

# Women and Stoic ethics in early modern England

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## Abstract

This paper provides an overview of women's engagement with Stoic ethics in early modern England (c. 1600–1700). It builds on recent literature in the field by demonstrating that there is a positive gender-inclusive narrative to be told about Stoic philosophy in this time—one that incorporates women's specific concerns and responds to women's lived experiences. To support this claim, we take an interdisciplinary approach and examine several different genres of women's writing in the period, including letters, poems, plays, educational texts, and moral essays. In these writings, we argue, a distinctive conception of Stoic therapy emerges. Women embrace well-known aspects of the Stoic philosophy—such as living in agreement with nature, the importance of self-government, and the ideal of freedom from the passions—but they also allow room for the cultivation of *eupatheiai* or life-affirmative feelings, such as feelings of respect, affection, and good will toward other people.

In his *History of Women Philosophers* (1690), Gilles Ménage reports that he “found no woman in the books of the Ancients who professed the Stoic philosophy.” Although there were probably some women, he says, “I think it is true that among these, not one woman who professed the Stoic philosophy was outstanding,” because the Stoic ideal of *apatheia* is “rarely found in women” (Ménage, 1690/1984, 45). Ménage's statement reflects two common assumptions about the history of women and Stoicism. The first is that there are no surviving texts by women philosophers in the ancient Stoic tradition: it is commonly thought that, by and large, Stoic philosophy has been a philosophy of men's ideas—those of Zeno, Chrysippus, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, for example. The second assumption is that Stoicism is traditionally a “manly” philosophy in which the idealized Stoic sage is impervious to outward circumstances and free from the irrational and disturbing influence of the “effeminate” passions. By comparison with

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the Epicureans, the Stoics were characterized in terms of “masculine” attributes, such as reason, self-government, and *apatheia*, or freedom from the passions.<sup>1</sup> In its classical guise, Stoicism seemingly reflected a pattern of thought in which masculinity and reason were regarded as the pinnacles of philosophical excellence, while femininity and emotions were denigrated and degraded as inferior (Grahm-Wilder, 2018, 181–2).

Nevertheless, recent literature in the field has challenged the idea that classical Stoicism was an essentially “manly” enterprise. Scholars claim that if we revisit Stoic writings, we can find feminist potential in their ideas concerning the equality of men and women (see Aiken & McGill-Rutherford, 2014; Grahm-Wilder, 2018; Hill, 2001, 2020; Hill & Blazejak, 2021; Nussbaum, 2002a). Far from being anti-woman, they argue, Stoic thought allows that both men and women have equal reasoning capacities as well as an equal ability to attain virtue and happiness through the cultivation of reason. Despite these claims, however, it is still the case that real women are more or less completely absent from classical Stoic texts. If women do appear, they tend to be fictional entities, idealized exempla, or negative stereotypes—such as Medea, Hipparchia, and the Amazons—who do not speak in voices of their own (see Grahm-Wilder, 2018, 182). In this paper, we look beyond the ancient era in order to incorporate real women's voices into the history of Stoic thought. For this purpose, we examine the history of women's engagement with Stoic ethical ideas in early modern England (c. 1600–1700). By “Stoic ethical ideas,” we mean those moral concepts, principles, and arguments most closely associated with the early Stoa in ancient Greece (c. 323 BCE–31 BCE), the Roman Stoics of the first and second centuries, and the so-called “Neostoics” (Christian Stoics) of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Our principal focus will be on women who engaged with the ideas of Seneca's *Letters* and *Dialogues*, Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, and Epictetus's *Manual* (*Enchiridion*). There is considerable indirect evidence of women's active interest in Stoicism: including translations of Stoic works (such as Elizabeth I's translations of Seneca and Boethius; Elizabeth I, 2009), or of Neostoic religious meditations (such as Mary Sidney's 1576 translation of *Excellent discours de la vie et de la mort* by Huguenot Philippe de Mornay, seigneur de Plessis-Marly); as well as marginalia and marks of ownership in Stoic books (see van Elk, 2021 on Margaret Lowther's copy of Roger L'Estrange's 1682 translation of Seneca's *Morals*); and public recognition of particular women as Stoics (such as Lucy Hastings in *Lachrymae Musarum, Or Tears of the Muses* of 1649/50). Our focus in this essay, however, is upon direct evidence for women's reflections about Stoicism in their own writings. Our contention is that when women's ideas are incorporated into the history of Stoic philosophy, there is a positive gender-inclusive narrative to tell: one that incorporates women's specific concerns and uncovers women's unique adaptations of Stoicism in response to their lived experiences.

