

Frances Greville's *A Prayer for Indifference* The Limits of Sentiment

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Abstract The present article considers Frances Greville's poem *A Prayer for Indifference* as the centre of a debate around the nature of the emotions and their social and cultural roles in the eighteenth century. Greville questions the models of the philosophers of sensibility, in particular Francis Hutcheson's, and, drawing on Shakespeare's newly prominent status, puts forward literature as an alternative.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Faeries, Feelings and Indifference. – 3 Sentiments, Stoicism and Moral Philosophy. – 4 The Disenchantment of Greville. – 5 Conclusion.

Keywords Frances Greville. Moral Sense. Stoicism. Sentiment. Shakespeare.

1 Introduction

The British writer Frances Burney describes her godmother Frances Greville in a letter as “a penetrant, puissant and sarcastic fairy queen” (1823, 103).¹ Greville does not appear to have fitted the ideal image of an eighteenth-century lady in touch with the trends of sentiment and sensibility. She rather brings to mind the depiction of Mrs Selwyn in *Evelina*, Burney's first novel, appearing in the same year as her letter about Greville. Mrs Selwyn does not hide her quick wits and lets her barbed tongue comment freely, embarrassing young Evelina more than once in the course of the novel's narrative. The literary reputation that Greville attained in her own day is due to a poem written by herself (which corresponds to Burney's characterisation in many ways).


A Prayer for Indifference was first published in the *Edinburgh Chronicle* (14-17 April, 1759) and frequently included in collections and miscellanies throughout the century. William Cowper responded with “Addressed to Miss ---, on Reading the Prayer for Indifference” (1762; first published in

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¹ See also Rizzo 2015. In her study *Companions without Vows*, Rizzo draws the comparison between Frances Greville and Mrs Selwyn in more detail (1994, 241).

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1814) while Hannah More criticised Greville with her poem “Sensibility: An Epistle to the Honourable Mrs Bocaswen” (1781), as did Helen Maria Williams in “To Sensibility” (1786). Throughout the eighteenth century, Greville’s *Prayer for Indifference* remained one of the clearest rejections of the cult of sensibility, and the text with which the champions of sentiment felt the need to engage.² While it is conventionally women who are seen as particular attuned to feelings, also men can excel in the eighteenth-century understanding of ‘sentiment’ and ‘sensibility’ (one need only think of *Tristram Shandy*, *David Simple* and *The Man of Feeling*). This particular conceptualisation of feeling, however, links to reason and the social order, and thereby, ensures that male characters and authors are not subsumed under a female category (see Spacks 2001, 257 ff.). Greville’s “A Prayer for Indifference” shows the limits of sentiment as the speaker of the poem steps out of role prescribed for women and refuses to accept the authority of her feelings any longer. She calls on Shakespeare’s Oberon and develops an alternative female model of feelings to the contemporary constellation of sentiment, virtue and public weal.

2 Faeries, Feelings and Indifference

Oh! haste to shed the sovereign balm,
My shattered nerves new-string;
And for my guest, serenely calm,
The Nymph Indifference bring. (Greville 1989, ll. 33-6)

The speaker of Greville’s poem calls upon the faerie king Oberon and begs him for a magic potion. Yet while the potion in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1600) gives Puck the opportunity to play fast and loose with the feelings of Titania and the four young Athenians, leading to all kinds of confusions and difficulties, in Greville’s poem, the gift from the faerie signifies the release from throes of passion and feeling.

I ask no kind return in love,
No tempting charm to please;
Far from the heart such gifts remove
That sighs for peace and ease. (ll. 17-20)

Furthermore, Greville comments on the ‘heart’, the main organ of sensibility, as follows:

2 A similarly critical treatment is presented by Ann Yearley in “To Indifference” (1787). More complete lists of poems responding to Greville’s *Prayer for Indifference* can be found in Grundy 1988, 15-16, and Rizzo 1994, 371 fn. 9).

