

Sentimental Songs for Sentimental Men: Sentimentality and the Politics of Excess

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Sentimentality commonly figures as always already too much in twentieth- and twenty-first century discourse — from literary criticism to pop musical commentary. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, for instance, offers the following as one possible definition of sentimentality: “[H]aving an excess of sentiment or sensibility” (Merriam-Webster n.d.). But which sentiments are included here and why are they considered excessive? Who has “gone too far” and in what ways? In this article, I listen across the long history of English-language sentimental songs in order to show that while sentimentality has persisted, ideas about emotional excess have shifted over the last two hundred and fifty years particularly with regard to love and masculinity. This broader history reveals that — unsurprisingly — sentimental men were present from the beginning, engaging song as a space for opening up in loving ways. In so doing, my aim is not to reinscribe binary gender stereotypes, but rather to untether the longstanding and still prevalent associations between femininity and excess emotional expression.

“Too Sentimental”

Sensual “ooh yeahs” float amidst ethereal pop-funk synth bass, keyboard, and shakers. A high tenor voice, androgynous in quality, sings the following words: “One world, one love, these can never be apart / Whisper in your words what is in your heart / How can I stop this emotion knowing that it’s true / Am I too sentimental for you?/ Have I gone too far?” (Air Supply 1993). “Too Sentimental,” a 1993 track from the Australian soft rock duo Air Supply, provides a succinct pop musical commentary on the cultural status of sentimentality: it is too much and should be stopped!

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1 In my larger project, I am thinking with theorist Lauren Berlant (2008) and music scholar Mitchell Morris (2013), both of whom have made cases for the ongoing relevance of sentimentality in spite of its low cultural status or denigration.

Air Supply offer an apt place to begin our journey. Musicians Graham Russell of England and Russell Hitchcock of Australia met on the set of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in 1975. The pair went on to form the soft rock duo Air Supply in Melbourne, Australia and garnered considerable international success in the early 1980s. Their first hit, released in October of 1976, was a track titled “Love and Other Bruises.” It peaked on the Australian Singles Charts at number 6. In 1979, their song “Lost In Love” caught the ear of Arista Records’s Clive Davis who re-recorded and re-released the track the following year as an international single. The subsequent album of the same title, included the hit “All Out of Love” which rose to number 2 on the US charts. The duo’s only number one hit on the Billboard Hot 100 arrived in 1981 as the title track of their sixth studio album *The One That You Love*. By 1983, Air Supply were releasing their *Greatest Hits* album. It included a new single, written by composer Jim Steinman of Meatloaf’s *Bat Out of Hell* fame. The power ballad “Making Love Out of Nothing at All” would reach number 2 on the US Billboard Hot 100 where it remained for three weeks. By the time the group released “Too Sentimental” in 1993, they had established a clear track record of writing songs with love as the primary theme. I hope, reader, we can agree that within one group’s output, this is a lot of love indeed.

While not a major hit, “Too Sentimental” simultaneously claims love as both *the* sentimental feeling and as a ‘going too far’ kind of feeling. This love is romantic, monogamous, heteronormative, and individualistic. A bridge section begins with vocalist Russell Hitchcock articulating the words “sentimental man” as if that pairing remains an obvious oxymoron. He goes on to ask: “Am I saying too much too soon? ‘Cause I love you” (Air Supply 1993). Here, Hitchcock makes apparent the masculine anxiety over loving, tender emotional expression. But where does this gender-specific shame about love stem from and has it always been understood as in excess? A broader history of the sentimental song reveals that — unsurprisingly — sentimental men were present from the beginning, engaging song as a space for opening up in loving ways.