To appreciate the full extent of women's engagement, the following analysis takes an interdisciplinary approach and looks to both literary and non-literary genres of writing. Eileen O'Neill has noted a tendency for historians of philosophy to ignore sources that do not conform to our modern-day conception of philosophical texts (1998, 36). As a result, some early modern genres—especially the so-called “feminine” genres of prose fiction and poetry, as well as translations, religious works, and ephemera (letters, commonplace books, and diaries)—have been overlooked as valuable sources of philosophical content. But if we turn to different source texts, it is possible to uncover substantial evidence of women's appropriation of Stoic ideas in early modern England. By surveying a wide array of genres, we demonstrate that English women have a strong history of adapting Stoicism to address their concerns. Our key figures include Brilliana Harley, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Astell, Mary Chudleigh, Damaris Masham, and Elizabeth Thomas. We focus on these specific women because they refer directly to Stoic authors, texts, or distinctively Stoic ideas or arguments in their writings.<sup>2</sup> We highlight the moral value that they found in core aspects of Stoic philosophy—such as living in accordance with virtue, the importance of self-government, and freedom from the passions—during a particularly troubled era in English history. In many cases, as we will demonstrate, these women shun an extreme Stoic *apatheia* in favor of the cultivation of *eupatheiai* or life-affirmative feelings, such as respect, affection, and good will toward other people.

## 1 | POLITICAL UPHEAVAL AND VIRTUE: HARLEY AND CAVENDISH

From the 1590s to the 1650s, a number of English women turned to Stoic philosophy under the pressure of religious reform and factionalism. Much of their engagement with Stoic concepts within Christianity occurred through marginal annotation or translation of religious works that embedded concepts drawn from Seneca, whose oeuvre was more readily adapted to Christian concerns than other classical Stoic models. Seneca's letters were viewed as key to a Protestant woman's education in virtue. In a tract on the education of women dedicated to the future Mary I of England, Juan Luis Vives recommended that Christian women read "historical and moral books" from the Bible but also Seneca (Levin et al., 2003, 18; Vives, 2000, 78).

From their reading of Seneca, women drew moral lessons for their children about how to attain virtue and happiness in a politically uncertain world. In the troubled pre-civil war years of the 1630s, the Puritan Lady Brilliana Harley promoted Stoicism in letters of advice to her son, Ned, who was studying at Oxford. Harley's engagement with Seneca's letters began prior to her marriage: in her commonplace book of 1622, she linked sententiae (moral sayings) drawn from Seneca's letters to passages from the Bible, Calvin's *Institutes*, and the English Calvinist Puritan William Perkins (Eales, 2001, 148; Harris, 2010, 113; Gillespie, 2017, 116-21). Writing to Ned, she recommended the Stoic principles of *apatheia* and self-government as a means of holding himself apart from the other students, and as a species of moral education she assumed he would not receive at Oxford. She wrote, "You are now in a place of more variety then when you weare at home; therefore take heede it take not vp your thoughtes so much as to neglect that constant servis you owe to your God" (Harley, 1854, 8). She was concerned that he learn to withstand emotional disturbances stimulated by his new environment and maintain a degree of detachment. She explained,

I am glad you like Oxford; it is true it is to be liked, and happy are we, when we like both places and conditions that we must be in. If we could be so wise, we should finde much more sweetness in our lifes then we do: for sartainely theare is some good in all conditions (but that of sinn), if we had the arte to distract the sweet and leaue the rest. Now I earnestly desire you may haue that wisdom.

(Harley, 1854, 8)

To this end, she advised him to focus inward "but about all, I desire you may haue that true health in your soule of a sounde minde, that so in theas days of wayfering and douteing you may hold the truth" (Harley, 1854, 44). Self-management also involved the regulation of external behaviour such as demeanour and dress. On 14 December 1638, after commending Ned for dressing plainly as his father desired, she wrote "Seneque had not goot that victory ouer himself; for in his country howes he liued priuately, yet he complains that when he came to the courte, he founde a tickeling desire to like them at court" (Harley, 1854, 16). Harley stressed that even Seneca, a renowned sage, exercised constant vigilant self-scrutiny in order to extirpate potentially dangerous desires unleashed through social contact, to immure himself from the vagaries of fortune, and thus to achieve an ideal state of self-sufficiency and tranquillity. Harley instructed her son in a Stoic philosophical approach to life that would enable him to cultivate virtue as the skill of selecting things in accordance with reason. She hoped he would gain knowledge of what was truly beneficial, and thus remain impervious to social pressures.

Harley recognized that Stoic freedom from the passions had political implications in the increasingly factionalized environment of pre-civil war England. When she wrote to Ned about the execution of Charles I's key strategic ally, Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, she compared Strafford to Seneca as follows: "I am glad that justice is excicuted on my lord Straford, whoo I thinke dyed like a Senneca, but not one that had tasted the mistery of godliness" (Harley, 1854, 131). Her concern was not to compare Strafford's death to Seneca's suicide, but to highlight his submission to the state, and acceptance of fortune. She referenced Seneca to underscore the resignation and fortitude with which Strafford met the fate fortune had bestowed, justly in Harley's opinion.

