

How did Cowper Love Women?

Academics enjoy few things more than formulating questions and then refusing to answer them. This article is no exception, as it asks the question ‘How did Cowper love women?’ and then suggests that the question cannot, in the final analysis, be answered at all. Or rather, I would argue, such questions *can* be answered - but only by making Cowper less interesting than he needs or deserves to be. Putting a label on the way in which Cowper loved is to box him in, to define him, to ‘pluck out the heart of his mystery’ (as Hamlet complained to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern). Despite my devotion to the art (or science) of interpretation, I believe that certain mysteries are better appreciated unplucked and that they can be explored without being explained. In particular, I believe that the wrong kind of biographical criticism makes the reading of poetry a duller experience. Psychopathology is the medicalised term for the labelling of poets and poetry, the word that best describes attempts that have been made to define and confine the life and work of Cowper ever since his death.

All psycho-pathological labels that seek to define both Cowper’s amorous predilections and what we now call ‘sexual identity’ are, in point of fact, anachronistic. They are drawn from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries rather than the eighteenth. Victorian doctors tended to want a place for everyone and everyone in their place. Labelled love has little (thank goodness) to do with Cowper or his world. Unfortunately, over the next decade or so, thanks to the inattentive readings of one Andrew Elfenbein, we can expect the dominant label attached to Cowper to be that of ‘repressed gay man’. Now Elfenbein doesn’t actually say that Cowper was gay, but he implies it, and I know full well from marking student essays that anything that is offered as a vague suggestion by any scholar becomes holy writ in the context of essays and examinations. And given the peculiar way in which authors are organised and packaged for university syllabi, I think it more than probable that very soon most young people studying Cowper (certainly in the United States) will regard him as important *only* in terms of his gay identity. As a result, all of Cowper’s poems and letters will be regarded as important *only* as evidence of his gayness. This has already happened to Thomas Gray (whose homo-erotic friendships are fairly well documented), and Cowper is about a decade behind Thomas Gray in this respect.

I intend to challenge the idea of a ‘gay’ or homosexual Cowper, not because I think there is anything wrong with being gay or that Cowper needs to be defended from any sinister accusation of being gay but rather for two (quite unrelated) reasons. Firstly for the fairly trivial and secondary reason that there is not a single solitary shred of evidence to support it. Nowhere in the entire body of Cowper’s poetry and correspondence is there ever the slightest suggestion that Cowper ever felt romantically drawn to anyone of his own sex, whereas his early poems to Delia (Theadora) contain some of the *most* heterosexual lyric sentiment of their day. The more important reason why I do not believe that this label should be slapped on Cowper is that I think that it threatens to enforce a dull way of reading his work.

Clearly, Cowper did not enjoy what is far too casually called a ‘normal’ heterosexual life. Certainly, there seem to have been forms of intimacy that Cowper shied away from, certain expressions of physical affection that he could not commit to. Given the available evidence, however, it seems logical to consider such refusals in terms of his fear of damnation and an altruistic belief that he had no right to allow anyone to become ‘one flesh’ with someone as doomed as he felt himself to be. In other words, Cowper felt too spiritually desolate too often to want to drag anyone down with him.

However, despite (or because of) Cowper’s failure in traditional romantic terms, he was enabled to ‘succeed’ with women, in very different terms. To begin by considering one short Cowper poem, we can see how fascinated Cowper was with the idea of intimacy with women:

‘A Poetical Epistle to Lady Austen’ (17 December 1781)

DEAR Anna – between friend and friend,
Prose answers every common end;
Serves, in a plain and homely way,
T’express th’occurrence of the day;
Our health, the weather, and the news;
What walks we take, what books we choose;
And all the floating thoughts we find
Upon the surface of the mind.

But when a Poet takes the pen,
Far more alive than other men,
He feels a gentle tingling come
Down to his finger and his thumb,
Deriv'd from nature's noblest part,
The centre of a glowing heart!
And this is what the world, who knows
No flights above the pitch of prose,
His more sublime vagaries slighting,
Denominates an itch for writing.
(1-18)

This poem illustrates an odd phenomenon: sexy Cowper! Cowper celebrates and yet mocks his epistolary and poetic gift in the course of a developing relationship, and the tantalising and rather naughty comma after the word 'part' shows that he was man of the world enough to play with bawdy comedy, only to land safely on a bed of rarefied and platonic sentiment.

The word that best describes Cowper's relationship with women is not to be found in any medical textbook. The word is 'friendship': as simple and as complicated a word as that. The friendship of women was the greatest blessing of Cowper's life, the thing that made life most bearable for him and the thing that inspired him to write many of his greatest poems, including of course *The Task* itself. None of his male literary contemporaries (with the possible exception of Samuel Johnson) enjoyed such important friendships with women, and no other male author (not even Samuel Johnson) was as inspired creatively by these relationships.

Cowper does have a poem, just called 'Friendship', which oddly enough contains a final verse omitted from most editions:

True Friendship has in short a grace
More than terrestrial in its face,
That proves it Heav'n descended:
Man's love of woman not so pure,
Nor when sincerest, so secure,
To last till life is ended.

