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Tom Macfaul

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CHAPTER I

True friends?

‘Most friendship is feigning’, sings Amiens in *As You Like It* (II. vii. 181); this reflects a sense common in Shakespeare’s time that friendship was on the wane, becoming increasingly untrustworthy. At the risk of over-interpretation, though, we might find other meanings here: the aphorism contains a deeper truth – that friendship is a *fictional* relationship, artificial rather than natural, despite Humanist attempts to make it into the most natural of human relationships; further, that most ideas about friendship, derived from the dominant Humanist tradition, were a kind of fakery. Yet the song only suggests that *most* friendship is feigning, and therefore that some true friendship remains somewhere. Despite the surface cynicism, then, there is a persistent belief that true friendship *does* exist. Most of Shakespeare’s plays and much of the writing of the period are shaped by the Humanist ideal of true friendship, even when they are aware that it is a will o’ the wisp, but its main effect is to create a self-assertive individuality coloured and limited by the failure of this ideal.

The Humanist ideology of friendship tries to make friendship the most important thing in the world; the fact that it cannot ever really be the centre of the world – after all, it can hardly even be defined – enables the emergence of a new way of looking at individuality in the literature of this period. People seek to discover themselves in their friends, and the central mirage of friendship affects the shape of all other relationships. Moments of connection with others are seen as pivotal, more important than any other events in life; family is compromised (though not ultimately driven away); romantic love is seen as inadequate; servile and political relationships are distorted by an ideal of friendship; larger social groups bend towards the ideal of one-to-one friendship; even if these other social priorities drive out ideal friendship, they are reshaped by it. The new attitude to individuality that emerges from this is alienated, self-consciously fictionalized, torn between solitude and company, but, in the end, ironically self-assertive. There may be a movement towards

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isolation in tragedy, and towards social integration in comedy, but the effect on the individual is at root the same: coming out on the other side of friendship the individual feels alienated from himself, but also alone, even when most in company. Having identified with another, even when this identification is exploded as a fiction, the self will never quite feel one's own. Hoping to find a stable and ennobled self in the friend or in friendship, there is always disappointment, but a more precise, if diminished and alienated self does emerge – a poor thing, but one's own. By insisting, ideally, that a friend should be 'another self' Humanism affirmed that there was such a thing as the self, whilst at the same time alienating this sense of self, which can only be found in or through others. In the end, one is thrown back on one's own resources – 'simply the thing I am / Shall make me live', as Parolles concludes in *All's Well that Ends Well* (iv. iii. 333–4). He has come to himself, because he has abandoned the fictions or feigning of friendship. The crucial fictions of friendship in Humanist texts were of equality and permanence, fictions which obviously impact on the individual's sense of selfhood: the fiction of equality enables a belief in the validity of social aspiration; that of permanence bolsters the individual's sense of his own integrity. The drama of the period recognizes the emotional force of these fictions but tends rather to demonstrate the importance of difference in friendship and the impermanence of any individual friendship. In doing so, it forces the individual to recognize the precise nature of his own selfhood, dependent on his differentiated and impermanent symbiotic connections to others. The alternative to the Humanist idea of perfect friendship is this idea of symbiosis – never fully articulated, and certainly not in modern biological terms. This model has its own problems, however: whilst it provides the individual a certain social and dramatic role and stresses the importance of his connection to others, it necessarily emphasizes the limitations of the individual and challenges his sense of integrity, and only creates tenuous or contingent links to others.

These ideas will be explored in detail in the main chapters of this book, which address the relationship of ideal friendship to other social structures. This chapter will consider some crucial foundational concepts: the emergence of ideal friendship from older familial models and the persistence of such feudal models alongside it; the structure of the Humanist ideal and its roots in classical thought; the use of friendship for dramatic self-assertion; the relation of the ideal to supposedly imperfect friendships of pleasure and utility; and the supposed corruptions of friendship by homoerotic desire. We will also consider the kinds of individuality that

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emerge from friendship and the use of a limited but symbiotic model of friendship to achieve this.