Royalist women also found recourse to Stoicism helpful in the aftermath of the civil war. Writing in the 1650s and 1660s, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, embraced Stoic principles across her oeuvre and within

her specifically philosophical writings (see Broad & Sipowicz, 2022; Barnes, 2018; Boyle, 2006; Cuning, 2016; Bennett, 2011; O'Neill, 2001, 2013). Cavendish contrasts the Stoic to a person who is a slave to their passions, which are (in the Stoic view) excessive impulses—such as appetite and pleasure, fear and distress—that are contrary to nature and incompatible with reason.<sup>3</sup> In a short sketch entitled “Of two Ladies different humours,” she contrasts two royalist women, one a “Stoick,” the other a “Gossip” (Cavendish, 1656, 208-14). In this binary, the Gossip runs headlong into aimless pleasures, whereas the Stoic is more circumspect. When civil war erupts, both experience “great Dangers, and many Wounds [...] in their Royal Master's Service, with the loss of their Estates, and banishment of their Persons, [and] they were forced to wander into other Nations” (Cavendish, 1656, 210). While the Stoic sage bears these indignities with patience, the Gossip “[is] impatient with her Misfortunes, which made her quarrel with every thing, even with her self” (Cavendish, 1656, 210-11). The Stoic “[bore] her Misfortunes patiently, [and] lived quietly, making her Necessities a School of Wisdom, where Truth taught, and Judgment corrected” (Cavendish, 1656, 211). Stoic *autarchia* (self-sufficiency) and *ataraxia* (tranquillity of mind) help her to detach herself from the unpredictable turns of fortune, such as the favour of princes. Foolish people may hang their future expectations on such things, but “they that are wise and experienced, are not muffled nor blinded therewith, nor build any design thereon, by reason that Politick Foundation [the system of princely favour] is rotten and weak” (Cavendish, 1656, 212). The Stoic woman views such political machinations with equanimity; political success is not something to be pursued as a good. This is why she adopts an attitude of reservation toward princely favour—her designs may not always go to plan.

In her plays, Cavendish acknowledges the common view of the Stoic as a dull and pedantic scholarly type who withdraws from society and does not have a practical view of the world. In *The Bridals* (1668), when Lady Pleasure declares “I find there is no pleasure like liberty, Mirth and Good Company,” her friend agrees, “You say true, Lady, for a Stoical life is the worst life in the world” (Cavendish, 1668, 56). In *Loves Adventures* (1662), a maid asserts that she will “seek another service, for [she] hates to live with a Stoic” (Cavendish, 1662, 38). Stoicism had gained a distinctly political cast, associated as it was with Calvinist Puritanism (as Sidney's translations show) and the Parliamentary cause (as Harley's letters to her son reveal). Cavendish seeks to reclaim Stoicism from these negative associations and demonstrate its utility as a philosophical approach to life that could fortify women in the face of war. In *Bell in Campo* (1662), Stoicism strengthens two royalist wives' resolve and capacity to support their husbands in the war effort: Lady Jantil commemorates her late husband's heroism by building a mausoleum and writing his biography (Cavendish, 1662, 600), and Lady Victorious corrals grieving wives into military action for the royalist cause, urging “instead of weeping eyes, let us make them weep through their Veins” (Cavendish, 1662, 596). Such examples figure in a discussion about how women should best manage those passions unleashed by civil war, exile, and political misfortune (Barnes, 2018). Stoic therapy provides women with a way to deal with excessive emotions that are disobedient or contrary to reason, in order to take public action.

## 2 | EDUCATION AND REASON: ASTELL AND CHUDLEIGH

English women also embraced Stoic ideas to address their educational disadvantages. From the mid- to late-seventeenth century, various Anglican writers lamented the fact that Catholic nunneries had become a casualty of the Protestant Reformation—by 1539, all the nunneries in England had been abolished (Hill, 1987, 107). When English women could no longer enter a life of celibacy in a convent, their access to formal higher education—and to an alternative career path to marriage and motherhood—became severely limited. In the second half of the seventeenth century, Mary Astell was among several advocates calling for the restoration of “Protestant nunneries” in England. Her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (part I, 1694; part II, 1697) was a plea for an Anglican retreat in which unmarried gentlewomen might obtain some degree of independence from men, and a place to receive a solid training in reason and religion rather than merely ornamental accomplishments. She uses several distinctively Stoic ideas and arguments to mount a case for the moral and intellectual education of English women (see Broad, 2015, 121-4). Her Stoic themes are not surprising given that Hierocles, Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius were reportedly among her favorite

authors (Ballard, 1752, 449; Astell, 1717/2013, §33). In her correspondence, she expresses an admiration for Marcus Aurelius's philosophy that human happiness does not depend on "Foreign supports," that "we are all of one Nature & Family; that our Minds are nearly related," and that we should reserve our esteem for those who "live up to the Dignity of their Nature" (Perry, 1986, 373).<sup>4</sup> In her arguments for a female academy, Astell comes back to these same ideas. She affirms the Stoic idea that all human beings share a common dignity on the basis of their natural reason and capacity for virtue, rather than external traits. In Marcus Aurelius's philosophy, the moral value of reason in every human being provides the basis for a cosmopolitan community, a conception of human beings as parts of one great whole. In his view, "our Minds are nearly related, being both extracted from the Deity" and "we are all made for mutual Assistance, no less than the Parts of the Body are for the Service of the whole" (Marcus Aurelius, 1708, 174; see also Nussbaum, 2002b, 36–7). Rational souls are therefore inclined to wish well toward one another, and to respond in proportion "to the merit and Dignity of Things" (374). In this spirit, Astell appeals to women to live up to "the Dignity of their Natures" by cultivating a justified self-esteem, and she calls on others to treat women with the respect they deserve (Astell, 1694–7/2002, 126, 57). As vital members of the human community, she argues, women ought to be given assistance toward their moral and intellectual improvement—they ought to be permitted to live in accordance with their nature.

