

## **SBReview\_15:**

MacFaul, Tom. *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. xi + 222 pp. ISBN: 978-0-521-86904-1.

Reviewed by Anthony Guy Patricia, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

The representation of friendship among males in the works of Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights, poets, and prose writers is the subject of Tom MacFaul's study, *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*. According to MacFaul, during the medieval era, friends were to be found among a close circle of neighbors and familial relations, all of whom mostly knew their place, and their purpose, within the highly stratified milieu of feudal society. With the advent of the Renaissance, however, the recognizably modern notion of friendship of affection—or, friendship with people who were not primarily either neighbors or family members—became prevalent. But, by Shakespeare's time, friendship of affection, as an important social institution for men, was in an acute state of crisis. As MacFaul explains it, this was because the Humanistic ideal of friendship between men that came to dominate in the early modern period was supposed to be something it, like all ideals, never really could be, which was “the most important thing in the world,” superseding all other possible human associations, including those connected with family, courtship, romance, marriage, sexuality, service, fellowship, and politics (1). Such ideal friendship was threatened from without by a number of factors, including the inequities of age, lived experience, social status, political allegiance, and economic circumstances; the inherent rivalries among siblings and masters and servants; the unruliness of hetero- and homoerotic desires; the inadequacy of utopian notions of fellowship; and the hidden agendas of one or both of the participants involved in a friendship. In other words, the increased disparateness between older and younger people, between siblings, between masters and servants, between lovers and friends, between generals and their subordinates, and between kings and their subjects fostered problematics in male friendships of affection that Humanistic ideals could not hope to overcome.

Though MacFaul makes no explicit statement of his methodology, his approach to the topic of male friendship in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries is broadly New Historicist and, with its repeated mentions of identity formation within the context of one-to-one and group relationships between males, somewhat psychoanalytic. In Chapter 1 of the book, “True Friends?,” MacFaul traces the history of the philosophy of male friendship from Aristotle to the Humanists of the Renaissance. He uses the next seven chapters of *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* to present close readings of a range of early modern plays and poems in which the difficulties associated with male friendship are either dramatized or narrated. Thus Chapter 2, “Momentary Mutuality in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*,” looks at the relationship between the older male speaker of the *Sonnets* and the younger “fair youth” to whom the bulk of the 154 poems are addressed. Chapter 3, “Friends and Brothers,” explores friendships between male siblings, while Chapter 4, “Love and Friendship,” covers the well-trodden ground of male friendships disrupted by one of the friend’s romantic attachment to a woman. Chapter 5, “Servants,” considers the inevitable inequities that attend male friendships between masters and their servants; Chapter 6, “Political Friendship,” analyzes male friendships in the political realm, particularly those between kings and their closest associates. “Fellowship,” Chapter 7, examines friendships among groups, rather than only pairs, of males; and “False Friendship and Betrayal,” Chapter 8, investigates friendships that involve one duplicitous, self-serving member and the effect of his machinations on the other partner in the relationship. In Chapter 9, “Conclusion: ‘Time Must Friend or End,’” MacFaul offers his final thoughts, such as they are, on the subject of male friendship and its corresponding representation in literature during Shakespeare’s time.

MacFaul directs his critical attention first to Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, in which, he claims, the friendship between the young man and the poet’s persona is, essentially, “an unequal one” and, thus, doomed to failure (30). Although the social superior of the two, the young man “can never quite live

up to the ideal standards by which he is judged” by the older and more experienced speaker who repeatedly attempts to idealize him in words that always, somehow, seem to fall short of their mark (31). Meanwhile, in a society governed by primogeniture as England was in the sixteenth century, the relationship between brothers was especially fraught with difficulties. Brothers, MacFaul writes, “get in each other’s way more than friends do. There is therefore a natural competition or even enmity between brothers, even if there is also a natural similarity and affinity” (48). Dramatic representations of conflicts of the former type are to be found in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, Tourneur’s *The Atheist’s Tragedy*, Webster’s *The White Devil*, and many of Shakespeare’s plays, including *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *As You Like It*, *King Lear*, *The Tempest*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Cymbeline*.