Nor ease nor peace that heart can know
 That, like the needle true,
 Turns at any touch of joy or woe,
 But turning, trembles, too. (ll. 21-4)

Like the needle of a compass, the heart indicates feelings “of joy or woe”, but, because the sentimental heart gives access to these feelings, it also leads to unrest. The sentimental heart in Greville’s *Prayer for Indifference* constantly moves between ‘joy’ and ‘woe’, ‘bliss’ and ‘agony’, ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain’. In the stanzas treating the matter of the heart, Greville jumps between positive and negative feelings with her choice of words, negations arranged in chiasmic fashion and fully-fledged figures of chiasms. The heart of Greville’s speaker does not get to rest and threatens to explode the eighteenth-century culture of sentiment (according to which, as we shall see in a moment, feelings can be cultivated and put to social use). This does not mean that Greville veers to excess. Rather, she presents an ideal vision of an *unfeeling* subject in the second half of the poem:

The tears, which pity taught to flow,
 My eyes shall then disown;
 The heart, that throbbed at others’ woe,
 Shall then scarce feel its own. (ll. 41-4)

In the moral philosophy of the eighteenth century, ‘pity’ and ‘sympathy’ play a central role as the expression of social connections and links. The emotions as ‘passions’, for example in Thomas Hobbes or in Bernard Mandeville, drive the subject to action without thought and often lead to the reckless pursuit of individual benefits, and are distinctly different from the emotions as ‘sentiments’ as conceptualised later in the eighteenth century. For the Earl of Shaftesbury, emotions as sentiments are the expression of the larger positive nature of man. For Francis Hutcheson, they are part of the ‘moral sense’, which works as a kind of social perception and then turns into the basis of all social and economic interaction in Adam Smith.³

Greville’s vision of ‘Indifference’ certainly does not want to return to the ‘passions’, but it criticises the notion of ‘sensibility’, exactly because this philosophy also appears to surrender the subject to painful experiences just as much as the previous mechanistic view. Indeed, she distances herself so far from the sentimental signifiers in the final verse of the stanza above that she does not even mention ‘heart’ and ‘woe’, but rather retreats to neutral references back to the beginning of the stanza with

3 See Mullan 1988 and Barker-Benfield 1992 for larger overviews on ‘sentiment’ and its philosophical and cultural implications.

“its own”. Greville is quite aware that her attack on the moral philosophy of sentiment is not likely to meet with great approval, and she ends the poem with the words “Half-pleased, contented I will be | Contented, half to please” (ll. 63-4).

3 Sentiments, Stoicism and Moral Philosophy

What exactly is this ‘Indifference’ that the poem’s speaker hopes for? The definitions in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* range from ‘neutrality’ and ‘impartiality’ (referenced through the disinterested approach to sensory perceptions recommended by John Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) all the way to ‘negligence’. ‘Indifference’ seems to have a relatively neutral meaning in everyday usage. In the context of moral philosophy, however, it refers to a rather negative quality. The response poems to Greville demonstrate this clearly.

After “Miss ---”, Cowper’s addressee, has read Greville’s poem, the speaker of Cowper’s poem invites her to speak the counter-prayer together with him. This gesture shows the social and religious relevance of the rejection of ‘indifference’:

‘Tis woven in the world’s great plan,
And fixed by Heav’n’s decree,
That all the true delights of man
Should spring from *Sympathy*. (Cowper 1980, ll. 45-8)

Rejecting feelings would mean rejecting the plan of creation that underlies the world view of the eighteenth century (most prominently articulated in Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man*). If we could get rid of feelings, Cowper argues, we would not only avoid negative feelings but also destroy the cohesion of marriage and society and foil the inspiration that underlies the arts.

Hannah More’s “Sensibility” is even more outspoken: if Greville’s “Prayer” should be heard, she would not be able to write a poem such as this, because it builds on feelings (and thereby stages a paradox) (see also McGann 1996, 51). After all, as also Helen Maria Williams underlines in her poem “To Sensibility”, Greville would relinquish also the positive aspects of sensibility if she were to say goodbye to feelings forever.