Like the Stoics, Astell also regards philosophy as a practical therapeutic endeavor to transform one's life and attain virtue and happiness. In her *Proposal*, she begins by diagnosing women's unhappiness and lack of virtue as evidence that they suffer from a common "Disease" (Astell, 1694–7/2002, 72), primarily an inability to use their reason to make the best judgements. Women place the wrong value on external accomplishments, such as a beautiful face and a wealthy husband, and they do not see that the key to their happiness lies only in their natural capacity for virtue, the only thing that can benefit them unconditionally. In keeping with Stoic ethics, Astell asserts that the root cause of this disease lies with women's ignorance of the highest good and their wayward passions: a failure to see that external things do not merit our desire, and that we ought not to pursue them as our good. She then proposes a remedy for this malaise: a training to improve women's natural logic and regulate their passions (166–89, 205–31). "Happiness is not *without us*," she says, "it must be found in our own Bosoms," and "'tis Virtue only which can make you truly happy" (225, 111). She advocates the Stoic view that a woman's happiness is in her own power, provided she recognizes that external things have no intrinsic value in themselves, and that she must live according to reason instead.

In her *Essays upon Several Subjects in Verse and Prose* (1710), Mary Chudleigh presents similar arguments for women's education. When it comes to women's moral and intellectual development, she endorses the philosophy of Epictetus first and foremost, while also recommending Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and Zeno (Chudleigh, 1701/1993, 7–8, 1710/1993, 291, 300, 314–23, 324, 355; see Hill & Blazejak, 2021, 195; Broad, 2017; Dimauro, 2012; Wright, 2007). Several passages suggest that Chudleigh wrote her *Essays* with one eye on George Stanhope's English translation of Epictetus's *Enchiridion*, titled *Epictetus His Morals, with Simplicius His Comment*, originally published in 1694 (Epictetus, 1694; see Dimauro, 2012, 19). In the programmatic statement at the start of her *Essays*, Chudleigh says that her chief design is to recommend virtue and the improvement of the understanding, so that women might acquire "a Consciousness of having done Things agreeable to Reason, suitable to the Dignity of [their] Nature" (Chudleigh, 1710/1993, 248).<sup>5</sup> To cultivate their minds, women must refine their reason and learn to manage their passions, especially their fear, grief, and anger at life's inevitable hardships. For this purpose, they must learn to esteem things according to their true worth and come to "prefer Wisdom before Beauty, good Sense before Wealth, and the Sovereignty of their Passions before the Empire of the World" (247). To obtain virtue and wisdom, they must learn to distinguish between those things that are truly good and bad, and those that are merely "indifferent" (279), or inessential to their happiness.<sup>6</sup> On the Stoic view, virtuous agents cultivate the right disposition toward indifferent things ("indifferents"), such as beauty, wealth, and political power: they neither desire them as good, nor shun them as bad, but rather select them on the condition that they are in accordance with nature.<sup>7</sup> Chudleigh thus advises women to take a critical approach toward society's excessive value for physical beauty. Women must purge themselves of their enculturated concern for outward appearances: "For what can be more childish, what a greater Argument of

Stupidity, than to be proud of a Face, of that which a Disease may quickly spoil, and over which Time must unavoidably triumph?" (263). Instead, women must learn to distinguish between "what is and what is not ours," "between what has its Dependency on us, is free, and cannot be hinder'd from being ours, and what has not its Dependence on us, but is subject to another, and may be denied us at pleasure" (313). With these sentiments, Chudleigh freely acknowledges, she has "epitomiz'd" the rules of Epictetus's *Enchiridion* (323).<sup>8</sup>

### 3 | MOTHERHOOD AND APATHEIA: CHUDLEIGH AND MASHAM

Distinctive Stoic themes also emerge in early modern women's writings about the deaths of loved ones, especially their children. Although there is a scarcity of data for this period in England, the available evidence paints a bleak picture of women's experiences of childbirth and mothering. Compared to today, the maternal mortality rates—the instances of women dying in pregnancy or childbirth—were relatively high, at sixteen deaths per 1000 births between 1650 and 1700 (Heywood, 2001, 65).<sup>9</sup> Most women would have known someone who had either died in childbirth or lost an infant or child. The mortality rates for infants and children were especially grim: on some estimates, there were 185–190 deaths per thousand births for the period 1675–1749 (Wrigley et al., 1997, 215).