A word about gender issues: the Renaissance praise of friendship tended to emphasize its importance for a *man's* life. A woman had other priorities, in her duties to her father or husband and in her role as a mother, thus making female friendship an entirely separate issue, affected by different codes of values.¹ Consequently, my focus in this book will be on male friendship only. In an age when men and women were strongly differentiated by education and men feared the 'feminizing' influences of women,² friendship with other men was crucial to a man's sense of identity. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick presents homosocial bonds as the means by which men sustain their power over women in any particular society; but this fails to capture the nature of the subjective experience of friendship. Sedgwick makes important points about the effects of male relations on women, but when she argues that 'for a man to undergo even a humiliating change in the course of a relationship with a man still feels like preserving or participating in a sum of male power, while for a man to undergo any change in the course of a relationship with a woman feels like a degeneration of substance',³ she fails to capture the experience of most men: they are more anxious about being humiliated in front of other men. No one, in our society or Shakespeare's, feels much personal stake in 'a sum of male power'. If anything, humiliation at the hands of another man is more powerfully felt because more power is at stake. Whilst Sedgwick is certainly right that 'the status of women, and the whole question of arrangements between genders, is deeply and inescapably inscribed in the structure even of relationships that seem to exclude women',⁴ such relationships are obviously not *only* about women; men do have direct needs for emotional support from other men, more so in the early modern world, owing to the relative powerlessness of women to help them in an unequal society.

The relationship of friendship to romantic love of women will be explored in chapter 4, below. For now, we should note that friendship, because of the Humanist emphasis on it, is at least as important for identity-formation as romantic love – or, indeed, the family. W. Thomas MacCary (from a psychoanalytic standpoint) argues that 'Shakespeare's comedies . . . are not only about marriage. They are also about the beginnings of desire in the search for the self in mirror-images of the self and the gradual acceptance of difference and independence in the other.'⁵ This acceptance can be traumatic in friendship as well as in sexual love, because it makes a man realize the limitations of his identity even as he is

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offered the possibility of greater wholeness. MacCary also argues that 'Shakespeare deals with desire in such a way that he is dealing with identity, and no Shakespearean male character is ever satisfied with the identity mere possession of a female can bring him'; men yearn for friendship as a buttress for identity that goes beyond the economic, the social or the sexual. As Coppélia Kahn observes, Shakespeare's 'male characters are engaged in a continuous struggle, first to form a masculine identity, then to be secure and productive in it'.⁶ She emphasizes the importance of the father to this identity-formation, but if friendship groups are at least as important as the nurturing family in forming the individual's social identity and inner life, it is clear that being productive in one's identity involves the social group at least as much as the family. If, as Kahn says, 'Shakespeare rarely portrays masculine selfhood without suggesting a filial context for it',⁷ he even more rarely leaves out a friendly social context.

Even as the order of traditional society was breaking down in the Renaissance, friendship was clung to as one last bastion of wholeness and unity; but for that very reason it was also the subject of particular anxiety, because if friendship failed there was no unity left. For Burton, friends are more important than family, as (he says) 'The love of kinsmen is grown cold.'⁸ The failure of friendship has correspondingly disastrous consequences:

Where this true love is wanting, there can be no firm peace, friendship from teeth outward, counterfeit, or, for some by-respects, so long dissembled till they have satisfied their own ends, which upon every small occasion breaks out into enmity, open war, defiance, heart-burnings, whispering, calumnies, contentions, and all manner of bitter melancholy discontents.⁹

So much, then, is riding on friendship, for the health of both the individual and the nation. It is both the cause of anxiety and its hoped-for cure. For melancholic individuals, such as Hamlet, or Antonio the merchant of Venice, friendship has a critical importance.

Partly this is because these men are alienated from family. Hamlet's mother has become untrustworthy, his uncle has become 'more than kin' (I. ii. 65), and his father has been murdered; Bassanio is Antonio's 'cousin', but that is the only family he has, and cousinship is in any case a decidedly imprecise relationship, its optionality bordering with that of friendship – Antonio has chosen to think of himself more as friend than family member. Considering the Gothic novel, Sedgwick argues that 'it is

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the ideological imposition of the imaginary patriarchal Family on real, miscellaneous, shifting states of solitude, gregariousness, and various forms of material dependence, that rationalizes, reforms, and perpetuates, in the face of every kind of change, the unswerving exploitations of sex and of class'.¹⁰ Although it is not clear that such vigorous ideological promotion of the family as bastion of class and gender domination was present in Shakespeare's England, the Protestant Church of England was clearly beginning to impose ideas of the nuclear family as the foundational unit of society.¹¹ With the destruction of other modes of allegiance, the family became an increasingly monolithic commitment for the individual – and friendship, the one remaining alternative mode of allegiance, therefore came to be presented in stark opposition to family.