This stanza has long perplexed me, since Cowper appears to claim that friendship is better than the love between men and women, a claim that makes little sense if Cowper's deepest friendships were with women, if indeed he loved certain women more deeply than he ever loved any men (something I for one believe). The only way to make sense of it is to suggest that Cowper thought that there was a way of loving other human beings that was more divine than that which is usually called the love between a man and a woman.

Friendship is about what should last, for Cowper. Certain key friendships, notably between Cowper, Mary Unwin and Lady Austen, did not in fact last and the 'three-fold cord' was soon broken. More important for the modern reader is the question of how the idea of friendship produced poetry that *did* last, friendship producing both the end and the beginning of great poetry.

I sing the SOFA. I, who lately sang
Truth, Hope and Charity, and touch'd with awe
The solemn chords, and with a trembling hand,
Escap'd with pain from that advent'rous flight,
Now seek repose upon an humbler theme;
The theme though humble, yet august and proud
Th'occasion – for the Fair commands the song.

(*The Task*, I.1-7)

There is, of course, a flirtatious, even a sexual element to Cowper's friendships. Cowper did not relate to women in the same way as to men. Cowper enjoyed the difference between men and women without seeking to exploit it or without wanting a flirtatious friendship to go any further. It is instructive to remember that Cowper and his friends had read and enjoyed the early volumes of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and Sterne was a master at delineating subtle, incomplete and ambiguous sexual encounters.

Like Samuel Johnson, Cowper did not believe that intellectual engagement need compromise a woman's essential femininity. Samuel Johnson famously said of his friend Elizabeth Carter that she could translate Epictetus from Latin into English and still bake a pudding (though not, presumably, at the same time). Cowper is more flirtatious than Johnson usually was, however. Interestingly, Johnson's first biographer, Sir John Hawkins, thought that Johnson was able to enjoy intellectual friendships with women because his eyesight was so bad that he could not be distracted by how pretty they were. Cowper, on the other hand, enjoyed (despite or because of his childhood residence with an oculist) excellent eyesight and his poems and letters have an eye not simply for beauty but (strangely and movingly) for the decay of physical beauty. Again, like Johnson, Cowper regards Mary Unwin's domesticity as fully compatible with her spiritual and intellectual intelligence:

To Mary

The twentieth year is well-nigh past,
Since first our sky was overcast;
Ah would that this might be the last!

My Mary!

Thy spirits have a fainter flow,
I see thee daily weaker grow –
'Twas my distress that brought thee low,

My Mary!

Thy needles, once a shining store,
For my sake restless heretofore,
Now rust disus'd, and shine no more,

My Mary!

For though thou gladly wouldst fulfil
The same kind office for me still,
Thy sight now seconds not thy will,

My Mary!

But well thou play'd'st the housewife's part,
And all thy threads with magic art
Have wound themselves about this heart,

My Mary!

(1-20)

Cowper is fascinated and frightened by the mutual dependency between himself and Mary. His own pain pains Mary and Mary's pain pains him in what threatens to become a vicious circle of sentimental identification. Lord Byron, incidentally, who disliked Cowper's work (and Laurence Sterne's) and who never enjoyed comparable female friendships, parodied this poem in his tribute to his own publisher entitled 'My Murray'. Byron was sadly immune to the poignancy of the poem's central section:

Thy indistinct expressions seem
Like language utter'd in a dream;
Yet me they charm, whate'er the theme,

My Mary!

Thy silver locks, once auburn bright,
Are still more lovely in my sight
Than golden beams of orient light,

My Mary!

For could I view nor them nor thee,
What sight worth seeing could I see?
The sun would rise in vain for me,

My Mary!

Partakers of thy sad decline,
Thy hands their little force resign;
Yet, gently prest, press gently mine,

My Mary!
(21-36)

Again, Cowper asserts the pain of being too closely involved in the happiness of another. The poem offers the exquisite mingled pain and pleasure of feeling for another's distress – what Cowper's world called 'sensibility' and what the twenty-first century has no name for. There is no name either that properly describes the intimacy of this William and Mary who lived joint king and queen of their little domain. They were not husband and wife, they were not live-in lovers, they were not brother and sister and they were not mother and son (though this may have been closest). They were two people who cared for one another without ultimately needing any further definition of that love:

And then I feel that still I hold
A richer store ten thousandfold
Than misers fancy in their gold,
My Mary!

Such feebleness of limbs thou prov'st,
That now at every step thou mov'st
Upheld by two; yet still thou lov'st,

My Mary!

And still to love, though prest with ill,
In wintry age to feel no chill,
With me is to be lovely still,

My Mary!

But ah! By constant heed I know,
How oft the sadness that I show
Transforms thy smiles to looks of woe,

My Mary!

And should my future lot be cast
With much resemblance of the past,
Thy worn out heart will break at last,

My Mary!
(37-56)

As the narrator of the poem folds its addressee to himself, we can conclude by observing that Cowper's relationships, like his verse, oscillated between possibilities rather than finding definitional refuge in any one 'form' of relationship. William Cowper was a lover as well as a poet *sui generis*.

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¹Andrew Elfenbein, 'Cowper's Task and the Anxieties of Femininity', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 13 (1989), 1-17.