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Friendship

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Résumé

This entry explores the diverse uses of the language and concept of friendship in eighteenth-century Britain. Though obviously central to sociable thought and practice, friendship was also caught up in philosophical debates about the instrumentality of feeling and the nature of social obligation. These debates in turn extended to the political arena, in which the invocation of friendship could be suspect or ironic. Through examination of attitudes to friendship, we gain a broader sense of the era's relationship to classical precedent and its understanding of private versus public selfhood.

The language of friendship was close to ubiquitous in Enlightenment Britain. Beyond the works of fiction and treatises of social philosophy which explored it most extensively, it was also invoked figuratively, informing contemporary understandings of national and local politics, art, horticulture, science and every other sphere of human activity or inquiry. With

such widespread usage came great variation in the ideas and traditions that the word 'friendship' was seen to represent

Friendship as emotional or moral attachment was frequently distinguished in eighteenth-century discourse by use of the adjective 'particular'. Particular friendships were understood to operate primarily within the private sphere, though in practice their influence – their benefits and their temptations – could also extend to matters of public concern. First and foremost, particular friends chose one another, and their bond, in its most idealistic formulations, was derived by way of Renaissance humanism from the classical ideas of 'perfect friendship' espoused by the likes of Aristotle and Cicero. Modern scholars such as Naomi Tadmor have emphasised the considerable difference between this conception of friendship and the non-elective contexts in which the word likewise surfaced. One's 'friends' in the eighteenth century could just as easily be one's family: near or distant relations who were not chosen and whose claims to loyalty rested less on personal affinity than on chance of birth. Undoubtedly, these friends were just as important as particular friends in the pursuit of business interests or political goals; the support or neglect of these friends was also pivotal for both men and women in their navigation of private life, as evidenced by the struggles of Samuel Richardson's Clarissa Harlowe when she becomes alienated from those she terms her 'natural friends'.[1]

The Temple of Friendship in the gardens of Stowe is a good example both of the concept's significance and of its conflicting functions during the period.

Stowe: A Description of the House and Gardens of the Most Noble and Puissant Prince Richard Grenville Nugent Chandos Temple (Buckingham: J. Seeley, 1817)

The interior of the temple, which was constructed in the late 1730s, celebrated Lord Cobham's circle of friends in a series of busts. All of the figures commemorated were high-born men; three (Richard Grenville, William Pitt and George Lyttelton) were family relations of Cobham and thus examples of the 'natural friendship' described above. As a whole though, the temple enshrined the friendly ties between its subjects as morally-informed and beneficial to the nation – in this, it related closely to other structures within the grounds of Stowe: for instance, the Temple of Ancient Virtue and the Temple of British Worthies, both designed by William Kent earlier in the decade. When considering the Temple of Friendship in the wider context of Cobham's allegorical purposes, one might question how much this monument actually owed to the realities of sociable practice at the time. As in many other cultural products of eighteenth-century Britain, friendship starts to seem synonymous with a more generic sort of virtue or patriotism. Moreover, the ulterior motives of Cobham's choices remind us of the potential for friendship to be enlisted within political debate, used as a tool to reinforce alliances or impose ideological conformity. Among the figures represented in the temple was Frederick, Prince of Wales, figurehead for political opposition at the time of the temple's construction. To enlist him as a friend was also to consolidate his political significance and to register one's claims on him in advance of his future reign.

While some of the tensions and contradictions that surrounded the portrayal of friendship stemmed, as in this case, from specific contemporary conflicts, many of them also arose naturally from the long and tortuous philosophical tradition already noted above. Among the key disputes that surrounded the topic were the question of friendship's exclusivity, issues regarding its instrumentality, and diverging views on the decorum (or possibility) of friendship between the sexes. The first of these aspects had been explored by Aristotle when he argued that perfect friendship could only subsist between a limited number of people.[2] The same idea had been expressed in the sixteenth century by Michel de Montaigne, who argued that true friendship, as opposed to general fraternity, should be 'absolutely single and indivisible'.[3] In eighteenth-century Britain, the espousal of such views was complicated on the one hand by the burgeoning culture of clubs: institutions which inherently encouraged corporate social identities at the expense of singular, exclusive friendships. Writers could also object to the tradition of ideal friendship on the basis that it stood opposed to Christian benevolence. This was the problem confronted by Samuel Johnson when he discussed the nature of friendship with the Quaker Mary Knowles. Seeing the Quaker usage of the word 'Friend' as reliant on generalisation and indiscriminate generosity, he argued that 'universal benevolence' was indeed 'contrary to the virtue of friendship, as described by the ancient philosophers'. However, in the account provided by his own friend and biographer James Boswell, he ultimately accepted Mary Knowles's counter-argument that Jesus loved one disciple (John) more than any other and thus that particular friendship could be compatible with a broader insistence on charity.[4]

This and other issues of friendship's conception were exhaustively interrogated in works such as Jeremy Taylor's *A Discourse of the Nature, Offices, and Measures of Friendship* (first published in 1657, but influential into the eighteenth century) and Timothy Greated's *An Essay on Friendship* (first published 1726). Though consensus always remained elusive, this was itself characteristic of a social idea shaped through social dialogue, a concept which was multifarious not simply due to philosophical differences but because it reflected the huge variety of individual experiences at that (or any other) time. These experiences of course differed depending on one's age, one's gender and the degree to which a friendship was enacted in the public eye. Clarissa's friendship with Anna Howe, fundamental to both the form and narrative of Richardson's seminal novel, naturally differed greatly in its benefits and its means of expression from that between Johnson and Boswell. Ultimately, the most remarkable fact about friendship in eighteenth-century Britain may not be its heterogeneity as such, but the degree to which it was accepted as a crucial element in British society's self-perceptions despite this heterogeneity.

1. Samuel Richardson, Clarissa, or, The History of a Young Lady, ed. Angus Ross (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 1413; for reflection on Clarissa and the 'dislocation of friendship', see Naomi Tadmor, Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship, and Patronage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 259-269.

2. Aristotle, Ethica Nicomachea, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), t. VIII, p. 1171a.

3. Michel de Montaigne, 'On Friendship', in Essays, trad. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1958), p. 101.

4. James Boswell, Life of Johnson [1980], ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 946.

Citer cet article

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In the DIGIT.EN.S Anthology

Katherine Philips, Heartfelt Words for a Friend (1678).

Timothy Greated, An Essay on Friendship (1726).

Heartfelt Words for a Friend, 1678
An Essay on Friendship, 1726
To a Friend who sent me some Roses (1816)