Sentimental Song Narratives

In the introduction to their anthology *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*, editors Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler write that “sentimentality and the public display of emotion are conventionally [and temporarily] seen as feminine characteristics” (Chapman and Hendler 1999: 1). This same gendered stereotype has dominated the histories and narratives of the sentimental song.² The form, to borrow an idea from Sara Ahmed (2004), seems to be particularly sticky. And what has stuck is the stereotype reiterated again and again that sentimental songs are women’s songs, the product of women’s musical labour, and the domain of women listener’s passions. The genre — if we might refer to it as such — remains so thoroughly feminized that contemporary media regularly use images of white, feminine bodies in order to discuss and/or promote it. Consider, for example, the January 2024 issue of *Elle* magazine. An image of a young and freckled, red-headed woman who wears headphones and smiles while her head rests in the lap of another — a lover perhaps? — accompanies an article with the following title: “Twenty-Five of the Best, Non-Cheesy Love Songs that Give us the Feels” (de Casparis and Blair 2024).

Turning to nineteenth-century music — where the origins of sentimental songs are usually located — historians have tended to lump them in with all other parlour songs, reading them as products of and for the private domestic sphere. As I have written elsewhere: think images of white middle class ladies crowded around the family keyboard, playing and singing together

2 Several otherwise brilliant in-depth studies of musical sentimentality have unwittingly reinforced the association: Carl Wilson’s (2007) *Let’s Talk about Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* analyses Canadian diva Céline Dion in the context of sentimentality and Karen Tongson’s (2019) *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* offers a queer reading of sentimentality in the soft rock drummer’s oeuvre.

(Gale 2026). Musicologists including Ruth Solie, Judith Tick, and Matthew Head, for instance, have analyzed the figure of the ‘piano girl’ emphasizing gendered accomplishments while Petra Meyer-Frazier (2006) and Candace Bailey (2010) describe the practice of collecting parlour songs in binders volumes. Meyer-Frazier writes: “The hundreds of extant bound music collections from the nineteenth century with women’s names engraved on them more than suggest that this type of music had an important role in both female life and the American home [...] Parlor songs...uphold the nineteenth-century gender norm known as ‘separate spheres’” (Meyer-Frazier 2006: 46–47). In their *No More Separate Spheres!* anthology, editors Cathy Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher critique this framing: “Scholars have created a composite portrait of a nineteenth-century United States where women were installed in female, domestic, sentimental, collective private spaces (basically, the world of the home), and men in the individualistic, public sphere of commerce, politics, and reason” (Davidson and Hatcher 2002: 8).

When music scholars have considered the public and political aspects of sentimental song history, discussions of love and excess tend to get sidelined. Nicholas Tawa, Susan Key, and Brian Roberts have offered important accounts of the sentimental song that emphasize its work in public settings — as a collective tool for political activism, including the nineteenth-century abolitionist songs of the Hutchinson Family Singers, and as a mode of empathizing with oppressed subjects, thereby inspiring action or movements (Tawa 1980; Key 1995: 145–166; Roberts 2017). Later in the nineteenth century, songwriters discovered “that they could sentimentalize grief over wounded and dead soldiers as they had missing lovers or the longing for home” thus turning their attention to nationalist sentiment and the US Civil War (Crawford 2001: 262).

In what follows, I offer a counterpoint to these received histories by attempting to bring together elements from each and prioritizing the relationship between love and masculinity — a central, but underemphasized aspect of sentimentality. Tracing the emergence of the English-language sentimental song to the end of the eighteenth century, I show that sentimental songs not only constitute a category in their own right with a particular history, but they have always been by and for men as much as for women. Were this history more widely known and acknowledged, perhaps Air Supply would feel or sound like less of an excessive, loving aberration.

Sentimental Songsters³

‘Sentimental song’ emerged as a distinct category of English-language popular song in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁴ By the beginning of the nineteenth century, references to ‘sentimental songs’ circulated broadly amongst a literate public via newspapers, journals, sheet music, collections of song texts, advertisements, and concert reviews. The very earliest print references to ‘sentimental songs,’ however, appear on the title pages of eighteenth-century songsters: pocket-sized collections of printed lyrics for the popular songs of the day.

Songsters anthologized predominantly secular song texts and did not make use of printed music notation. Some songsters refer the reader to the title of a song tune to which the newly composed lyrics ought to be performed while others offer only texts. Songsters ranged from eight to several hundreds of pages in length and were published widely in Great Britain throughout the eighteenth century. Such print practices were then adopted in the United States; Irving Lowens’s comprehensive bibliography cites over six hundred extant songsters published in the US between

3 The subsequent three sections are based on a chapter of my doctoral dissertation which has not yet been published elsewhere. See Gale (2014: 21–49).