There is evidence that Stoic ideas helped early modern women to cope with the excessive fear and grief that was part of their everyday lives as mothers and caregivers.<sup>10</sup> In Stoic philosophy, a passion is a mistaken judgement about what is good or how an external thing is to be preferred; it is also a corrupt opinion about what is an appropriate reaction to the loss of that thing (see LS 65; Durand et al., 2023). According to the Stoics, to attain happiness, we must rid ourselves of these erroneous evaluations, and recognize that nothing besides virtue is good, because nothing else can benefit us unconditionally, in all the varied circumstances of life. Chudleigh reiterates these Stoic sentiments in her essay "Of Grief" and her poem "On the Death of my Dear Daughter Eliza Maria Chudleigh" (Chudleigh, 1710/1993, 286–96; Chudleigh, 1703/1993, 135–9). In these texts, she discusses the Stoic methods she used to overcome her excessive grief at the loss of her only daughter. She appeals to Epictetus's method of eliminating the passions to avoid being a "Slave to Grief" (Chudleigh, 1710/1993, 295) and to prevent grief playing "the Tyrant in the bleeding Heart" (Chudleigh, 1703/1993, 138). This method consists in using our reason to determine what does and does not belong to us; and, in turn, this requires us to distinguish what is and is not the highest good for human beings. For something to be the highest good it must be "the *Summum Bonum*, the chief, the only Good of Mankind, that without which 'twere impossible for them to enjoy the Felicity appropriated to their Nature" (Chudleigh, 1710/1993, 296). To be the *summum bonum*, a good must be "unalterably and eternally" good; but it is clear that neither life nor death in themselves can be beneficial in this way, because their good is variable or contingent on circumstances (287):

for were they either necessary Goods, or necessary Evils, they would be unalterably and eternally so, not only to this or that individual Man, but to the whole Species, which Experience tells us they are not (279).<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, virtue is always beneficial or good for us and is always under our control. Virtue depends solely on the exercise of our reason and can never be alienated or taken away from us; it is essential to our very nature as rational creatures.

Chudleigh's remedy for overcoming the passion of grief depends on recognizing that external things—such as friends and relatives, wealth, reputation, health, and even life itself—are mere indifferents, and vulnerable to circumstances beyond our control. Due to their lack of education, women are especially susceptible to thinking that these things constitute their good: "too many, especially those of my own Sex, have from their Infancy imbib'd wrong Notions of Life and Death, have been taught to think the one a real Good, and the other an essential Evil" (Chudleigh, 1710/1993, 278). While they are in thrall to these "wrong Notions," women are prone to excessive grief for the death of their children, and they become unreasonably dejected about any illness or bad fortune. To correct

these disorders, they ought to be instructed in “the Method of giving every-thing its proper Place, its just Value in their Esteem” (283–4). They must learn to distinguish between those things that genuinely contribute to their happiness, and those that play no essential part in it (298). Once they have developed right notions concerning life, it will be regarded as “a thing indifferent,” they will “possess it with Indifferency” (279, 288). If they truly live according to nature—according to the dictates of their God-given reason—women will be led to a “state of Independency,” in which they will be unconcerned whether they enjoy external things or not (283–4) or, if they do enjoy them, they will do so with Stoic reservation.

Damaris Masham makes similar recommendations to cope with the loss of loved ones in her correspondence with the philosopher John Locke (Broad, 2019, 114–86).<sup>12</sup> This corpus of letters from 1682 to 1688 provides a window into the pressures Masham faced when, in 1685, she married a widower with nine children and moved to the Essex countryside to run his household. She not only had to cope with feelings of extreme social isolation, but also grief over the sudden death of her younger brother (156), and a morbid fear of her own death in childbirth (163–6, 174). In response, at various points, Masham announces a “designe of turning Stoick” and of having “a Profound Indifference for all things in the World” (Broad, 2019, 136, 135; see also 146, 149, 151–2, 153). Throughout the correspondence, she refers to Seneca’s *Morals*, Marcus’s *Meditations*, Epictetus’s *Discourses*, and a contemporary account of Seneca’s philosophy by Antoine Le Grand, *Man without Passion*, first published in English in 1675 (Broad, 2019, 136, 162, 169). She often affects a Stoic detachment from other people and worldly things, including life itself. Contemplating her own death in childbirth, she tells Locke “do not think that if I leave this World I do it with any Mightie Regrett, since though I could perhaps at some times have done it with less, I am yet very far from being in Love with it” (165). She also endorses the Stoic view that external things are neither good nor bad, but rather indifferent, declaring that “Nothing in this World deserves Half the Care we usually Bestow upon it” and “Happiness is not to be looked for in any thing without us” (144).

#### 4 | FRIENDSHIP AND EUPATHEIAI: MASHAM AND THOMAS

In other passages, however, Masham places a high value on feelings of love and friendship toward other people. While she strives to eliminate excessive passions (those emotions beyond the control of reason)—such as the fear of death and grief for the loss of loved ones—she does not endorse the removal of life-affirmative feelings such as respect, affection, and joy. Rather, on her view, sociability forms an important part of human life. Throughout her letters to Locke, she articulates a distinctive conception of “Durable Friendship,” based primarily on esteem for the other person, an obligation to be sincere, and fidelity and loyalty toward one other (Broad, 2019, 135, 140, 154, 175). While human beings are unlikely to find “Pure, Great, Generous, and Perfect” friendships on earth, this should not prevent them from being content with the friendships they do have (159). It is possible, Masham concludes, to have “an Undesigning and Honest Friendship; free from Unjust Ends; and Little Interests” (174). With these sentiments, Masham emulates not only the Stoics’ cosmopolitanism and their emphasis upon the interconnectedness of all human beings, but also their value for life-affirmative feelings as part of the good life. Like some Stoics, she sees a role for the “good feelings” of watchfulness (including respect and esteem), appropriate wanting or wishing (kindness, generosity, warmth, affection), and joy (delight, sociability, cheerfulness).<sup>13</sup> These are the emotions that are morally permitted, provided that they are compatible with virtue and the exercise of reason (see Graver, 2007, ch. 2; Nussbaum, 2009, 398–401; Inwood, 1987, 172–4). They are affective reactions characterized by the right attitude of reservation toward externals.

