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Buddies that Matter: Gender and Friendship

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 In an interview published under the title “Friendship as a Way Of Life” Michel Foucault asks:

This notion of mode of life seems important to me. Will it require the introduction of a diversification different from the ones due to social class, differences in profession and culture, a diversification that would also be a form of relationship and would be a “way of life”? A way of life can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalised. It seems to me that a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics. (Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth 1994: 127-8)

This issue of gender forum is dedicated to the question of how friendships may encourage or discourage, obscure or validate established concepts of gendered power relations and self concepts. Are friendships spaces in which issues of gender and sexuality figure less or more, do they offer alternative, non-institutionalised ways of life or figure as relations shunning the “real thing”? The exclusion of physical desire traditionally appears to be one of the defining principles of friendship as a bond that rests on mutual trust and understanding undisturbed by sexual and opposing interests. Especially at a time of “postmodern, fragmented selves”, selves in perpetual crisis, where romance and the assumed shortlivedness of physical attraction becomes viewed more sceptically, cynically even, friendship allegedly grants a space of reassuring stability. What the articles assembled in *Buddies that Matter* foreground, however, are precisely the slippery boundaries which (do not) separate friendships from sexual relationships, intellectual/emotional from physical interaction and matches of equals from power struggles. Rather than being conceptualised as a retreat from “doomed romances”, from the war of the sexes and sexualities within an oversexed western culture as a whole the articles render friendships as fragile relations, subverting and stabilising institutions, undermining and validating the self.

2 Leonie Wanitzek’s contribution focuses on the fragile concept of friendship originating in mentor - pupil relations in two literary examples. The characters of Hector and Miss Brodie as two particularly complex examples of inspiring yet ambiguous mentor figures in British fiction are analysed in regard of their various relationships with colleagues and students. Following a long literary tradition, the different teacher-student relationships in *The History Boys* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* encompass aspects of platonic friendship and erotic desire as well as complementary and oppositional positionings. The unequal setup of power distributions within these friendships figures as both an educating and fostering as well as an exploitative and hindering constellation for “both” parties.

3 Drawing attention to two seemingly extraordinary conceptualisations of friendship Redfern Jon Barret article "'My Stand': Queer Identities in the Poetry of Anna Seward and Thomas Gray" undermines traditional expectations and demarcations of interpersonal relationships and romance. Barret argues that if we talk of love in our culture, we usually mean sex. It is one of the fundamental norms of our society that love is intrinsically bound to sexuality. In contrast to this prevailing concept however, Anna Seward and Thomas Gray wrote poetry about love that is nonsexual: it is even anti-sexual. They wrote about romantic friendship. The article elaborates on the importance of romantic friendship for the lives of both poets who strongly believed in same-sex friendship and opposed opposite-sex marriage, a queer desire for which each was willing to sacrifice their well-being and reputation.

4 "Revisit but not Revise: Friendship and the Romantic Imperative" is the third and concluding contribution to this issue on gender and friendship and turns its view precisely to the heteronormative assumption within our culture namely that due to their generally presupposed sexual attraction "men and women can't be friends" (When Harry met Sally). Friederike Danebrock takes issue with two popular, cinematic examples dealing with this cultural token, arguing that Hollywood's romantic comedies such as the iconic When Harry met Sally... and - as a close relative - Friends with Benefits, in terms of theme and plot, are not only revealing with regard to concepts of friendship. The romantic imperative both films construct and represent is certainly a gendered imperative, as well: The crucial issue of both narratives is the avoidance of romance in a specific constellation, namely cross-sex friendships between two heterosexual individuals – attempts which, the films suggest, are doomed to failure. In this sense the narratives are driven by (the question of) a "romantic imperative", that is by debating and depicting the unavoidability of falling in love.

Eros in the Classroom: Mentor figures, friendship and desire in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The History Boys*

By Leonie Wanitzek, University of Chester, UK

Abstract:

This article focuses on the characters of Hector and Miss Brodie as two particularly complex examples of inspiring yet ambiguous mentor figures in British fiction, and on their various relationships with colleagues and students. Following a long literary tradition, the different teacher-student relationships in *The History Boys* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* encompass aspects of platonic friendship as well as erotic desire. I analyse in detail the erotic triangles and instances of erotic substitutions and doubles in both texts by using and adapting Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of "homosexuality", before examining Miss Brodie's and Hector's pedagogical agendas and their interaction with students in the classroom in order to offer an overview of the non-eroticised aspects of the teacher-student relationships in the two primary texts.

1 Mentors and teachers have been fascinating figures throughout history. In Western culture, the image of the inspiring teacher reaches back as far as Ancient Greece, where figures such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras represented ideals of knowledge, wisdom and pedagogy that are still extremely relevant today (Steiner 8-10). In later centuries, Christian scholars like St Augustine and Thomas Aquinas exerted lasting influence on European thinking as well as on education philosophy (Steiner 3). Yet the fascination with mentor figures goes beyond the factual historical legacies of these ancient teachers. Real lives of teachers and their pupils have served as an inspiration for works of art and literature, such as in the case of the mediaeval French philosopher Pierre Abélard and his gifted student Héloïse, whose legendary love affair has clearly shown itself to possess an immense narrative and artistic attraction. And the popularity of fictional narratives concerning intriguing, stimulating, or even dangerous mentors and the relationships with their protégés – from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's educational novel *Émile: or, On Education* (1762) to Peter Weir's successful film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) – demonstrates that the appeal of the teacher figure has remained ever constant in more recent European and American history.