4 I surveyed a wide-range of English-language texts published between 1777 through to 1848. I used “sentimental song” as a keyword in my research while acknowledging the limits of the written record. Sentimental song traditions such as Japanese Enka and Portuguese Fado, for instance, could certainly be understood as in dialogue with the popular music I discuss here; a cross-language comparison, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

1734 and 1821. Songsters were often printed without a listed editor or compiler and the individual song texts that comprise these volumes rarely mention an author or lyricist.

Early US songsters featured lengthy and descriptive titles which categorized their contents and highlighted the musical values of the time. Words such as merry, polite, modern, fashionable, celebrated, ladies, and gentleman adorn the title pages, emphasizing the role that music ought to play in polite society. For instance, titles such as “The American Mockbird: containing a new collection of the most favourite songs now in vogue” (1760) exemplify the common emphasis on qualities such as ‘newest’, ‘most celebrated’, ‘choice collection’ and ‘most favourite.’ Some songster titles even prescribe their intended use: “Designed for the entertainment of the ladies and gentlemen of New-York, and other parts of North America” (*The Mock Bird*, 1761) and “Intended for the instruction and amusement of little Master Tommy, and pretty Miss Polly” (*A Little Pretty Pocketbook*, 1762). Others explain where these songs were performed: “As sung in the theatres and public gardens in London and Dublin” (*The New Song Book*, 1771). Titles like these signal the reader to the songster’s function: they were both to teach and to entertain.

In the late 1770s, as their length increased, songster titles began to feature adjective descriptions that more specifically enumerated the types of songs contained within. Rather than simply designating ‘new,’ ‘celebrated,’ or ‘favorite’ songs, as their precursors had done, songster editors began to employ an organizational system for song texts that relied on adjectives: national songs, patriotic songs, satirical songs, humorous songs, naval songs, military songs, Irish songs, Scottish songs, and, of course, sentimental songs.

In the introduction to his songster bibliography, Lowens highlighted the importance of these adjectives. He found that ‘sentimental’ and other variants of amatory descriptors form the second most widely used group of adjectives within the songsters he studied, just behind ‘patriotic’ and its variants. Approximately one sixth of Lowens’s six hundred songsters employ the term ‘sentimental’ as a song category in the title to describe the song texts within. On the topic of who used songsters, Lowens writes: “A content analysis...shows that 65 percent, or 354 items, were intended to be used by both men and women. An additional 22 percent were addressed to a primarily male audience. More songsters were designed for children than for women” (Lowens 1976: vii).

The earliest use of the term ‘sentimental song’ that I have located comes from the title of a 1777 collection of song texts by English playwright, poet, and songwriter, George Alexander Stevens. A popular performer, Stevens appeared at Covent Garden Theatre and crossed the Atlantic to perform on stages in both Philadelphia and Boston. Stevens titled his songster “Songs: Comic, Satirical, and Sentimental.” It was printed in Philadelphia and Bell’s Book Store promoted its sales with an advertisement in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* later that same year. The ad refers to Stevens as “the greatest master of the sing-song art in Europe.” The point here is less that this is the first instance of ‘sentimental song’ — I would be unsurprised to find slightly earlier variants in similar locales — but more that the idea of the sentimental song was, to borrow from Raymond Williams, emergent in this decade (Williams 1977: 121–127). Moreover, at the time of their emergence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sentimental songs were not specifically understood as products of women’s culture.

