

INTRODUCTION

Now is an opportune moment to rethink the legacy of sentimentalism so dominant in eighteenth-century Western European literature and culture. Contemporary interest in the “truth of emotions” and the affective basis of “lived experience,” whereby the individual’s somatic and subjective responses to stimuli are held to gainsay objectively verifiable data and recorded events, impels us to turn once more to the period in which arguments about mind-body relations, the hierarchy of passions, the function of reason as a regulator of human affairs and the irreducible force of feeling first entered the realm of debate. It was in the eighteenth century that the term “sentiment” became the broad-spreading umbrella under which clustered the cognates “feelings,” the “heart,” “sensibility,” “emotions,” the “affecting,” “tears,” “faints,” “being moved,” all words that carry within them a suggestion of some irresistible force acting on the rational individual. Henry Mackenzie’s “man of feeling” centres on one protagonist the age’s preoccupation with the idea that sentiments define not just us as people, but our moral compass and whole mode of being in the world. Sentimentality thus emerged as the motive force not only behind the plots of novels, the period’s defining mode of literary production, but the sum of our understanding of what it meant to be alive in the world. It is therefore timely for this special issue of *Studia Philologia* to re-examine the eighteenth-century’s formulations of sentimentality as we question once again the function of emotions in human subjectivity.

For all the animadversions of its critics, sentimentality was seldom thought to be a wholly internalised mode of being, one untethered from moral, philosophical or social considerations. As the essays collected here demonstrate, eighteenth-century sentimentalism bore within itself a complex set of negotiations between the feeling individual and the social realm of the public sphere. Alexander Pope’s sentimentalised Hector was at once a “man of feeling” and a figurehead of heroic action who could, and most probably did, inspire military prowess in an age characterised equally by delicacy of sensibility and military conflict. Mackenzie extolled moral sentiment as a “science of manners” conducive to social cohesion as the result of individuals acting in accordance with the dictates of mutually attuned emotion. Sentimentalism was never intended to be a solo performance, but a harmonious blend of affective relations out of which amicable



social relations might be constructed. Indeed, concerns that began to surface late in the eighteenth century about the socially deleterious impacts of sentiment, never more pointedly expressed than in James Gillray's figure of female "Sensibility" weeping over a dead bird and reading a copy of Rousseau while she treads on the severed head of Louis XVI, were always counterbalanced by more generous notions of what the sentimental life could entail. Towards the earlier part of the century, Francis Hutcheson explicitly connected sentimental ideas with the social sphere in his ideas of "moral" and "publick sense" advanced in *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (1742). While sentimentalism could be criticised on the one hand for encouraging excessive displays of emotion and erecting the paramountcy of passion over reason, its defenders placed human feeling at the heart of moral consciousness and the ability to act properly in accordance with sentimental ethics.

Two major themes that emerge in this special issue are, first, the question over whether sentimentalism originates as a pre-rational, turbid, self-centred force against which our rationality must contend, or a benevolent faculty implanted within the human frame with the capacity to inculcate timeless moral truths. This latter point directs us to the second theme, which concerns the historical, geographical and cultural situatedness of sentimentalism. As seen in the essays here, sentimentalism in the eighteenth century was invariably framed as an innate feature of human physiology that could, with sufficient understanding and to greater and lesser degrees according to social development and geographical happenstance, be discerned in all peoples on the face of the earth. This accounts for the seeming paradox of Adam Smith's account of human morality whereby the perceived uniformity of emotions allowed him to posit the "impartial spectator" (Smith 1761, 34) as the "vicegerent" (204) of God within us, a reliable arbiter of our own and other people's actions whether under the influence of emotions or not. Moreover, the pleasurable sensations we experience when we witness an act of goodness were held to be a reliable indicator of the path of virtue with no need for the faculty of reason to adjudicate. Hence the "truth of emotion," according to the eighteenth-century's understanding of the term, was quite the opposite of self-indulgent or egotistical amorality. Sentimentalism was the foundation of morality precisely because it lay deeper than rationality and was less prone to error, albeit it had to be interpreted carefully, hence it provided the plot-stuff of many an eighteenth-century novel.