That envied ease thy heart would prove
Were sure too dearly bought
With friendship, sympathy, and love
And every finer thought. (Williams 1786, ll. 81-4)

Is there no successful road to indifference in the eighteenth-century world of thought? Maybe we can find this in the moral philosophy of Stoicism, which was rather popular in the mid-eighteenth century? The Stoic finds peace and tranquillity, as soon as she succeeds in taking a step back from the tempest of the emotions and in regarding said emotions as a noisy coulisse of opinions lodged between the world as it is and the world as we perceive it. In the dedicatory poem to Elizabeth Carter's translation of Epictetus, we read:

COME EPICTETUS! Arm my Breast [...]
 Oh teach my trembling Heart
 To scorn Affliction's Dart
 Teach me to mock the Tyrant Pain! ("An Irregular Ode" 1758, ll. 5-7)

The promise of Stoic serenity, however, that comes from surmounting emotions, is either ridiculed in the eighteenth century (see, for instance, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*) or presented as unattainable (as with the Stoic philosopher in Johnson's *Rasselas*) (see also Norton 2012, 25-45). We find similar lines of argument in the response poems to Greville's *Prayer for Indifference*. In Lady Carlile's "The Fairy's Answer" (1781), for example, Oberon reports his frenetic, comical search for a "[g]rain of cold indifference", which is hopeless since such a substance would break "[t]hose laws which Fate has made" (ll. 46, 57).

The dedicatory poem to Carter's translation, cited above, is also at pains to underline that Epictetus and Stoic philosophy do not liberate the individual from the demands of Christian charity and sympathy. It asks Carter to turn her translation from ancient philosophy to the concerns of modern Christian teachings. There is no room for a Stoic 'indifference' that would break the bonds of moral feelings. When read against the main part of the poem, which revolves around a clearly Christian world of feeling and sentiment, the request that Epictetus should 'arm' the poem's speaker against the tempests of emotions turns almost mock-heroic. Carter then also states in her introduction, which offers an overview of Stoic philosophy for her eighteenth-century readers, that "[t]he absolute Indifference of all Externals, and the Position, That Things independent on Choice are nothing to us, the grand Point on which their Arguments turned, every one, who feels, knows to be false" (1758, xviii).

Eighteenth-century moral philosophy comes to a similar verdict. Shaftesbury writes: "Let indolence, indifference or insensibility be studied as an art, or cultivated with the utmost care, the passions thus restrained will force their prison" (1999, 214). Hutcheon comments on the "Vanity of some of the lower rate of Philosophers of the *Stoick Sect*". He observes, "That this *affectionate Temper* is true Virtue, and not that *undisturbed Selfishness*, were it attainable, every one would readily own who saw them both in Practice"

(Hutcheson 2002, 83; italics in the original). The Stoic model of indifference, of equanimity (*apatheia*), which is not perturbed by any emotion, appears to be a pipe dream. On the contrary, the emotions we cannot escape are reconceptualised as “affectionate Temper” and turned into the guiding lights of virtue. Hutcheson’s “moral sense”, for example, depends on the “sensations” we feel in response to virtue and vice and it leads us to do the right thing. At the same time, the “moral sense” helps us towards happiness, because it makes us experience pleasure in the good qualities of others (78).⁴

Greville’s poem questions these seemingly secure conclusions. Let us begin with the interesting parallel between Carter and Hutcheson when it comes to the basis of Stoic ‘indifference’: everyone knows from their own experience, either through their own feelings (as with Carter) or through their own reflections (as with Hutcheson) that the Stoic attempt to separate feelings and thoughts is not feasible. The reference back to one’s own experience, through one’s ‘moral sense’, then turns to the central moral instance in Hutcheson. Greville, however, asks Oberon to liberate her from exactly this ‘sense’. “Take then this treacherous sense of mine, | Which dooms me still to smart” (ll. 29-30). Greville’s speaker is happy to relinquish her painful emotions. “Sense” can be read as ‘sensibility’ (meaning the perception of feelings) in these verses, but it certainly also links to the ‘moral sense’ (meaning feeling as perception and moral discernment). She calls it “treacherous”. First and foremost, it might mean that “sense” promises a happiness that it cannot deliver. But go a step further and the “treacherous sense” will not even be able to point you the right way in the social landscape. The compass needle of the sentimental heart no longer offers a reliable orientation, neither when it comes to interpersonal relationships, nor when it comes to transcendental matters. And the sentimental edifice of thought is about to collapse unto itself.