Masham’s views on friendship and sociability are echoed by other English women writers at the time. In several texts, we find a common stipulation that, to attain virtue and happiness, women need not cultivate a severe emotional detachment from everyone and everything. In her *Essays*, Chudleigh denies that she advocates an extreme “Stoical Apathy” or that she “would have Persons insensible” (Chudleigh, 1710/1993, 296). In her *Letters to John Norris*, Astell is similarly cautious: “I am not for a *Stoical Apathy*,” she says, “I would not have my Hands and Feet cut off lest

they should sometimes incommode me” (Astell & Norris, 2005, 99). Both authors are quick to recommend a “love of benevolence” to their readers, a good will or wishing well toward others for their own sakes, not for selfish motives. On their view, to obtain happiness, it is not necessary for women to be rendered completely insensible to their family and friends. In fact, it would be an injustice to Epictetus, Chudleigh suggests, to claim that he advocated the neglect of caregiver duties toward one’s children (Chudleigh, 1710/1993, 321). Contrary to stereotype, the Stoic philosophy never encourages a cold unfeeling disposition toward family and friends, or a reckless disregard for food, shelter, good health, and other things that are in harmony with our nature.<sup>14</sup> These externals are still to be preferred in most circumstances; in fact, virtue consists in knowing—and rationally selecting—what is to be preferred, in accordance with our nature, in all the specificities of life. The crucial point is that externals are not to be desired as supreme goods in themselves; only virtue is the highest good and desirable for its own sake. But there is still room for respect and esteem, affection and good will, delight and joy, as affective states toward others.

In her correspondence with the courtier Richard Hemington, the poet Elizabeth Thomas takes a similar stance when she defends the moral permissibility of loving relationships. Their exchange of letters from 1704 to 1705 was first published as “The Debate between the Stoic and Corinna” in Edmund Curll’s *Atterburyana* in 1727. In his first letter, Hemington adopts the Stoic view that human beings should learn to cultivate self-sufficiency and an emotional disposition “consistent with the Dignity of our Nature” (Broad, 2020, 103). In reply, Thomas denies that human beings have the capacity to develop such “heroic virtue,” a complete self-sufficiency or emotional detachment from material things, solely on their own strength. She accepts his view that “nothing is really good or evil but what is essentially so,” and seemingly also allows that contingent things are “indifferent” (103). But contra Hemington’s “fine spun, stoical Cobweb,” she claims that “Experience has taught me, that I have received Benefits from some, and Injuries from others,” and that we are obliged to do good to others, whenever we can (105–6). She agrees that “everyone ought to endeavour the *Dignity of his Nature*,” but she denies that we are capable of resisting the temptations of life, honor, and riches on our own strength alone (110). Rather, true friendships provide a solid basis of support, especially those that are founded on a “*generous, disinterested, and inviolable Amity*” (112–13). In a later poem, “*On the Stoick Philosophy*” (1722), Thomas expresses a similar skepticism about the ability of human beings to cultivate *apatheia* toward one another. If the capacity for indifference were “a Principle divine”—a principle that all human beings shared by virtue of their God-given reason—then we would expect to find the absence of feeling more widespread (Thomas, 1722, 171). But instead, human beings are frequently subject to other-oriented emotions, and especially the passion of love, which exerts a “superiour Force” on their minds (Broad, 2020, 172). In her letters to Hemington, Thomas explores the same theme with regard to “True Friendship,” which is a virtue that consists primarily in charity (loving kindness) or a love of benevolence toward other people (Broad, 2020, 113). Thomas is thus another woman writer who allows room for the “good feelings” in her ethical outlook, those emotions that are crucial to human beings as social creatures and parts of one great community.

## 5 | MARRIAGE AND FREEDOM: CHUDLEIGH AND ASTELL

Similar appeals to the virtues of love and friendship can be found in early modern women’s writings about marriage. In seventeenth-century England, the law of coverture dictated that married women’s legal status was “covered” by the legal status of their husbands, who gained control of their personal and real property upon marriage (Staves, 1990). This meant that wives had little freedom to spend their own money, to engage in public employment, or even to leave the marital home without their spouse’s permission. Women writers appeal to Stoic conceptions of freedom in their critical responses to women’s lack of social and political liberty in marriage. Astell (1706/1996) and Chudleigh (1701/1993), in particular, urge married women to cultivate autonomy as a form of rational self-government, with distinct appeals to the Stoic ideals of self-mastery and self-sufficiency in the midst of oppressive circumstances.