2 In this paper, I am going to focus especially on the idea of friendship between teachers and their students. However, as my title suggests, this is only one potential component of fictional teacher-student relationships. Once teacher figures become more than mere instructors to their pupils, there is always the possibility of a sexual connection between them that may result in a relationship characterised by erotic desire rather than platonic friendship. It is no accident that the two key words here, "erotic" and "platonic", refer back to the Ancient Greeks and to Plato in particular. *Eros* and *agape*, sensual and spiritual love, were

seen as frequent, even desirable, components of the relations between master and pupil in Ancient Greece, and they were often manifested in homoerotic relationships between an older and a younger man (Steiner 25-26). The term “platonic”, which is now used to denote a non-sexual love between two individuals, is also linked strongly to spiritual ideas in its original meaning as inspired by Plato’s *Symposium*, so that “platonic” and “erotic” can be regarded as two contrasting, competing potential qualities within an intense mentor-pupil relationship. They must both be examined at the same time in order to fully characterise two such individuals in a unique relation that may hover between inspirational friendship and sexual desire.

3 With such a problematic issue as the eroticisation of teacher-student relationships, it is particularly important to distinguish between reality and fiction. The real-life legal situation in Britain is clear: sexual relationships between a teacher and a pupil under the age of 18 have been illegal in the United Kingdom since 2001. There have been a number of sensational cases in recent years, yet despite the attention they received, they constitute a very small minority. It is obvious that teachers tend to take their position of trust and authority very seriously, and that any abuse of the power over their charges – including both sexual offences and physical assault – is seen as inexcusable. At the same time, this does not mean that in works of fiction, authors cannot explore those areas of teacher-student relationships that are out of bounds in reality. Teachers are after all fascinating figures that are easily romanticised, and there has always been a public appetite for teacher-student love stories, in popular as well as in “high” culture. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature thus developed the figure of the “mentor-lover”, for which Patricia Menon offers an extensive analysis in the works of three nineteenth-century women writers, with literary examples such as Lucy Snowe’s relationship with Paul Emanuel in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*. The original audiences of George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* were disappointed that the play did not provide them with a happy ending for Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle. And in more recent popular teenage culture, the genre of fanfiction can be a good indicator of the interest which students themselves take in fictional teacher-student relationships; for example, popular fan-written “pairings” in the *Harry Potter* universe include romances between the potions master Severus Snape and various Hogwarts pupils, like Hermione Granger or also Harry Potter himself (*Fanfiction.net*). The latter “pairing” simultaneously provides an example for the special appeal of non-heteronormative relationships to fanfiction writers and readers (Tosenberger 192-193, 198). All in all, the erotic components of teacher-student relationships in fiction clearly

constitute an important aspect for literary analysis, although one should still bear in mind the different perspective in terms of real-life legal and moral issues.

4 In my analysis of friendship and desire between teachers and students, I will focus on two particularly complex examples of inspiring yet ambiguous mentor figures in British fiction and their relationships: Miss Brodie, the progressive spinster teaching at a girls' school in 1930s Edinburgh, from Muriel Spark's 1961 novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; and Hector, the homosexual General Studies teacher from Alan Bennett's 2004 play *The History Boys*, who is responsible for the cultural refinement of a group of Oxbridge candidates during the 1980s. Though separated by different eras as well as by their gender, Miss Brodie's and Hector's multifaceted personalities possess a number of interesting similarities as well as contrasts and offer abundant material for a detailed analysis and comparison. There are also film versions of both texts: *The History Boys* (2006) is a very faithful adaptation, additionally legitimised by the involvement of Alan Bennett and the cast of the original theatre production. In contrast, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969), despite Maggie Smith's Oscar-winning performance, presents a more limited, one-layered interpretation of its title character and will therefore not be considered further, while the film of *The History Boys* helps to complement the play with a valid performance version of the text.

5 I will first explore issues of sexuality and desire that are central to Miss Brodie's and Hector's characters and their relations with colleagues and students. Here, the work of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, especially her notion of 'homosociality', is crucial for an understanding of the same-sex tensions (explicit in *The History Boys*, implicit in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*) and the erotic triangles and erotic substitutes which permeate both texts. I will apply Sedgwick's theories to Spark's novel in order to examine the complex relationship between Miss Brodie and her protégée and rival Sandy as well as the secondary relationships Miss Brodie has with her two male colleagues. Within the practically all-male world of *The History Boys*, Sedgwick's idea of homosociality as a whole spectrum of male social bonds, from the platonic to the erotic, is especially useful for analysing the complex relationships between the main characters of Hector, Posner, Irwin and Dakin. The paper will also address issues of responsibility, before moving on to characterise Miss Brodie and Hector in regard to their pedagogical concepts and their interaction with their students in the classroom, thus offering an overview of the non-sexual sides of their relationships with their students. In conclusion, it will become possible to explain – at least partly – the fascination which Miss Brodie and Hector create in readers and audiences and to demonstrate the complexity of the

relations of students and teachers in the worlds of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The History Boys*.

6 Eros and teaching, as I stated earlier, have been connected since classical antiquity, and there is a spectrum of eroticised mentor-student relationships in literary texts of the past centuries. Similarly, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The History Boys*, sexuality and eroticism are intertwined with the portrayal of teachers and teaching, and teachers and students experience and arouse sexual desire. Hector even goes as far as stating that “The transmission of knowledge is itself an erotic act” (53) – which, although uttered in a futile attempt of self-justification to the headmaster after “handling the boys’ balls” (68), has an element of truth in it, as the erotically charged teacher-pupil relationships of both primary texts can testify.