Shakespeare's plays, then, were performed at what seems a particularly important time in the history of friendship, as older feudal modes of allegiance gave way to modern friendship of affection. Broadly stated, in the medieval world people knew where they stood with regard to one another: their friends were their neighbours and their familial attachments, through being 'god-sibs' (co-godparents) or through marital attachments. This meaning of the word *friend*, in fact, persists until the nineteenth century, and can be found prominently in the works of Jane Austen, and even of Trollope. It was, however, no longer the necessary or primary meaning. Alan Bray's splendid re-examination of the history of friendship shows that

As England passes into the sixteenth century, an apparently quite different kind of friendship becomes visible and is far more familiar: a noninstrumental friendship, based in affinity, that does not (and should not) obtrude on a wider world of public affairs. With its quite different assumptions, modernity seems to arrive, with a world we can recognize.¹²

It is notable for example that Wendoll, in Heywood's *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1607), explicitly states that Frankford's friendship for him is based on 'no alliance' (vi. 33), and this is meant to prove the friendship particularly sacred.¹³ The play's subplot articulates the sense that kin alliance is no longer reliable when Old Mountford says of his newly impoverished nephew 'He lost my kindred when he fell to need' (ix. 17). There is a suggestion then that 'friends' from old-style alliances are not to be trusted, and that betrayal of modern friendship of affection is a much greater sin. On the other hand, Bray's study also shows that older

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practices of friendship persisted well beyond the sixteenth century, involving rituals of friendship that were ethically if not legally binding:

The kinship of two godbrothers or two sworn brothers could be as indisputable as that formed by marriage; but kinship of this kind shared a crucial distinction to that of betrothal or marriage in its ability to forge links across social divisions where marriage would have been unthinkable.¹⁴

Several modes of friendship were in existence and could often be confused with one another (after all, one could have a friendship of affection with a cousin as Antonio does). The traditional familial mode, however, is more straightforward and unambiguous, and is therefore easier to represent as a priority in drama, and can be used more readily for plot purposes. In Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (c. 1605), Witgood's marriage to Hoard's niece is validated by the fact that Hoard and he (supposed rivals for the affections of a non-existent widow) have declared themselves to be friends, forming a 'league' (iv. iv. 264) before witnesses; this is taken to be dramatically and almost legally binding.¹⁵ Once a friendship has been founded, it cannot be easily renounced. Friendship could also be inherited, like kinship. In Massinger's *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*, Welborne tells Alworth, 'Thy father was my friend, and that affection / I bore to him, in right descends to thee' (I. i. 117–18).¹⁶ It is clear, then, that an older obligatory mode of friendship persisted, at least in dramatic plots (though Shakespeare, notably, does not make much use of it).

Set against this, the ideal of friendship informed what men at least claimed to want from relationships with other men. Renaissance Humanism had a clear if fragile ideology of friendship as the centre of man's life, which can be summed up fairly simply: a friend is a second self with whom one shares everything, friends are virtuous and similar to one another, and the friend is chosen after long and careful assessment of his virtues; the purpose of such friendship is the promotion of virtuous thought and action; it may contribute to the public sphere, but it is ultimately independent of it. This is clearly an idealization, and was often recognized as such, but even so it had a persistent ideological force.

The central aspect of the Humanist ideology of friendship was a belief in friendships of *virtue*, which promoted manliness (practically as well as etymologically): for Cicero, the crucial influence on ideas of friendship, these were the only true friendships. What he calls (in *Laelius / de Amicitia*) friendships of pleasure or of utility are in his view not just inferior to virtuous friendship but actually false versions of it. This contrasts with Aristotle, to whom Cicero owes many of his ideas, but