As has long been recognized by scholars of early modern literature, a man’s romantic love for a woman was particularly disruptive to the ideal of male friendship. Not surprisingly, MacFaul finds the tension between romantic love and friendship “expressed in the narrative and dramatic form of the jealousy plot—in which two friends love the same woman—a plot that is sufficiently common in this period for us to call it a genre” (65). Two male friends cannot, after all, share a woman, and the resolution of such a conflict between love and friendship “tends to leave the friendship compromised, and certainly the friends will no longer see each other as the most important thing in life. Love of women has in these cases superseded friendship” (65). Scenarios of this type are legion in the drama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, as evidenced by Lyly’s *Euphues*, Webster and Rowley’s *A Cure for a Cuckold*, Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Maid’s Tragedy*, and Shakespeare’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, among many others of the Bard’s dramas. If nothing else, MacFaul argues, what these plays show again and again is the failure of the Humanist ideal of male friendship when it is placed in direct competition with a force like heterosexual romantic love. Friendship is always the inevitable loser in such contests.

After considering the inevitable failure of ideal, affective friendship between males when it comes to masters and servants such as Lear and Kent in *King Lear*, monarch and subject like Hal and Falstaff in *Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2*, and *Henry V*; like Macbeth and Duncan and, later, Banquo in *Macbeth*; and groups of men like the trio of scholars in *Love's Labour's Lost* in loose fellowship with one another, MacFaul interrogates what he terms the “false friend,” a character type ubiquitous in the literature of the period. There can be, arguably, no more false a friend than Shakespeare's Iago in *Othello*, who callously betrays Roderigo, Cassio, Desdemona, Emilia, and, most especially, his beloved general, Othello, all in his larger quest to be revenged for having been passed over by Othello for promotion to the rank of lieutenant. “A soldier,” MacFaul writes, “trusts in his general and puts a considerable amount of his self-worth into his leader. The relationship is therefore a powerful one and betrayal of it on either side has as much force as the betrayal of a private friendship” (190). The more disquieting implication of the collapse of Othello and Iago's relationship is that no affective friendship between men is ever safe from destruction when one of the parties harbors a hidden agenda.

In an extremely brief concluding chapter to *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, MacFaul notes that, in the Humanist conception, ideal, affective friendship between males in the Renaissance is both possible and desirable. In the fictions of the time, however, “friendship is presented as fleetingly impermanent, fragile, illusorily existing in the moment; its value is only fully recognized when it has passed. To be fully realized in a plot it must *end*” (196). And so ends this study of how friendship works, or, rather, how friendship does not work and ultimately fails, in the literature of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

It is unfortunate that MacFaul's *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* does not cover any ground that seems altogether new, nor does it add anything substantial to the collective understanding of relationships between men and how they are represented in the works of

Shakespeare and his colleagues that already exists. The book often comes across as derivative of its predecessors, including Lorna Hutson's *The Usurer's Daughter: Male Friendship and Fictions of Women in Sixteenth-Century England* (1994), Laurie Shannon's *Sovereign Amity: Figures of Friendship in Shakespearean Contexts* (2002), and Alan Bray's *The Friend* (2003), to name but three. Furthermore, scholars working on Shakespeare and his contemporaries from a queer theoretical perspective may find themselves frustrated with MacFaul's skittishness as regards the potential homoerotic nature of the friendships between the characters of Antonio and Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, or Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*. But, as a critical text that looks at, and provides insightful readings of, how male friendship operates in the prose, dramatic, and poetic works of Shakespeare and his fellow writers—in contrast to how male friendship was supposed to operate in the material world according to the ideals of early modern Humanist philosophy—MacFaul's *Male Friendship in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* fulfills its purpose.