7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of homosociality is crucial for this paper’s exploration of the single-sex community with its erotic triangles and erotic substitutes and doubles. While the aspect of homosexuality is obviously more central to *The History Boys*, there is also a (less overt) lesbian subtext present in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*; and even the non-sexual male-male relationships of *The History Boys* and the heterosexual relationships between Miss Brodie and her male colleagues provide ample opportunities for applying Sedgwick’s theories. In this context, the paper will also discuss a few other notable characters and their sexualities beside Miss Brodie and Hector in order to fully analyse the complex triangular relationships and instances of substitution in both texts, which are often difficult to define exactly.

8 The most obvious instance of an eroticisation of the student-teacher relationship occurs in Hector’s fondling of the students’ genitals as he drives them home on the back of his motor-bike. Its implications, however, are complex. Although the headmaster is legally right to press ahead with Hector’s early retirement as an alternative to firing him (51, 53), Hector’s actions are not presented as a simple case of sexual harassment or abuse. The boys, while not enthusiastic for their next turn on the bike (17), regard it as a slight nuisance rather than a traumatic experience, and in one of their matter-of-fact discussions, Dakin only expresses concern for their safety in traffic:

Dakin: I’m terrified.

Scripps: Of the sex?

Dakin: No. Of the next roundabout. (21)

Even though he does not desire Hector, he would – in a safer situation – actually prefer if Hector “just [went] for it” (21). And the homosexual Posner even volunteers to be given a lift, and is only turned down by Hector because he doesn’t “fit the bill” (17): he is still too young-

looking to attract Hector. This points towards the real reason why Hector's fondling of his pupils can be treated with so little seriousness in the play, as the author himself explains:

I realise that Hector laying hands on the boys would be totally different if they were much younger, but these are all 17-, 18-year-olds. [...] I'm afraid I don't take that very seriously if they're 17 or 18, I think they are actually much wiser than Hector. Hector is the child, not them. (Bennett and Hytner, par. 48)

This means that even if Hector does exploit his position of trust and authority, the fact that his students are psychologically mature and – in part – already sexually active themselves, makes his offence pathetic rather than distressing.

9 Throughout the play, Hector is characterised as a slightly miserable figure where his sexuality is concerned. He has arranged himself with his situation in a way that allows him to remain essentially passive: a marriage to keep up the façade, gropes on the motorbike to satisfy his most basic urges, a row of boys to desire from afar. He tells Irwin that after an initial unhappiness over a boy in the past, the pain has provided him with “immunity for however long it takes. With the occasional booster... another face, a reminder of the pain... it can last you half a lifetime” (94). Slight self-delusions help, too; whether he habitually casts his favourites as romantically “sad” boys (22) or euphemises his “laying-on of hands” (95). In the end, it is inevitable that Hector is doomed to one-sided desires. He himself remarks, “Who could love me? I talk too much” (94), and he is also physically undesirable, which is probably even more important in ruling out the plausibility of a mutual attraction.

10 In contrast to Hector, Miss Brodie's physical attractiveness and active love life form important components of her sexuality. From the beginning of the novel, we are aware of the emphasis she places on her desirability as a woman when we are told that her own love life “had been described to [the girls]” (5). Miss Brodie's steadily developing romantic autobiographical narrative is a topic of continuous interest to the girls, whose own sexual awakening is strongly related to their changing perception of their teacher. After one of the Brodie set has observed the teacher kissing Mr Lloyd in an empty classroom, “the question of whether Miss Brodie was actually capable of being kissed and of kissing occupie[s] the Brodie set till Christmas” (53), marking a turning point in their conception of Miss Brodie, from an asexual (though romantic) being – “Miss Brodie's above all that” (20) – to a sexual woman whose affairs feature in their increasingly daring fantasies (59, 73-74).

11 Among the girls, it is Sandy who is most interested in Miss Brodie's sexuality. From half-innocent contemplations of the shape of the teacher's chest¹ over the series of romantic fantasies she co-authors with Jenny (18-20, 73-74) to her involvement in Miss Brodie's plans for an affair with Mr Lloyd by substitute, Sandy is closely associated with the sexual aspects of her teacher. At least two critics have also identified a lesbian subtext in Sandy's and Miss Brodie's relationship, although their exact theories differ. For Patricia Duncker, Miss Brodie's affair with Mr Lloyd by sexual substitute "works both ways of course" (75): she "hand[s] [her girls] over to the art master" (75) not only because she cannot sleep with him, but also because she cannot sleep with *them*. Duncker quotes Sandy's judgment of Miss Brodie, "the woman is an unconscious Lesbian" (120), and concludes that the narrator agrees. Finally, she points out Sandy's own unrecognised lesbianism, having already mentioned Sandy's "bisexual fantasies" (71). Christopher Whyte, on the other hand, agrees about Sandy's unconscious lesbianism and cites numerous hints from the novel (170-173), but disagrees about Miss Brodie: in his opinion, Sandy betrays Miss Brodie "*because she is heterosexual*" (171) and the teacher's lack of response to Sandy's feelings brings about her downfall. Either way, Miss Brodie shows a strong lack of responsibility for her former pupils in trying to manoeuvre them into Mr Lloyd's bed – the illegal and morally questionable nature of an affair between a student and a male, married teacher does not enter her head. Once again, this demonstrates the self-centredness of her character; in her personal fantasy world, other people's fates are to be directed according to her likes, regardless of such details as legal and moral responsibility.