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whose conceptions he simplifies. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle presents friendships of pleasure or utility as different, inferior, but nonetheless allowable forms of friendship, so much so that A. W. Price has argued that in the case of friendship 'Aristotle was never closer to the concept of family resemblance': that is, he sees friendship as a range of cognate possibilities rather than as one precise and perfectible form.¹⁷ The potential confusion between these forms was fruitful for drama. Cicero, on the other hand, created a unitary, authoritative version of what friendship is, and he was often taken as an authority by early Renaissance Humanists. Such an ideal, then, has a certain cultural centrality in this period, but the homogeneity it promotes means that it soon disappears from more complex drama. It is the Ciceronian model that Laurens J. Mills calls 'the friendship theme',¹⁸ but, as we shall see, there are many other ways of treating friendship. Laurie Shannon argues that the fiction of equal friendship provides a space of freedom for the individual to 'shape himself',¹⁹ but when friendship is too rigorously conceived in a Ciceronian manner it can become just as obligatory and stifling as any other set of rules. In plays like *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* it becomes an absurd and arbitrary 'law' that must be overturned. Like the friendly aristocrats of Navarre, friendship cannot isolate itself in virtuous contemplation, and the drama often (as in the case of *Love's Labour's Lost*) satirizes the absurd effects of a belief in the autonomy of friendship. *Shakespeare's Sonnets* explore the pleasures of isolated friendship, but are also consumed with the difficulties of establishing and sustaining such a relationship, which can perhaps only exist in a sonnet, and is liable to collapse across a sonnet sequence, let alone when set in the larger context of a drama.

Although Cicero's idea of friendship was much more directly influential on English Humanists than that of his Greek predecessors, Plato and Aristotle were increasingly available to an English audience, and their presentation of friendship has some similarity to that in Shakespearean drama, however indirect their influence may have been. At the conclusion of *Lysis* Socrates says:

O Menexenus and Lysis, how ridiculous that you two boys and I, an old boy, who would fain be one of you, should imagine ourselves to be friends – this is what the bystanders will go away and say – and as yet we have not been able to discover what is a friend!²⁰

The emphasis here on the age difference is as important as that on the impossibility of defining friendship: there is an ironic suggestion that it is

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ultimately difference that makes friendship. The *Symposium* demonstrates the power of educative pederasty (in any case a subcategory of *philia*), seeing friendship as a mode of cultural transmission that subverts the biological and the primary means by which humanity develops beyond mere biological need; again, this is a use of friendship that is predicated on difference. Francis Bacon develops the idea in 'Of Parents and Children':

The perpetuity by generation is common to beasts; but memory, merit, and noble works, are proper to men. And surely a man shall see the noblest works and foundations have proceeded from childless men, which have sought to express the images of their minds, where those of their bodies have failed. So the care of posterity is most in them that have no posterity.²¹

Our affections guide us to transmit our ideas. The dialogue of the *Symposium* demonstrates this more dramatically and precisely than that of the *Lysis*. In a simple sense, the mere expression of different ideas about *eros* in the *Symposium* shows the value of *philia* (friendship) in promoting philosophy, as each speech feeds off the others' ideas. The arrival of Alcibiades at the dialogue's end shows the results of educative pederasty and presents a comic picture of its limitations. Alcibiades is drunk when he and his gang enter and this in itself, along with Alcibiades' decidedly ambiguous later reputation, hardly shows Socrates' educative methods in the best light. Alcibiades' sexual desire for Socrates might also somewhat undermine the latter's claims to chaste educative friendship. Nonetheless, a more subtle point is being promoted: Socrates tells us that he started off by loving the boy's beauty, but now the boy loves him, despite his ugliness. Such friendship therefore demonstrates the superior beauty of ideas. Even though it still carries with it the freight of physical desire and personal affection, this friendship is nonetheless valuable. Flawed though it necessarily is, and requiring careful sexual restraint on Socrates' part, human affection remains a crucial part of self-improvement. The friendship is not equal, but its balance changes over time, to the enrichment of both. It is hard not to think that Shakespeare had Socrates and Alcibiades in mind when he created what amounts to a parodic picture of them in Hal and Falstaff. The concept of friendship as a balancing act that has noble aims but may fail, existing firmly in time-based conditions, is more dramatically fruitful and a better representation of social reality than soul-connection. It is the very differences between Socrates and Alcibiades, or between Hal and Falstaff, that give these friendships their emotional power – differences that the Ciceronian

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concept of friendship would erase. Aristotle, although he was Cicero's main source, also valued difference in friendship, seeing it as involving a complex balancing act, taking place over time; it therefore involves rather more of a *process* than Ciceronian friendship. For Aristotle, friendship was a matter of moral competition, in which one sometimes increased one's friend's *eudaimonia* (moral well-being) at the expense of one's own, but this was envisaged very much as a two-way process;²² in Cicero there is less stress on the dynamic nature of this process.