Set against this, recent advances in the history of emotions encourage us to reconsider sentimentalism as a "biocultural" phenomenon (cf. Boddice, 2020). The hermeneutical challenge sentimentalism poses is that it is at once an embodied experience and a culturally situated one; the wise student of eighteenth-century culture will weigh sentimentalism's frequent claims to innate universality with its particular moment in place and history. Moreover,

just as it has proved constructive among historians to speak of plural “enlightenments” rather than a single monolithic “enlightenment” to take into account local variations and multiple perspectives, so the essays here approach sentimentalism as a multifaceted historical and cultural entity, both in terms of how it was understood in the period and how we analyse it today. The very dominance of sentimentalism meant that it spanned virtually all aspects of eighteenth-century culture, from books, poems and plays to medical, philosophical and scientific discourse, from literary salons to gardens and expeditions of discovery. Sentimentality was a gendered phenomenon as well as one that drew upon differing pre-existing traditions; although, as we shall see, there was a remarkable traffic of ideas in shared sentimental discourse between neighbours Britain and France. As the eighteenth century wore on, sentimentalism came under pressure from, on the one hand, more “Romantic” tastes that held regulated and socially grounded emotions to be mawkish, and on the other, the school of “sense” that increasingly disfavoured powerful displays of feeling – the latter most famously expressed in the novels of Jane Austen.

The articles included in the present volume aim to provide new and emerging critical contexts that unravel the multi-faceted concept of sentimentalism outlined above. The volume opens with Jessica Glueck’s essay on Homer’s Hector as man of feeling. She sheds a new light on Alexander Pope’s translation of the scene of the parting of Hector from Andromache, arguing that the eighteenth-century ideal of sensibility – which created an ambiguous model of masculinity – was employed by Pope in order to transform Hector into a more attractive masculine archetype for modern readers. Ellen Dangel-Janic zooms in on Susanna Centlivre’s use of humour in *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*, a play in which the comic acquires both an ethical and an empathetic dimension which strengthens the virtuous nature of the female heroines who are at loggerheads with vicious figures such as parents and guardians. Elena Butoescu offers a fresh analysis of eighteenth-century affective theory in tandem with translation studies. She devotes attention to the English translation of Crébillon *fil’s* novel *Le Sopha, couleur de roze*, one of the well-known erotic books that promotes a new discourse meant to popularize virtue through eroticism, satire and decadence. Amelia Precup interprets Eliza Haywood’s novel *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* as a story of suffering, aggression and, ultimately, emotional development of the heroine from an imprudent coquette to a reflective wife whereas Rodolphe Olcèse theorizes on Rousseau’s concept of self-love as an expansion of feeling which can be related to contemporary climatic questions. At the opposite end lies the wrong practice of sympathy and benevolence explored by Alexandra Bacalu in conjunction with the fragmentary structure of Henry Mackenzie’s novel *The Man of Feeling*. Rebecca J. Squires argues that Claude-Henri Watelet’s *Essay on Gardens* may be viewed as a telling example of

the relationship between affections and the mid-eighteenth-century picturesque landscape embodied by the French painter's garden isle, *The Moulin July*. Madame de Tourvel, the sentimental and idealized heroine of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, enables Yuqin Gong to raise moral questions about the contemporary world driven by competition and self-interest. Andreea Bugiac re-reads Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* and Laclos's *Liaisons dangereuses* so as to show how sensibility propels into action new fictional forms and norms of emotional behaviour meant to question the limits between the human, the non-human and the inhuman. Éva Antal's insight into Mary Wollstonecraft's travel-letters lays stress on the concept of intellectual mobility and escapism, which the author connects with Rousseau's ideas on exercise and movement, on the one hand, and with Burke's theory of the sublime, on the other. Finally, Emese Kunkli treats Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* as a parody of sentimental and Gothic novels, claiming that the novel should also be read as a *Bildungsroman* in which Austen rewrites romantic literature as well as the conventions of the female Gothic novel ending.

The eleven articles included in the volume are chronologically ordered and have the merit of opening up new vistas for research on eighteenth-century sensibility tackled with the help of recent theories of emotions. We would like to express our special thanks to the contributors, to the article peer-reviewers, and to the *Studia Philologia* executive editors for kindly accepting a theme that continues to be of utmost relevance today.

WORKS CITED

- Boddice, Rob. 2020. "History Looks Forward: Interdisciplinarity and Critical Emotion Research." *Emotion Review* 12, no .3 (July): 131-34.
Smith, Adam. 1761. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. 2nd ed. London: Printed for A. Millar.

Andrew RUDD

Senior Tutor

Murray Edwards College, Cambridge

Email: andrew.rudd@murrayedwards.cam.ac.uk

Dragoș IVANA

Associate Professor

English Department

University of Bucharest

Email: dragos.ivana@lls.unibuc.ro