12 The lesbian subtext in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* touches on a crucial aspect of both texts: triangular patterns and sexual substitutes within single-sex communities. These can be linked to the work of gender and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her concept of homosociality, although in slightly adapted forms. Sedgwick originally coined the term "male homosocial desire", which describes "the entire spectrum of male bonds and potentially includes everyone from overt heterosexuals to overt homosexuals" (Edwards 36). It is a complex linguistic construct that builds on earlier theories, most notably René Girard's text *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (1972), which suggests that in the literary genre of the novel, triangular relations, especially love triangles, between one woman and two men constitute a frequent, central motif; and that the relation between the two male characters is actually the primary one in many cases (Edwards 34). Sedgwick is also

¹ This passage becomes a striking metaphor for Miss Brodie's inconstancy and changing attitudes: "Some days it seemed to Sandy that Miss Brodie's chest was flat, no bulges at all [...]. On other days her chest was breast-shaped and large [...]" (11).

influenced by earlier feminists who already addressed the complex interrelation between gender and sexuality, like Gayle Rubin and Audre Lorde, and by the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and his concept of male “traffic in women” as part of a patriarchal social network.

13 Sedgwick’s central idea is that the relations between men seldom resemble the straight line of a triangle’s side but are capable of change and fluidity and should thus be represented as a “continuum” of homosocial desire instead (Edwards 36; Sedgwick, *Between Men* 2), including social aspects and aspects of desire into a construction that mirrors the potential tension between the two. Sedgwick also introduces the concept of “male homosexual panic” to describe the omnipresent fear of a man’s own potential homosexuality in a society where patriarchal solidarity and male bonding cannot always be definitely distinguished from homosexual relations (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 88-89; Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 20-21). Sedgwick’s research and analysis centres far less on female interrelations, but she is still strongly influenced by concepts such as Adrienne Rich’s idea of the “lesbian continuum,” which includes both heterosexual women and lesbians because all are implicated in the “double life” which women must assume under institutionalised heterosexuality (Rich 659). For Sedgwick, too, the demarcation between the homosocial and homosexual is more fluid and less distinctive for women than for men (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 2-3), although she points out the nevertheless existent conflicts and divisions within female communities as well as the factor of lesbian panic.

14 Sedgwick’s concepts can be applied to both *The History Boys* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. The above-mentioned lesbian subtext in the relationship between Sandy and Miss Brodie is characteristic of the female fluidity between homosocial and homosexual: when we are told that Sandy does not desert the Brodie set “because she loved Miss Brodie” (32), this ambiguous statement could mean, as Whyte has suggested, that Sandy is attracted to the teacher, but it could also merely be a little girl’s admiration for her teacher. More interesting is Sandy’s thought, “the woman is an unconscious Lesbian” (120). Instead of proving Duncker’s theory of Miss Brodie’s lesbianism, it rather suggests potential lesbian tendencies in Sandy’s sexuality that are expressed through lesbian panic coupled with a slight homophobia.

15 For an analysis of Miss Brodie’s sexuality, one needs to examine her two triangular “affairs by substitute” with Mr Lloyd. The text subverts the “traditional” form of the male-male-female love triangle as described by Sedgwick by making Miss Brodie, the woman, the dominant actor in the Miss Brodie – Mr Lloyd – Mr Lowther triangle, while the relations

between the two men are hardly present in the text at all (apart from Mr Lowther being a sexual substitute for Mr Lloyd). The original isolation and subordination of women (Edwards 39) is thus transformed into female dominance and elevation above the more exchangeable, passive men², whose potential homosocial bond is of no interest to the narrator. And although Miss Brodie is in love with Mr Lloyd (56), she does not stay chaste because of his unavailability as a lover, rejecting the traditional behaviour pattern of the “virtuous woman” in favour of sexual gratification and a sense of power over her substitute lover Mr Lowther. She is therefore presented as a dominant, sexually unconventional woman, suggesting that the traditional “virtuous woman” of Marcia Blaine, whose “price is above rubies” (6) is a thing of the past.

16 The triangle between Miss Brodie, Sandy and Mr Lloyd can also be seen as an inversion (and therefore a subversion) of the patriarchal homosocial triangle as described by Sedgwick; with two women and one man instead of the other way round. The strongest and most complex relation is the female homosocial bond between Sandy and Miss Brodie, who depend upon one another and, in a sense, finally betray one another (Massie 49-50); it is not between either of the women and Mr Lloyd. However, if Miss Brodie indeed harbours unconscious lesbian feelings in addition to her heterosexual desire for Mr Lloyd, they may actually rather be for Rose, for whom she originally planned the affair with Mr Lloyd. It is Sandy who effectively changes the triangle to include herself, Miss Brodie and Mr Lloyd, with Rose acting as a mere informant (110), which shows that Sandy is drawn more to Miss Brodie than Miss Brodie is to her. Yet perhaps Sandy is also showing more “insight” than her teacher at this point, for by making herself and Miss Brodie the two women of the triangle, she reinforces the idea that she is Miss Brodie’s double in the novel (Hynes 76). Miss Brodie frequently acts through surrogates (Royle 158), but it is Sandy who is most like her teacher and most firmly bound to her for all her life, and their connection via Mr Lloyd in the triangle highlights her paradoxical status as disciple and rival, agent and traitor of her teacher.