Nevertheless, Cicero's ideas dominated Humanist thought and verse (and even drama) for most of the sixteenth century. In the Middle Ages, friendship was a theme rarely treated for its own sake, being taken for granted as part of the feudal system,²³ but in the early sixteenth century there was a sudden flowering of interest in the subject. This began when Cicero's *De Amicitia* was first printed in 1481, and its ideas were popularized partly by the inclusion of many friendship aphorisms in Erasmus's *Adagia* (1525), and partly by the works of Sir Thomas Elyot, whose *Boke Named the Governour* (1531) can be seen as the key text in the English Renaissance discovery of friendship. He is particularly emphatic about the centrality of friendship to man's life – it sustains society, buildings, agriculture, and is the sun of man's life.²⁴ His rhetorical enthusiasm is powerful in its attempts to yoke people and their emotions together: 'Verely it is a blessed and stable connection of sondrie willes, makinge of two parsones one in hauinge and suffringe' (pp. 129–30). This fantasy of unity can only be sustained by a fantasy that it escapes from mutability, and therefore from the social mobility he seems keen to promote. The emphasis here on stability cannot but be challenged in a dramatic context. Elyot's own narrative of friendship (between Titus and Gisippus), which we shall address in a later chapter, seems designed to prove this stability, but it is a circular and undramatic narrative. It avoids the sense of a wider society embraced by Shakespearean drama.

Later writers used Elyot's rhetoric in order to present friendship as a resource for legitimate social aspiration, appropriating the rhetoric of perfect friendship between equals for more instrumental purposes. Thomas Churchyard says that friendship

is a certaine felicitie of the minde, a sweete ensence that burnes before GOD, a preseruer of mans renowne and life, a willing bondage that brings freedom for euer, a steadfast staffe that all good people doe stay on, the mother and nurse of mutuall loue, the conqueror of hate, the pacifier of quarels, the glorie of kings, and the suretie of subjects.²⁵

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This is the peak of the idealizing tradition, ripe for debunking, so little does it have to say about the subtleties of human life, except in that paradox of ‘willing bondage’, which emphasizes that the bonds of friendship are chosen (as opposed to familial ones), and thus enable one to escape from the unfree conditions of one’s social position. There is an almost desperate confidence in the power of friendship here. This relates to the fact that the text, dedicated to Sir Walter Raleigh, is geared towards patronage: it is designed to ‘requit a good turne receiued’ (A2r). Churchyard defends himself from the potential charge of flattering Raleigh by arguing that to turn towards the powerful is *natural*. Patronage is as natural as friendship, and is indeed one of its forms.

Thomas Breme’s *Mirror of Friendship* (1584 – translated from Italian, it signals its traditional nature) is also concerned with patronage. It is addressed to Thomas Kyrton, chief Serjeant of London, a man whom Breme had clearly not met, but one whom he wishes ‘good will’ (Aiiv), ‘hauing heard you so notably commended and well spoken of’ (Aiir). It argues that a friend is someone who gives one what one lacks, and that one gives one’s heart to one’s friend. Emotional loyalty, then, is given in return for material favours. One of the primary burdens of Breme’s work is that friendship is a bulwark against misfortune (indeed his text is accompanied by ‘a briefe treatise, or caueat, not to trust in worldly prosperitie’). Nicholas Grimald takes a similar line in his ‘Of friendshippe’, in which friendship is represented as the only absolutely steady thing in life:

When fickle fortune fayles, this knot endureth still,
 Thy kin out of their kind may swerue, when friends ow the
 good [will?]
 What sweeter solace shall befall then one to finde
 Upon whose brest thou maist repose the secrets of thy minde
 He wailleth at thy woe; his teares with thine be shed;
 Behold thy frend and of thy selfe the patter[n] see
 One soule a wonder shall it seeme in bodies twaine to bee
 In absence, present rich in want in sicknes sounde
 Ye after death alieue maist thou by thy sure friend be founde.²⁶

He also observes, following Cicero and Aristotle, that ‘nothing is more kindly for our kinde’. This emphasis on the naturalness of friendship (in the old meaning of the word *kind*) is an attempt to make it supersede familial attachments. At the same time Grimald acknowledges the rarity