speak well of you, and would rather do you good than harm'.2

The earliest literature on friendship also stressed the social importance of enemies, who were often more useful and less dangerous than friends. This is because their candour and honesty provided an important contrast to the flattery and dissimulation of close personal acquaintances. It was in his famous treatise *De amicitia* ('On Friendship') that Cicero noted 'Some men are better served by their bitter-tongued enemies than by their sweet-smiling friends'. He described how one's enemies rather than friends were better equipped to offer frank and candid advice.3 Other treatises from the early modern period echoed this sentiment. The anonymous author of *The Triall of True Friendship* (1596) explained that many men could learn much about their own imperfections by keeping company with their enemies. The author cited the example of the Ancient Greek ruler Hieron of Syracruse, whose enemy smelt his stinking breath and mocked him, which led him to seek a remedy. Hieron's close acquaintances, by contrast, had put up with his bad breath for many years and never told him about it.4 As the political scientist Rodney Barker has noted, enemies are useful in political relationships because their public identity is much less ambiguous than those of friends. In fact, having an identifiable enemy can enhance political power, for societies and groups, which Barker argues are held together not by their values, cultures, or institutions, but 'by an enemy who is common to all and threatens all'.5 The ultimate source and root of enmity, of course, came in a religious context: namely with the devil, who was the literal 'enemy of mankind'.

In the centuries before our period, the relationship between friendship and enmity was often quite clear-cut. In fact, enmity in the Medieval period was not only a social relationship, but also a legal concept, which had a pedigree in Roman Law. Harm done to an enemy in the Middle Ages occupied a different legal category from harm done by anyone else and had different legal consequences. For example, if a homicide was inflicted against a 'mortal enemy', there was a high probability of acquittal. This meant that an instance of wrongdoing or harm might be mitigated by an individual's known relationship with an enemy.6

By the eighteenth century, the line between friendship and enmity was very thin. After all, the deepest enmities naturally resulted from the closest friendships. Strangers could not become enemies. Whilst arguing that 'there is nothing more necessary unto the life of man then to be environed with faithful and unfained friends', treatises such as the *The Triall of True Friendship*, advised readers to move cautiously in those to whom they contracted a relationship, for 'those on whom we bestow the greatest benefits, if opportunities serve, wil requite us with the deadliest hate'.7 Francis Bacon had similarly declared in his treatise 'Of Revenge' (1625), that it was much easier to follow the command to forgive an enemy than it was to forgive a friend.8 The danger that a known enemy posed was thus often eclipsed by the perils of the false friend.

For many eighteenth-century writers, the primary concern about false friendship was the potential danger that a friend – to whom the closet secrets, counsels, and opinions had been imparted – might pose after the relationship had broken down. This was underscored in answer to a question asked of the periodical the *Athenian Mercury* in 1692 about 'why the greatest enmity succeeds the greatest Friendship and Amity?' The Athenian Society replied that the 'Freedom and Converse' of close friendship make the parties involved 'more open to one anothers abuses, whereas other Persons that were strangers to their Breasts cou'd have nothing to say against them, or at least not half so much'.9

As friendship was such an important marker of an individual's identity, there was a genuine concern within the eighteenth-century advice literature about the damage to reputations that came from making friends with the wrong people. It was impressionable young men and women who were singled out by many writers as particularly susceptible to the dangers of false friendship. Lord Chesterfield warned his son Philip in his widely successful *Letters* about the dangers of 'incontinency of friendship' among one's peers. While he did not suggest shunning the company of other young people altogether, he instructed Philip to 'keep your serious views secret' and to entrust them only to a 'tried friend' of a more advanced age, who 'is not likely to become your rival' (Stanhope 83).