17 In *The History Boys*, Sedgwick’s triangles exist in yet another form: the all-male homosocial triangle. Here, open (yet mostly one-sided) homosexual attraction takes the place of heterosexual romance in the original male-male-female triangle; and male bonding, sympathy between fellow homosexuals and shared intellectual interests form the homosocial connection of the “traditional” triangle. Dakin, the most attractive, confident and most gifted among the history boys, is desired by his fellow student Posner, by the young substitute teacher Irwin, and by Hector himself, and therefore forms the tip of three different triangles,

² Mr Lloyd and Mr Lowther even share a physical likeness (48).

taking the “female” role in each case – which means he is the one who is openly desired by the other men, not that he is a feminine or homosexual boy or that he reciprocates their desire in every case. The relations between Hector and Irwin, Hector and Posner, and Irwin and Posner constitute the homosocial axes of the three triangles.

18 The all-male triangle inverts traditional expectations because the homosocial bond is no longer needed as a covert possibility for potentially homoerotic feelings, but instead provides a non-sexual bonding between gay men who share an open homosexual attraction to another male (who replaces the courted woman of the original triangle). In the play, this constellation is only possible because it is set in an atmosphere where male homosexual panic and homophobia are almost completely absent. For example, Posner’s classmates are aware of, but not repulsed by, his homosexuality (21) and his attraction to Dakin. Dakin himself rather revels in the attention, and when he finds himself strangely attracted to Irwin, he accepts it matter-of-factly and even tries to seduce him, although he is otherwise presented as heterosexual. Likewise, the boys meet Hector’s sexual advances with leniency and gentle ridicule, not with disgust or fear. Outside of the world of the play, the audience, too, is encouraged to encounter homosexuality in a positive way, since the character of Irwin actually becomes more sympathetic once his attraction to Dakin and his resulting vulnerability emerge (Bennett and Hytner, par. 9-10).

19 Posner and Irwin are brought together in their attraction to Dakin when Posner confides his sexuality in the young teacher and hopes, in vain, that Irwin will confess that he is “in the same boat” (42). As fellow student Scripps assesses, Posner “knew that Irwin looked at [Dakin] occasionally too and he wanted him to say so. Basically he just wanted company” (44).

20 Hector and Posner share a bond because of the unrequited nature of their desire for Dakin, who chooses Irwin over them. This is illustrated when they have to hold Dakin and Posner’s additional afternoon lesson without the former:

Hector: Ah, Posner. No Dakin?
Posner: With Mr Irwin, sir.
Hector: Of course. (53)

Their understanding is almost wordless, but one can observe Hector’s quiet resignation in his “Of course.” He then stresses the solidarity of unrequited love between him and Posner by including his student into a “we”: “No matter. We must carry on the fight without [Dakin]” (54). On a larger scale, Posner and Hector are also able to relate to each other because they share a true love for literature and the transmission of knowledge. Furthermore, Posner is in a way Hector’s “heir”, the “only one who truly took everything to heart” (108) and who follows

his mentor's footsteps, becoming an unfulfilled homosexual teacher himself. Shared, but not mutual, desire thus becomes a catalyst for friendship in yet another unconventional teacher-student relationship in *The History Boys*.

21 Irwin and Hector are very strongly linked because they share the predicament of being teachers attracted to one of their students. Hector gives advice to the younger Irwin, cautioning him not to "touch" Dakin – "He'll think you're a fool" (95) – and to see the pain caused by the unfulfilled love as "an inoculation [...] Briefly painful, but providing immunity for however long it takes" (94). He also states it is actually best not to continue teaching in the first place: "I used to think I could warm myself on the vitality of the boys I taught, but that doesn't work" (94). At the same time, an interesting clue is given in this scene when Hector replies to Irwin's pensively uttered "Love" with the question, "Who could love me?" (94). By drawing attention to Hector's own undesirability, the play hints at the possibility that Irwin may be acting as his younger, more attractive double whose attraction is actually answered by Dakin – the boy has been flirting with Irwin only two scenes earlier (87-91). This is further reinforced in the next scene between Irwin and Dakin, where Dakin makes his sexual offer to the teacher (99). After a thoughtful pause, he adds, "Actually, that would please Hector" (100), which sounds highly suggestive even after Dakin explains that he was actually referring to the grammatical form of his proposal (100). Irwin, however, resists being doubled with Hector, precisely because he realises their similarities:

Irwin: You've already had to cope with one master who touches you up. I don't...
Dakin: Is that what it is? Is it that you don't want to be like Hector? [...] You can't be.
[...] Hector's a joke.
Irwin: No he isn't. He isn't. (100-101)

Irwin must take Hector seriously because he himself is essentially in the same position, but he rejects this connection, fearing that it would taint his actions toward Dakin with parallels to Hector's pathetic gropes on the motorbike; that he himself is as much of a joke to Dakin as Hector is, an anxiety which is not wholly unfounded.³ But at the same time, Dakin's attraction is perhaps more deep-rooted than he realises because it shows the most direct relation between eros and the transmission of knowledge in either of the two texts: "Irwin's teaching is sexualised by the pupil who actually takes it all on board" (Bennett and Hytner, par. 47).⁴ Through his erotic double Irwin, Hector's infelicitous quotation on the erotic nature of teaching has actually been fulfilled.

³ Although Dakin is definitely fascinated by Irwin and his teaching, he implies that Irwin's physical desire is not matched by one of his own and that his offer is more a favour, a way "to say thank you" (102).

⁴ Alan Bennett found his notions of a connection between sexuality and teaching confirmed when reading George Steiner's *Lessons of the Masters*, where Hector's quote, 'The transmission of knowledge is in itself an erotic act', is also drawn from.