Greville is not the only eighteenth-century female author who criticises the culture of sentiment. Charlotte Lennox’s poem “On Reading Hutcheson on the Passion”⁵ states that Hutcheson’s model is of no help to those already caught in the stream of emotions: “Why was thy soft philosophy address | All to the vacant ear, and quiet breast” (1760, 5-6). When examining Hutcheson’s chapter “[h]ow far our several Affections and Passions are under our Power”, it becomes indeed apparent that the philosopher does not offer any practical means to master one’s feelings. This lies in the nature of his model. The ‘moral sense’ is given to each individual human being and it shows in quasi-automatic fashion which virtue one should

4 Hutcheson refers to Marcus Aurelius for this point; certainly a thinker who does not belong to the “lower rate of Philosophers of the Stoick Sect”.

5 Lennox’s poem exists in two different versions, published in her collection *Poems on Several Occasions* (1747) and in her journal *The Lady’s Museum* (1760).

admire and which vice one should despise. Hutcheson writes: “But ‘tis plain, we have not in our power the modelling of our *Senses or Desires*, to form them for a private Interest: They are fixed for us by the AUTHOR of our Nature” (2002, 82). Lennox draws from such remarks the conclusion that Hutcheson’s system only works if you are already feeling rather little.⁶ As she puts it, it is a philosophy for the “serenely stupid” (l. 13). Greville’s criticism is less explicit. She shows that spontaneous emotions are often painful and that the moral dimension only works to intensify such pain. Neither Greville nor Lennox mention the term “virtue”, which is central for Hutcheson, the Stoics and also Cowper (especially when it comes to the moral education of his female addressee in the poem). As female authors, Greville and Lennox know better than to criticise the moral superstructure and choose to target their criticism at the emotional model instead.

4 The Disenchantment of Greville

We have seen how Greville reacts to the culture of sentiment of her days in a fashion that we could call, in line with Burney’s characterisation of her godmother, “penetrant, puissant and [in certain moments] sarcastic”. Burney also addresses her as a “fairy queen” (1823, 103) and, indeed, Greville chooses to embed her poem not into the Christian world order but into Shakespeare’s fairy realm from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. This strategy, which can also be traced as a topos of liberation in the work of other female authors of the period (see Doody 2000, 230-3), lends the poem a playful note and develops an alternative role for literature in the debate around feelings.

The speaker introduces Oberon as follows:

Sweet airy being, wanton sprite,
That liv’st in woods unseen,
And oft by Cynthia’s silver light
Trips’t gaily o’er the green. (ll. 5-8)

After the speaker has presented her plea and imagined in some detail the effect of the healing potion, she describes her good wishes for Oberon and thereby gives further shape to the fairy world:

And so may never-fading bliss
Thy flowery paths attend!

⁶ While Lennox still hopes in the version from 1747 that she will master her passions and find repose, the version from 1760 switches into a different key and gives up on Hutcheson and the promise of his model.

To some new region of delight,
Unknown to mortal tread. (ll. 51-6)

Through Oberon Greville conjures a fairy realm that emerges as dainty, skirts the mundane and embodies happiness. Oberon's paths are "unknown to mortal tread" and he lives in "woods unseen". This world is not accessible to human beings (and perhaps not even perceptible to them). "Glow-worms" and "acorn goblets" describe the measure of his world. While Oberon dances in the direction of new delights and never-ending felicity, the poem's speaker hopes for a less dynamic "sweet repose" and "sober ease" which will calm the compass needle of her heart. A moral human being cannot promenade on the paths of Oberon, and she cannot share either really or metaphorically his "acorn goblet" which is filled "with heaven's ambrosial dew, / From sweetest, freshest flowers distilled" (ll. 57-9). What remains for the human being is, at best, indifference.