We have seen that both Astell and Chudleigh maintain that women ought to be educated for liberty—for both freedom from the slavery of their passions, and the freedom to make their own moral choices in accordance with



reason. Their core message is that women's emancipation is entirely in their own power, just as their enslavement is entirely their own fault: "they turn to themselves only the wrong Sides of Objects, contribute to their own Delusion, are accessory to their own Captivity, and do as much as in them lies to reduce their Souls to the worst Slavery" (Chudleigh, 1710/1993, 304; see also 312). Their solution for this psychological malaise is a Stoic remedy: "by having Recourse to Philosophy, the Physick of the Soul" (313). Through the therapeutic use of philosophical argument, women might regain their liberty by restraining their passions and taming their desires for those things that are outside of their control.

In their reflections on marriage, these ideas come to the fore in Astell's and Chudleigh's responses to a misogynist sermon by the non-conformist preacher John Sprint (see Broad, 2017). In his *Bride-Woman's Counsellor* (1699), Sprint had argued that, to fulfil her marriage vow, a wife must be completely obedient to her husband's every command, to the extent that she must not desire anything that her husband would not desire. In *The Ladies Defence* (1701), Chudleigh provides a dramatic dialogue between four central figures: a parson (clearly representative of Sprint), a domineering husband, a young bachelor, and a woman named Melissa. Through the character of Melissa, Chudleigh defends a married woman's freedom to make moral choices according to her own reason—even if those choices differ from those of her husband. Melissa says:

The Tyrant Man may still possess the Throne;  
 'Tis in our Minds that we wou'd Rule alone:  
 Those unseen Empires give us leave to sway,  
 And to our Reason private Homage pay.

(1701/1993, 34)

Along similar lines, in a preface to her *Defence*, "To all Ingenious Ladies," Chudleigh praises Epictetus for his ability to preserve his integrity and remain true to his principles, in spite of trying circumstances (7–8; see Wright, 2007, 332). Chudleigh encourages women to cultivate a similar constancy of character: if they are married to a tyrant, then they must "consider what those things are which they can properly call their own, and of which Fortune cannot deprive 'em, and on these alone they ought to terminate their Desires, and not vainly extend 'em to those things that are not within their Power" (6). Her emphasis is on women developing the kind of moral character that is needed to withstand a bad marriage.<sup>15</sup>

A similar Stoic idea of liberty as rational self-government enables Astell to challenge the social and legal constraints of the early modern marriage state in her *Reflections upon Marriage* (originally published in 1700). Like Chudleigh, Astell also opposes Sprint's views concerning wifely obedience by reminding women that "the Mind is free, nothing but Reason can oblige it, 'tis out of the reach of the most absolute Tyrant" (1706/1996, 56). Against Sprint, Astell advocates an ideal of marriage as a relationship based on virtuous friendship between men and women, rather than relations of domination and subordination. The core of this kind of friendship—once again—is a love of benevolence, a wishing well toward one's friends and a desire to promote their well-being, rather than a selfish desire to possess or dominate them. Prospective marriage partners should be "guided by Reason, and not by Humour or brutish Passion" and "He who does not make Friendship the chief inducement of his Choice ... does not deserve a good wife, and therefore should not complain if he goes without one" (Astell, 1706/1996, 37). In her views on marriage, then, Astell supports the cultivation of life-affirmative feelings toward women—an affectionate well-wishing grounded in reason and virtue, rather than excessive passion—in response to misogynist prejudices of her time.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have examined women's adaptations of Stoicism in response to the troubling circumstances of their lives in early modern England, and we have analyzed the receptiveness of Stoicism to their concerns. We have found

that during the English civil war, women from both the Parliamentary and royalist sides drew upon Stoic ideas about freedom from the passions. Later in the century, Stoic conceptions of moral excellence and virtue provided women with moral justifications for female education and their calls for “Protestant nunneries” in England. Stoic techniques for recognizing “indifferents” also offered women a way of managing grief, fear, and other disturbing emotions, at a time when child and maternal mortality rates were high. And finally, Stoic notions of freedom, dignity, and benevolence provided women with the grounds for a vigorous reappraisal of marriage. The upshot of this analysis is a new appreciation of English women's contributions to early modern Stoicism across several genres, including letters, poems, plays, educational texts, and moral essays.