22 Both Miss Brodie and Hector have various other central ideas concerning the true nature of education, and they define themselves and are defined in relation to social notions of what constitutes “good” teaching. Their individual teaching styles are important aspects of their characters as well as expressions of their respective attitudes towards the students, and the inclusion or exclusion of the students into the lesson can provide important clues to Hector’s and Miss Brodie’s positioning of themselves within the teacher-student relationship. I will furthermore analyse the triangular relationship between Miss Brodie’s and Hector’s own “official” teaching agendas and their self-perception, their outward position as teachers within a certain system, and the reality of their actual teaching performances; and finally I will provide a brief consideration of the elements of self-fictionalisation and self-romanticising in these two eccentric teachers’ self-images and teaching performances.

23 In one of his first stage directions, Hector is described as “a man of studied eccentricity” (4). His language in the following scene immediately reinforces this. He employs intricate sentence constructions (4) and delights in complex and unusual words, e.g. “felicitations” (4) or “otiose” (5), as well as in almost Shakespearean-sounding insults, e.g. “Foul, festering grubby-minded little trollop” (5). He is very fond of peppering his regular speech with quotations (e.g. 6, 7, 30, 52) and he is proud to show off his fluency in French and his accent. The emphasis is the “studied” quality of his eccentricity – Hector very consciously employs these rhetorical devices to present himself as a unique and well-educated person. By wearing a bow tie and driving a motorcycle (4), he further accentuates his differences from the norm through these somewhat contrasting accessories. In Richard Griffiths’ performance of the role, the actor’s enormous girth presents yet another visual marker of Hector’s otherness, whether self-chosen or not.

24 Hector also cultivates his role as the eccentric professor by repeatedly hitting the boys with exercise books (e.g. 5) or ordering others to do it for him (84). Like so many aspects of his lessons this is a game, a collaborative performance with the boys, who feign indignation at his half-serious wrath but in reality “lap [...] up” (7) the blows: far from being a disciplinary measure, these hits that “never hurt” (7) are “a joke” (7) and a demonstration of fondness: ‘He hits you if he likes you’ (7). It is worth noting how Hector turns a violent act asserting power and manliness into a subtly homoerotic gesture of affection and/or attraction. While his fondling of the boys’ genitals on the motorbike naturally draws the most attention in the text, it is perhaps this rough caress posing as punishment which best characterises Hector’s troubled, complex relationship with his own sexuality and his fumbled attempts to express his yearnings towards the boys. It also illustrates perfectly the dual nature of teacher-student

relationships between friendship and desire. Rather ambiguous and subtle where its erotic component is concerned, Hector's hitting of the boys symbolises a playful, mutual exploration of the boundaries of authority and physicality in the relations between the teacher and his students.

25 As with Hector, a significant part of Miss Brodie's self-stylisation happens through linguistic means. She likes using archaisms such as "forsooth" (46); like Hector, she inserts literary quotations into her everyday speech, e.g. "Season of mist and mellow fruitfulness" (12), or "Come autumn sae pensive, in yellow and grey [...]" (47); she also regularly recites poetry to her class in order to "raise their minds" (21).

26 However, Miss Brodie's high style and stage-like lectures to her class are undercut by Muriel Spark's ironic technique of inserting abrupt changes of topic into Miss Brodie's speech, letting her mind turn from the solemn to the mundane in one split second:

"I was engaged to a young man at the beginning of the War but he fell on Flanders' Field," said Miss Brodie. "Are you thinking, Sandy, of doing a day's washing?" (12)

Spark also exposes Miss Brodie's slightly ridiculous airs by making other characters echo her speech. In one case, this device mocks the hypocrisy of Miss Brodie's insistence on grammatical correctness (Bold 69): she scoffs at Mary McGregor for saying "comic" instead of "comic paper" (11) and asks Eunice, who speaks of attending "a social," "Social what?" (62) – but then the famous "prime" which she continuously mentions is questioned in a similar way by adult Eunice's husband:

"Who was Miss Brodie?"

"A teacher of mine, she was full of culture. [...] She used to give us teas at her flat and tell us about her prime."

"Prime what?" (27)

On an even larger scale, Sandy and Jenny's imagined correspondence between Miss Brodie and Mr Lowther unconsciously satirises their teacher's lofty rhetoric by intersecting a naive recreation of Miss Brodie's characteristic utterances with dry newspaper and courtroom language, resulting in lines like: "I may permit misconduct to occur again from time to time as an outlet because I am in my Prime" (73). But it also illustrates how easily the young girls are shaped and influenced by Miss Brodie, elevating her style of speech, as well as the "stories" she tells them, to definitive guidelines and examples even when they are ridiculous. This suggests a strong initial imbalance in the mentor-student relations between Miss Brodie and her charges, which in turn explains why her close personal relationships with her "girls" are more problematic than those between Hector and his more mature boys: Miss Brodie's

irresponsible behaviour is directed at students who are initially much younger and more vulnerable, and who are in danger of falling completely under her spell.