The perils of false friendship had gendered connotations. The natural sincerity associated with women, meant that female company came to encapsulate many of the ideals of civility and good manners expected of people of quality.10 However, the consequences of failed or false friendship were also more damaging. Since women did not have the same legal recourse as men and could not challenge an opponent to a duel if their honour was infringed, their reputation, as well as that of her family, kin, and other acquaintances, could be irreparable

damaged if their private thoughts and secrets were exposed.11 This was evidenced in the anonymous *Ladies Dictionary* (1696). Whilst recognising that 'Friendship well chosen and placed, is the greatest felicity of life', the treatise went on to warn its female readers to move cautiously in the choice of their friends, for, 'when a close knit Friendship slips the knot, or is violently broken in sunder, Anger and Hatred ensures all the Secrets on either side [...] are let fly abroad to become the Entertainment and Laughter of the World'.12

Eighteenth-century conceptions of sociability, which regarded female relationships as particularly emotionally interested and affectionate, provided greater occasion for both intimacy and estrangement. The Scottish physician Alexander Monro warned his daughter in 1753 that a 'dangerous Companion' threatened the very foundations of civil conversation.13 His private counsel was echoed in other printed advice literature, such as that by the Scottish physician John Gregory in *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1776). In this, Gregory remarked that it was common for women like his daughters to 'run into intimacies which you soon have sufficient cause to repent of'. One of the greatest obstacles, he noted, was a clashing of interests 'in the pursuits of love, ambition, or vanity'. Like Lord Chesterfield, who had warned his son about the greater potential for enmity among one's peers, Gregory recommended that a close relationship with a man could often be less dangerous than friendship with another woman.14

The rise of polite culture may even have enhanced the anxiety surrounding false friendship. This was a time when manners, language, gestures, and deportment were increasingly regulated and expected to conform to certain cultural standards. However, this had the effect of obscuring the inner self from public view. Although 'assuming different masks was a sociable commonplace', Soile Ylivuori points out the intense concern that surrounded the masquerade-like superficiality that dominated displays of eighteenth-century polite culture. Politeness was 'implicitly dishonest' because it demanded dissimulation. This involved not only the suppression of one's true thoughts and feelings, but also 'strict control of the body and all its movements', which had especial resonance for writers concerned about the perils of false friendship.15 The highest form of dissimulation, as one author declared, occurred when individuals 'not only cloud their real Sentiments and Intentions, but make Profession of, and seem zealously to affect the contrary: This by a more proper and restrain'd Name is call'd Deceit'.16

Polite ladies and gentlemen were thus advised to be selective when it came to the choice of their closest intimates. But what should they to do if an enmity did arise? According to Lord Chesterfield, injury to an individual's honour or moral character had two possible recourses: 'extreme politeness, or a duel'. Whilst duels remained a feature of the eighteenth-century cultural landscape and provided elite men with an important mechanism for defending their honour and regulating their personal relationships, they were being displaced by more passive ways of treating with enemies.17 Chesterfield believed that the best revenge for an affront was 'to be extremely civil to him in your outward behaviour'. In fact, it was important for an enemy to be shown 'rather more civility than [...] another man'. This was not dissimulation, he assured his son, but necessary 'for the quiet and convenience of society, the *agremens* of which are not to be disturbed by private dislikes and jealousies' (Stanhope 78).

Concealing one's true feelings about one's enemies, was seen as a necessary means of upholding the manners and morals of polite society. This was because being in enmity with another person had the potential to evoke passion and uncontrolled anger, which was not consistent with the polite and rational discourse expected of men and women of quality. The natural remedy was thus to avoid contact with an enemy altogether. This is encapsulated in the advice that the French *salonnière* Madame de Pompadour wrote in her treatise *Advice to a Female Friend*, first translated into English in 1750. In this, she stated that it was essential to 'avoid as much as possible those whom you have a Dislike to'. However, 'if Chance throws you into their Way, or you are obliged to see them, conceal your Aversion by all Means'.18