Greville's poem seems to take up a phenomenon which Max Weber calls the "disenchantment of the world" (1988, 594). Weber discusses how the trust in reason, the development of rational science and philosophy and, eventually, the bureaucratic organisation of society turn the world into a prosaic, grim place. The study of the history of emotions also discusses this in terms of the self-disciplining through discourses around manners and politeness (see Elias 1994; Reddy 2001; Goring 2004). Of course, Weber is mainly addressing developments in the nineteenth century, but the notion of the 'disenchantment of the world' is already present in Friedrich Schiller's poem "The Gods of Greece" ("Die Götter Griechenlands" [1788] 1960). Schiller, just as Greville two decades earlier, links joy with fantasy and speaks of "beautiful creatures from fairy realms" ("schöne Wesen aus dem Fabelland", l. 4). In Schiller's poem, the heavens are empty, God appears distant and humans are merely "the first and most noble of the worms" ("der Würmer Erster, Edelster", l.190). Nature is dead, as it is now governed by science, and this turns also the speaker of Schiller's poem (who expresses himself on the part of humanity as a whole) into an unfeeling creature. In the eighteenth-century culture of feeling and sensibility, one might find scientific terms and measurements, such as the compass mentioned by Greville, but these serve to illustrate the movements of feelings not to stifle them. The world according to Shaftesbury or Cowper draws on these measurements to indicate to everyone how well it has been designed, while Greville and Schiller present an altogether different perspective.

Both Greville and Schiller use the notion of 'faerie' to show the boundaries of the culture of sentiment. Greville does not (yet) draw the boundaries between science and the arts as firmly as Schiller does. She rather plays with possible fictionalisations of older scientific models, such as the 'animal spirits', which come to be related to the fairy creatures. According to

the Renaissance conception, the ‘animal spirits’ are produced in the brain and their movements are closely linked to the ‘passions’ (see Arikha 2007). In the eighteenth century, Swift describes them satirically as “a crowd of little animals, but with teeth and claws extremely sharp”, in “A Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operations of the Spirit” (2008, 134). Like the individual bodies in Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, they course through the nervous pathways and, depending on the shape of their bites, bring forth poetry, rhetoric and political writings (see also Sutton 1998, 138). The fairies in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* can indeed be read as ‘animal spirits’ that constantly provoke new feelings and love pains. Greville, I would argue, consciously reimagines Oberon in this light. On the one hand, she gives new life to the old notion that feelings emerge from the capricious ‘animal spirits’ and underscores that they by no means represent a reliable ‘moral sense’. At the same time she takes Oberon into the service of her own cause and expects release from the tyranny of sentiment from him. Greville’s fictionalisation of the animal spirits also reminds her contemporaries of the fact that poets are by no means tied to Hutcheson’s model (even though the response poems, as we have seen, seem to assume so). Even if a visit from Oberon is unlikely and even if his potion has only imaginary powers (as the light touch of “haply some herb or tree” indicates; l. 14), the fairy realms offer an alternative model for thinking through the dominant culture of ‘sentiment’. The rhythm of the poem, sashaying and almost swaggering, relates itself to Shakespeare’s blank verse and carries readers from the strictures of sentiment into the imaginary world of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

5 Conclusion

The link to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* gives Greville the necessary cultural legitimisation to attack the culture of sentiment and, at the same time, allows her to develop an alternative model drawing on a literary tradition that is in the process of getting established and enhanced in those very decades. Shakespeare’s plays more generally question the reliability of feelings. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in particular, presents two characters, Demetrius and Lysander, who show with the greatest sincerity feelings that (as the audience well knows) have been manipulated by the fairies. These feelings do not work as a moral compass; rather, they are the reason why Titania, Lysander and Demetrius cannot distinguish between dream and reality. Greville develops her criticism with a comparatively light touch through the fairy theme in her poem, but the numerous response poems show that she hit a nerve with her *Prayer for Indifference*.

William Reddy writes about the (French) theory of emotions in the eighteenth century: “sentimentalism’s view of human nature was wrong in inter-

esting ways" (2001, 146). No matter how much Hutcheson and Carter, as representatives of 'sentiments' and 'sensibility' appeal to the experience of their readers, doubts always remain as to whether their theory is generalisable to the extent they believe. These doubts emerge from that fact that the cultural model of the emotions only captures part of the larger cognitive phenomenon. Even if 'sensibility' was right at the centre of literary interest in the eighteenth century, dissenting voices found their place. Sarah Fielding works out the ironic discrepancies between feeling 'sentiment' and translating it into actually beneficial actions (see Gadeken 2002), and fainting and hysteria might also be interpreted as escape routes from the tyranny of sentiment rather than as confirmations of female sensibility (see Csengei 2012). With Shakespeare's Oberon, Greville brings literature itself as a player into this debate, both as a challenge to the familiar model of thinking about 'sentiment' and as a temporary liberation from the corset of 'moral sense'.

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