27 All in all, Miss Brodie's behaviour shows a curious mixture of the highly dramatic and the unwittingly comical; of course this also demonstrates how close the two usually lie together. Her lack of self-consciousness when she gives her little shows of poetry, personal tragedy and tit-bit history stems from her firm belief in her own deep profundity and grandeur: this is a woman who says of herself, "[I] looked magnificent" (44); who constantly states to be in her prime; who plays a gladiator (46) or recites "The Lady of Shalott" as if in the throes of passion (21). Passion is indeed a key element in Miss Brodie's character. No matter how absurd the focus and the expression of that passion, it nevertheless lends her a degree of sincerity and prevents her from becoming a mere caricature. Passion is also what distinguishes her most markedly from Hector's character. In his eccentric behaviour there is always an element of playfulness, of self-conscious, self-ironic over-stylisation. This does not mean there is no seriousness or conviction behind his teaching; on the contrary, he is in a way as passionate as Miss Brodie.⁵ But he never allows himself to express this passion openly as she does and to forget himself in it. This is because he is much more conscious of his student audience than Miss Brodie is – and of course this makes sense, as he does not perform in front of impressionable little girls but unruly, questioning adolescent boys, who are far more involved in the lesson than Miss Brodie's charges.

28 According to Judy Sproxton, "there is no element of dialogue in Miss Brodie's teaching; in fact, it is quite authoritarian" (64). Despite Miss Brodie's emphatic notion of education as "a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul" (36), she is actually guilty of the opposite practice, "thrusting a lot of information into the pupil's head" (36). This is especially problematic because this information is by no means objective or factual. Completely convinced of her own ideals and beliefs, Miss Brodie instils a curious mixture of scattered cultural knowledge, personal prejudices and arbitrary guidelines into the girls' minds, as in this exchange:

"Who is the greatest Italian painter?"

"Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie."

"That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite." (11)

Here, Miss Brodie does not even try to disguise the subjective nature of the opinions she passes on; this is because she is unaware of her faulty thinking. In her own mind, she is practising "education as a leading out" (36) and therefore does not notice the discrepancy between

⁵ Even the headmaster realises so: "There is passion there. Or, as I prefer to call it, commitment" (12).

her self-proclaimed agenda and her actual teaching. While Miss Brodie does not possess any “conscious ideological intention” (Sproxtton 66), it is at least as dangerous that through her sheer egocentricity she fails to realise that merely passing on her own prejudices is questionable.

29 Miss Brodie’s only instance of dialogue with her pupils consists of questions to ensure they have absorbed her monologue:

“These are the fascisti,” said Miss Brodie and spelt it out. “What are these men, Rose?”

“The fascisti, Miss Brodie.” (31)

Most of her lessons, however, simply consist of curiously disjointed lectures which incorporate at least as much of her personal life as of other subject matter, such as art. But slipped in between are also her questionable political opinions, which make them more disconcerting than any mere self-absorbed talk:

In London my friends who are well-to-do [...] took me to visit A. A. Milne. In the hall was hung a reproduction of Botticelli’s *Primavera* which means the Birth of Spring. I wore my silk dress with the large red poppies which is just right for my colouring. Mussolini is one of the greatest men in the world, far more so than Ramsay MacDonald, and his fascisti – (44)

30 Dorothea Walker comments on this “dual nature of Miss Brodie” (41) that is manifest in her teaching methods: Miss Brodie genuinely wishes to broaden the minds of her young protégées, yet the biased opinions which she feeds them do more harm than good, especially when they range into the political. Her pupils also learn very little that is actually relevant to the curriculum, although Miss Brodie is careful to disguise her digressions from the specified syllabus of instruction by having the girls prop up the appropriate books in front of them or by keeping the blackboard covered with arithmetic (10, 12, 45). When the headmistress enters unexpectedly in one scene, Miss Brodie invents a history lesson as “neatly” as she catches a falling leaf (13) in order to explain why her pupils are crying (in reality, she has been telling them about the death of her lover in the First World War).

31 Hector’s lessons are rather different from Miss Brodie’s where the element of dialogue is concerned. Like Miss Brodie, he exposes his students to his particular tastes in music, theatre and literature during his “General Studies” lessons. However, he often permits them to play-act scenes (31-32, 66), perform songs (29) and engage in playful discussion with him (5-6, 29-30), thus allowing a much higher degree of student participation in his classes than Miss Brodie does, although he still determines the overall lesson structure.

32 For instance, his French lessons follow the fixed form of a foreign-language role play, but the topic is chosen by the boys (12). The result, acting out a brothel scene, needs to be

concealed from the suddenly appearing headmaster just like Miss Brodie's love story had to be disguised: Hector rapidly recasts it as a hospital scene in wartime Belgium and the pupils follow his lead. However, there are two main differences here to Miss Brodie's class. First, there is a greater sense of shared complicity between teacher and pupils, since they are both responsible for the risqué scene. This is probably why the students actively support Hector's cover-up, while in *The Prime of Miss Brodie* the girls merely acquiesce in silence to Miss Brodie's alibi. Secondly, Miss Brodie's lecture on her late lover has little or no educational merit for the girls, whereas Hector's brothel is "un maison de passe où tous les clients utilisent le subjonctif ou le conditionnel" (12), making it an unconventional but efficient exercise for practising grammatical structures. The two scenes illustrate the respective relationships of Miss Brodie and Hector to their students very well, contrasting the greater degree of pedagogical friendship and camaraderie between Hector and his boys, in particular against the "common enemy" of the headmaster, with Miss Brodie's mere utilisation of her pupils as audience and silent accessories, which again shows a much larger imbalance of power and authority in their relationship.