The Cult of Sentiment

Sentimental songsters emerged during the height of British sentimentalism, a cultural phenomenon that, according to literary critic, Janet Todd, touched or even encapsulated most forms of artistic production between 1740 and 1770 — from literature and poetry, to drama and music. Todd’s invaluable study of sentimental literature illustrates that the cult of sensibility and senti-

mentality pervaded British literature by the mid-eighteenth century. What was new to the eighteenth century, explains Todd, was the “centrality of sentiment and pathos” (Todd 1986: 3). Sentimental works sought to arouse pathos in their viewers or listeners, demanding an emotional or even physical response. Often the arousal of feeling was intended to be instructive — to teach people how to feel in certain situations and to stir up their sympathies. Sentimental works also assumed a link between life and literature. Todd writes: “A sentimental work moralizes more than it analyses and emphasis is not on the subtleties of a particular emotional state but on the communication of common feeling from sufferer or watcher to reader or audience” (Todd 1986: 4)

Early sentimental songs printed in sentimental songsters do just this. They draw a clear link between the expression of emotion and the feeling that the spectacle of emotion incites in its listener. Sentimental songs speak in the first person and focus on the immediate present, thus highlighting their intended purpose of provoking an emotional response. Some even include extra-musical performance directions. In “The University” from the song collection *The Nightingale; or Rural Songster in Two Parts* (1800), the performer is instructed to dab a tear from his eyes. The directive should give us pause: “Weeps, and pulls out a blue handkerchief with which *he* wipes *his* eyes; gazing tenderly at it, *he* proceeds” (emphasis mine).

Masculine sentimentality was typical of the eighteenth century. In sentimental novels, protagonists like Laurence Sterne’s Yorick from *A Sentimental Journey Through Italy and France* (1768) and Henry Mackenzie’s Harley from *The Man of Feeling* (1771), in particular, were known for their overt displays of emotion. One Amazon reader provided this apt summary of *The Man of Feeling*: “A man called Harley wonders through life crying, and bumping into people who have unbelievably bad luck. Eventually Harley dies — but not before crying some more” (Coles 2013). Another reviewer writes: “I love this book simply because it’s proof of a different time and totally different gender expectations. Yes sir, you go ahead and faint and cry. We won’t judge you” (Armenta 2013).

Hundreds of sentimental song texts from extant songsters published in the US in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries articulate a man’s perspective on romantic love and address either a specific woman or ‘to the ladies,’ more generally. Much like their literary counterparts, the lyrics are ripe with descriptions of feelings, tears, hearts, and sighs; they create a spectacle of pathos through song. To be clear, it should not be surprising that men were at the centre of production and performance of any eighteenth-century art form; what might be surprising, however, is the way in which feeling and affect were central to these productions and performances. Through song, the men who wrote, performed, and published sentimental songs could become ‘men of feeling.’ And rather unlike Air Supply in the 1990s, they seemingly did so without shame, questioning, and anxiety.

Sentimental Masons

Fraternal orders including the Masons were especially popular sites of sentimental song publishing and singing. Of the songsters from Lowens’s bibliography that use ‘sentimental’ within their title, roughly one quarter of these are also designated as Masonic, either in the collection’s title or by publication. Lowens emphasizes the role that the Masonic Order played in printing and circulating songsters such as those described above.

Masonic song texts exhibit the same salient influences of eighteenth-century sentimentalism as the more general sentimental songs. *The Columbian Songster and Freemason’s Pocket Companion* lists a range of song types in its subtitle, the first of which is ‘sentimental.’ The song texts included within draw attention to the high order of love, mirth, friendship, and generalized feel-

ings within the fraternal orders. “The Origin of Masonry,” for instance, highlights connections between song and social harmony:

Thee, brethren, charge! Charge all your glasses;
The sentiment echo along;
United, let's join to commem'rate
The harmony, mirth, and the song (Larkin 1798).

“The Master’s Song” emphasizes compassion for one’s fellow brother, particularly those who are downtrodden:

The faithful worthy Brother,
Whose heart can feel for grief;
Whose bosom with compassion
Steps forth to its relief,
Whose soul is every ready,
And to diffuse
The principles of Masons
And guard them from abuse (Larkin 1798).

The fifth verse of “Song XX” refers specifically to “feelings” that inspire generosity and charity:

Inspired by his feelings, he bounty imparts,
For Charity ranges at large in our hearts;
And an indigent brother reliev'd from his woes,
Feels a pleasure inferior to him who bestows (Larkin 1798).