There is a further, perhaps more salient, lesson that emerges from our analysis. We began the paper by highlighting Ménage's observation that, if there were any women Stoics, they would be unlikely to embrace Stoic *apatheia*. We have found that, by and large, Ménage was wrong: women did embrace Stoic recommendations concerning the elimination of the passions. But there is also a sense in which Ménage was right: several women writers reject an extreme Stoic *apatheia* that promotes an austere emotional detachment from others. While women are solicitous to extirpate the passions—such as excessive fear, grief, and anger—they allow room for life-affirmative feelings that are compatible with reason. In their adaptations of Stoic ideas, a number of early modern women acknowledge the *eupatheiai* or the “good feelings” of respect, esteem, wishing well, kindness, generosity, affection, delight, sociability, and cheerfulness. They are opposed to an extreme form of Stoicism that advocates an austere indifference or cold emotional detachment toward other human beings. On their reading, the Stoic philosophy permits a well-reasoned attachment to friends and family members. Virtuous women might still experience the emotions of respect, kindness, and joy for others, provided that these feelings are consistent with a life of virtue.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> On characterizations of Stoicism and Epicureanism (in the works of Seneca and Cicero, for example), see Grahn-Wilder, 2018, 7-8, 182-5; Gordon, 2012, 112-18.
- <sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of our paper to discuss women's engagement with Stoicism beyond England and/or the early modern period. On European women who embraced Stoicism in this period, see Shapiro 2007 (on Elisabeth of Bohemia) and Alenius 2004 (on Birgitte Thott). For recent studies of English women and Stoicism in the later eighteenth century, including Elizabeth Carter, Catharine Trotter Cockburn, Catharine Macaulay, and Mary Darby Robinson, see Wright, 2007; Hutton, 2007; Sheridan, 2018, 250-2; Hill & Blazejak, 2021, ch. 6.
- <sup>3</sup> See Stobaeus, LS 65A: “They [the Stoics] say that passion is impulse which is excessive and disobedient to the dictates of reason, or a movement of the soul which is irrational and contrary to nature.”
- <sup>4</sup> Astell's direct source is Marcus Aurelius, 1708: “Let your Air be chearful; depend not upon Foreign Supports, nor beg your Happiness of another” (190); “we are not just of the same Flesh and Blood, yet our Minds are nearly related, being both extracted from the Deity ... I can't find it in my Heart to Hate, or to be Angry with one of my own Nature and Family” (173-4); and “every ones Good Opinion is not worth the gaining, but only of those who live up to the Dignity of their Nature” (189-90).
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Simplicius's Commentary in Epictetus, 1694: “a Man ought to harden himself against all Scoffs and Reproaches, with the Consideration of the Dignity of Humane Nature, and what is decent and agreeable to so excellent a Being; and then to persevere in the Choice of Virtue, in despite of all Opposition to the contrary” (214-15).

- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Epictetus, 1694: “if it be any of the Things out of our own Power, it must needs be indifferent in its own Nature, and neither good nor bad of it self” (401).
- <sup>7</sup> Diogenes Laertius, LS 58A1-4 (1987): “They [the Stoics] say that some existing things are good, others are bad, and others are neither of these. The virtues – prudence, justice, courage, moderation and the rest – are good. The opposites of these – foolishness, injustice and the rest – are bad. Everything which neither does benefit nor harm is neither of these: for instance, life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, noble birth ... For these things are not good but indifferents of the species ‘preferred.’”
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Epictetus, 1694: “All things whatsoever may be divided into Two Sorts; those that are, and those that are not within our own Power” (10); “The things in our own power, are in their own Nature Free, not capable of being countermanded, or hindered; but those that are not in our power, are Feeble, Servile, liable to Opposition, and not ours, but anothers” (35).
- <sup>9</sup> In 2018-20, the maternal mortality rate in the UK was 10.90 deaths per 100,000 maternities (Iacobucci, 2022).
- <sup>10</sup> On Stoicism and grief, see Nussbaum, 2009, 375–89.
- <sup>11</sup> This argument is similar to Stoic arguments concerning what is good and what is indifferent; see, for example, Diogenes Laertius, LS 58A5 (1987): “For just as heating, not chilling, is the peculiar characteristic of what is hot, so too benefiting, not harming, is the peculiar characteristic of what is good. But wealth and health no more do benefit than they harm. Therefore wealth and health are not something good.”
- <sup>12</sup> For the full correspondence, see Locke 1976–82, vols. ii, iii, iv, and v.
- <sup>13</sup> See Diogenes Laertius, LS 65F1-3 (1987): “They [the Stoics] say that there are three good feelings: joy, watchfulness, wishing. Joy, they say, is the opposite of pleasure, consisting in well-reasoned swelling [elation]; and watchfulness is the opposite of fear, consisting in well-reasoned shrinking. For the wise man will not be afraid at all, but he will be watchful. They say that wishing is the opposite of appetite, consisting in well-reasoned stretching [desire].”
- <sup>14</sup> On this topic, see Reydams-Schils, 2005, 136–141.
- <sup>15</sup> Consider also the following passage from Chudleigh, taken almost verbatim from Epictetus (1694, 180):

Again, that Person is properly my Lord and Master, who hath it in his Power to gratify my Wishes, or make me afraid; to give me what I desire to have, or to take from me what I'm unwilling to part with: The only way then to preserve one's Liberty, is to restrain one's Passion, and to have neither Desire nor Aversion for any thing in the Power of others; for he that does not so, is sure to be a Slave as long as he lives. (Chudleigh, 1710/1993, 322.)

That Person is properly my Lord and Master, who hath it in his power to gratify my Wishes, or to inflict my Fears; to give what I desire to have, or to take from me what I am loath to part with. The only way then to preserve one's Liberty, is to restrain one's own Passions, and to have neither Desire nor Aversion for any thing in the power of others: For he that does not so, is sure to be a Slave as long as he lives. (Epictetus, 1694, 180.)

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