Enmity, then, was intimately linked to friendship and eighteenth-century practices of sociability. They were so closely connected, in fact, that the potential for friendship to become an enmity was a constant source of anxiety for eighteenth-century moralists and conduct-book writers. Whilst enmity was a destructive and negative relationship, it was also socially useful, especially since it was a relationship that was clear cut and unambiguous. It was false friends rather than enemies that had the potential to do the greatest harm. The anxiety that surrounded friendship formation was heightened by the rise of politeness in the eighteenth-century. This made it increasingly difficult to distinguish external performance from potential hypocrisy, betrayal, and falseness. The danger of enemies in disguise and thus the double-edged quality of friendship formation was affirmed by Richard Steele's remarks in a 1711 edition of *The Spectator*, in which he described how it was possible that 'the most polite Age' was 'in danger of being the most vicious'.19

1. Dirk Baltzly and Nick Eliopulos, 'The Classical Ideals of Friendship', in Barbara Caine (ed.), Friendship : A History (London: Equinox, 2009), pp. 1–64.

2. Philip Dormer Stanhope, Lord Chesterfield's Advice to His Son on Men and Manners (5th edn, London, 1788), pp. 72, 87.

3. M. Tullius Cicero, Laelius on Friendship, in Cicero : De Senectute De Amicitia De Divinatione. With an English Translation, trans. William Armistead Falconer (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1923), p. 90.

4. M. B., The Triall of True Friendship (1596), sig. E2v.

5. Rodney Barker, Making Enemies (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. ix, 1.

6. Robert Bartlett, '"Mortal Enmities": The Legal Aspect of Hostility in the Middle Ages', in Tracey L. Billado and Belle S. Tuten (eds), Feud, Violence and Practice: Essays in Medieval Studies in Honor of Stephen D. White (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 199–201.

7. M. B., The Triall of True Friendship, sig. B3r.

8. Francis Bacon, 'Of Revenge', in The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall, of Francis Lo. Verulam, Viscount St. Alban (2nd ed., London, 1625), p. 21

9. Athenian Mercury 6, Issue 29 (26 March, 1692).

10. Lawrence E. Klein, 'Gender, Conversation and the Public Sphere in Early Eighteenth-Century England', in Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds.), Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 100–115.

11. Mary Robinson draws attention to this gendered disparity in a Letter to the Women of England (London, 1799), p. 5: 'If a man receives an insult, he is justified in seeking retribution. He may chastise, challenge, and even destroy his adversary. Such a proceeding in MAN is termed honourable; his character is exonerated from the stigma which calumny attached to it; and his courage rises in estimation […] But were a WOMAN to attempt such an expedient,

however strong her sense of injury, however invincible her fortitude, or important the preservation of her character, she would be deemed a murderess [...] if a slanderer, or a libertine, even by the most unpardonable falshoods, deprive you of either reputation or repose, you have no remedy.'

12. N. H., The Ladies Dictionary: Being a General Entertainment for the Fair Sex (London, 1694), p. 223.

13. Alexander Monro (Primus), The Professor's Daughter: An Essay on Female Conduct (1739), ed. P.A.G. Monro (Cambridge: P.A.G Monro, 1995), p. 50.

14. John Gregory [Lord Gregory], A Father's Legacy to His Daughters. By the Late Dr. Gregory, of Edinburgh (Edinburgh, 1776), pp. 73–4

15. Soile Ylivuori, Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England: Bodies, Identities, and Power (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 166–7, 76.

16. Anon. [attributed to Judith Drake], An Essay in Defence of the Female Sex. In a Letter to a Lady. Written by a Lady (4th edn, London, 1721), p. 102.

17. Markku Peltonen, The Duel in Early Modern England: Civility, Politeness, and Honour (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

18. Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, Marquis de Pompadour, Advice to a Female Friend. By Madam de Pompadour (London, 1750), p. 61.

19. Richard Steele, The Spectator 6, 7 March 1711, in Donald F. Bond (ed.), The Spectator (5 vols, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), i. 30.

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