The chorus of “The Master’s Song” also offers an example of a Masonic song aligned with moral edification:

These are thy songs, whose pleasure,
At every Lodge, will be,
T'improve themselves by lectures,
In glorious Masonry.
Hail! Glorious Masonry! (Larkin 1798).

In these sentimental songs, Masonic singers express love openly as a project and product of fraternalism and community. Rather than affirming romantic love between pairs of hetero couples, the songs express a communal and social love that clearly shows the influence of the broader cult of sentiment.

Historian Steven Bullock explains that “music played a central role in New England’s Masonic activities” and situates it at a time during which public support for music was considerably haphazard (Bullock 1996: 80). However, Bullock goes on to write that “singing and playing formed an important part of nearly every public and private fraternal activity” (Bullock 1996: 82). The musical harmony and social harmony that are so closely aligned in the song texts above illustrate the close relationship between sentimentalism and fraternalism. Historian James Kences has referred to this as “the double meaning of harmony” (Kences 1996: 78). In singing together, these sentimental men sounded the meaning of their songs and ratified their fraternal engagement more generally.

A final example comes from slightly later in the nineteenth century. The lyrics featured in *Songs from the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Harmonia: A Collection of Sentimental and Pleasing Songs* (1835) similarly emphasize ideals of love, unity, fraternity, duty, and sympathy. Unlike the examples above, this volume includes a song with a reference tune. Here, an untitled song, set to the tune of “Rule Britannia,” relies on the typesetting conventions of sentimental literature

and poetry, namely the varied use of punctuation to set off and highlight the emotive aspects of the song. The second verse uses dashes to emphasize the word “feeling”:

Pluck narrow notions from the mind,
And plant the love of human kind;
Teach us to feel a brother's woe,
And — feeling — comfort to bestow.
Let none unheeded draw the sigh,
No grief unnoticed pass us by (I.O.O.F. 1835).

Once again love remains central to the sentimental song; however, this love speaks of interdependence and connectedness. It feels with others.

Songsters often listed “Rule Britannia” as the tune for new sentimental song lyrics. This might seem surprising given the tune’s jaunty melody and upbeat tempo. Eighteenth-century sentimental songs, however, sought to inspire feeling and fervour. Much in the same way it was used to activate patriotic feelings, “Rule Britannia” was particularly effective as a song tune both because it was widely known and because of its specific musical characteristics. In the song above, both the words “feel” and “feeling” align with the melodic high and low points as a way to underscore their significance. Importantly, this fraternal song also connects back to the didactic aspects of sentimentalism; the song pertains not just to edification, but specifically to the edification of one’s emotions: “Teach us to feel...”

Popular tunes, including “Rule Britannia,” served as tunes for new sentimental texts precisely because their familiarity helped to inspire communities of singers — like the Masons — to come together and sing. This practical and flexible approach to song production was characteristic of the time and indeed, underscores the notion that sentimental songs were not simply romantic and weepy songs performed in the parlour, but rather they were sentimental because they invited social connection in spaces beyond the home, inspiring the juxtapolitical worlds of sentiment and emotion. Sentimentality was more than just the thematic of a song; it was per Carl Wilson a terrain that was being worked upon through song (Wilson 2007: 53) and men too participated in this kind of musical emotional work.

According to most standard literary narratives, eighteenth-century men of feeling were replaced by dying daughters and crying mothers in the nineteenth century. In music, the feminization of the sentimental song didn’t begin to take hold until around the mid-nineteenth century with writers such as John Sullivan Dwight who, in his *Journal of Music*, began to print derisive references to “namby-pamby sentimental songs” (Dwight 1855: 118). Here, Dwight explicitly aligned the assumed degeneracy of such songs with femininity. Publishers of mid-nineteenth-century musical ephemera would similarly contribute to the feminization of sentimental songs as in the cover image used by Henry de Marsan in his *New and Comic Sentimental Singer’s Journal*. The image explicitly aligns sentimental songs and singing with the domestic sphere and women’s culture: it shows a young woman seated at a keyboard with her parents standing behind her. De Marsan didn’t adopt the image until the 65th volume, but continued to use it right up until his final 200th volume.

Writing in 1937, Helen Kaufmann observed:

The sentimentality of the nineteenth century, which started as a timid pianissimo, worked itself through a powerful crescendo during the Victorian era and Civil War, into a double fortissimo of mawkishness in the mauve decade. Emotional overstatement drips especially from the songs of those years from 1890 to 1900, to form a kind of stalactite which souvenir hunters of today break off and carry away to preserve among their musical curiosities. Curiosities they are, if not objects of art, for they represent a whole outmoded school of thought and feeling (Kaufmann 1968: 89).

Here, Kaufmann's account of "emotional overstatement" starts to sound closer to the concerns of excess expressed by Air Supply. By way of conclusion, let's return to "Too Sentimental."

Masculinity, Excess, Love

In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, bell hooks describes the feminist problem of patriarchal masculinity. hooks writes: "[P]atriarchal culture really does not care if men are unhappy" (hooks 2004: 5). She goes on: "[B]y supporting patriarchal culture that socializes men to deny feelings, we doom them to live in states of emotional numbness. We construct a culture where male pain can have no voice, where male hurt cannot be named or healed" (hooks 2004: 6). The kinds of emotional musical excess I have discussed in this article are not the kinds of excess usually mapped onto conceptions of masculinity. Domination, power, expressions of violence, and misogyny stand as more familiar and recognizable — and often celebrated — forms of excess.

Air Supply provide a powerful metacommentary on just this. In contemporary culture, the overt expression of softer, tender emotions including love, sadness, regret, loneliness, longing, and vulnerability are never not in excess when demonstrated by men; hegemonic masculinity continues to demand that so-called 'real men' keep their feelings to themselves. They don't go "too far." Behaviours associated with these feelings such as weeping, speaking openly of love, or expressing care continue to be culturally coded as feminine and, like most aspects of feminized culture, they are consequently degraded and denigrated in public discourse (Connell 2005; Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 2005; Jarman-Ivens 2007; Manley 2023).

Writing in 2000, hooks observed that "there are not many public discussions of love in our culture right now. At best, popular culture is the one domain in which our longing for love is talked about. Movies, music, magazines, and books are the place where we turn to hear our yearnings for love expressed" (hooks 2000: xvii). In this article, I have listened to a range of sentimental men who sing and write of love. Do these songs, per hooks, "demand a change in fixed ways of thinking about gender roles, culture, or love"? (hooks 2000: 11). Can we listen differently to a history of popular music in a way that recognizes sentimental men?

Chapman and Hendler write:

the continuing lack of attention to male writers', artists', and philosophers' engagements with American sentimental culture suggests, even now, a critical unwillingness to imagine the American man of sentiment, as if this subject position is too paradoxical, too unstable, too threatening to discuss; as if critics fear the results of deconstructing the alignments of reason, commerce, and the public sphere with men, and feelings, domesticity and the private sphere with women (1999: 7).

Davidson and Hatcher explain that "[g]ender does not entail intrinsic, universal, or necessary affective qualities (such as sentiment). It is suspect to generalize about which behaviors, emotions, actions, or beliefs are synonymous with or even characteristic of all women or all men" (2002: 23). Or, people of any gender for that matter.

Obvious critical differences remain between the late eighteenth century, the early 1990s, and now. To reiterate, my aim is not to reinscribe fixed gender roles. Instead, I hope to offer a framework for hearing a longer history of loving men and their loving songs. Ignoring the musical expressions of sentimental men only reaffirms the gendered patriarchal binaries of sentiment and logic or emotion and reason and further, it perpetuates narrow definitions of masculinity. This is not to suggest that male emotional expression is straightforward or perfect and certainly there's room for further exploration here. I might borrow Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2019) concept of "racialized emotions" to ask how these song perpetuate universal — read white — understand-

ings of love. I might consider the ways that denying feeling altogether has been used as a tool of dehumanization and white supremacy. Indeed, it's impossible to have an excess of emotion if you aren't heard as feeling at all. And I could ask how do these songs land for queer ears, listeners, and performers of all genders. But I think we must start at the place where we are willing to hear men's sentiment at all and remind ourselves that empathy and feeling are human traits, not just feminine ones.

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