33 An analysis of Hector's statements on his educational policy illustrates further that despite his eccentric choices of subject matter, he has a much further developed and realised pedagogy than Miss Brodie in her narcissistic lectures. While he admits freely to the boys that his "General Studies" lessons serve no practical purpose, he also points out that "All knowledge is precious whether or not it serves the slightest human use" (quoting A.E. Housman, 5). When he makes the boys learn poetry by heart, he explains he is equipping them with an "antidote" to "grief" and "happiness" (30). In contrast, drama and song interludes are included, he states, because he does not

want to turn out boys who in later life had a deep love of literature or who would talk in middle age of the lure of language and their love of words. Words said in that reverential way that is somehow Welsh. That's what the tosh is for. *Brief Encounter*, Gracie Fields, it's an antidote. Sheer calculated silliness. (94)

His repeated use of "antidote" in these two quotations is central in illustrating the basis of his pedagogical approach: equipping his students with "high" culture as something to fall back on when one is overwhelmed by things "happening" (30); and with popular culture to prevent that high culture turning into a pose. Hector's teaching is about reaction to the system, about defence through literature. When talking to Mrs Lintott, the more conventional history teacher, he says poignantly, "You give them an education. I give them the wherewithal to resist it" (23). He sees himself as a counterforce to the exam-oriented, fact-based school

education, hoping that his students will remember him and his teaching in later life, and that they will “pass it on” (109) to future generations.

34 However, despite these noble ideas of himself as a wise and benevolent mentor-friend, one should not make the mistake of glorifying Hector’s teaching as absolutely altruistic. As Mrs Lintott observes, Hector “is trying to be the kind of teacher pupils will remember” (50), so his teaching is at least as much about creating his own memorable personality as it is about giving his students an enduring cultural education and the benefits of a social elder’s guidance and friendship. One also must not forget that he does not reliably produce results – the boys do not always take his teaching seriously, and out of all his students, only Posner really “pass[es] the parcel” (109) in the end. Indeed, for both Miss Brodie and Hector the lasting influence of their teaching is doubtful. In the later years of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, only Sandy remains under Miss Brodie’s spell throughout her life, whereas the other girls all move on rather quickly, unharmed but also unenriched by the years spent under Miss Brodie. Similarly, all the “history boys” except Posner have fairly ordinary adult lives in which Hector’s education seemingly plays no great role (106-108).

35 It is also notable that both Miss Brodie and Hector are not responsible (or refuse to be so) for exam preparation, and only this unusual situation can make room for their eccentric, eclectic teaching styles. In *The History Boys*, Hector merely provides “the cherry on top,” while Irwin and Mrs Lintott do the actual work of drilling the boys for their entrance examinations. Hector’s boys even maintain the notion that “[his] stuff’s not meant for the exam [...]. It’s to make [them] more rounded human beings” (38), and that to answer questions on poetry in the entrance examination would be “a betrayal of trust” (39). Such a disdain for exams fits well with Hector’s motto, “All knowledge is precious” (5). It also hints once again at the sense of camaraderie between Hector and the boys and their alliance against the “system” symbolised by the headmaster and Irwin.

36 In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Miss Brodie simply refuses to stick to the curriculum at the expense of her travel accounts and other personal lectures: “Qualifying examination or no qualifying examination, you will have the benefit of my experiences in Italy” (45). The girls eventually pass their exams, studying on their own in order to “scrape through” (38) as Miss Brodie commands them, but they have certainly not received a very solid education: “All of the Brodie set, save one, counted on its fingers, as had Miss Brodie, with accurate results more or less” (6). In Miss Brodie’s world, accuracy and predictability must stand back in favour of other virtues: “Safety does not come first. Goodness, Truth and Beauty come first. Follow me” (10).

37 Apart from their attempts to influence their students, both teachers – but especially Miss Brodie – also try to present their own person and actions in the desired light by romanticising and even fictionalising themselves and their lives. For Hector, this mostly happens through his conscious performance as the eccentric teacher. In addition, he tries (unsuccessfully) to gloss over his sexual advances on the boys by euphemising them as gestures of “benediction [rather] than gratification or anything else” (95), and he has a habit of discovering an imagined sadness in his favourite boys to justify his affection and attention and to romanticise them in his mind (22). In both instances, Mrs Lintott provides a reality check: “Hector, darling, love you as I do, that is the most colossal balls. [...] A grope is a grope. It is not the Annunciation” (95); and: “You always think they’re sad, Hector, every, every time” (22).

38 Miss Brodie is a much bigger fantasist. As she herself is developing under the girls’ eyes (43-44), so the story of her love life changes with each retelling: Her dead lover Hugh who died on Flanders field slowly acquires the characteristics and talents of Miss Brodie’s two new love interests, Mr Lloyd and Mr Lowther, in order to maintain a satisfying neatness in the relation between old and new love (Pullin 89-90). Sandy, who realises this, is “fascinated by this method of making patterns with facts” (72), but also takes it as further proof that Miss Brodie is “guilty of misconduct” (72). Indeed, while Miss Brodie is “casting herself as author and heroine of her own myth” (Pullin 90-91), she neglects the consequences that her treatment of real life in the manner of a novelist has on other people’s fates; as so often, Miss Brodie’s self-deceptions lead her too far.

39 Finally, Miss Brodie’s trend to romanticise her own position and to interpret her surroundings in an appropriate light in order to fit her own beliefs can be linked back to the differences between her teaching agenda and teaching reality. Miss Brodie stylises herself as an educational heroine:

It has been suggested again that I should apply for a post at one of the progressive schools [...]. But I shall not apply for a post at a crank school. I shall remain at this education factory. There needs must be a leaven in the lump. (9)

She feels she has a duty to save the girls in her charge from their conservative surroundings and sees herself as dedicating her “prime” to her girls, even at the sacrifice of Mr Lloyd’s love (120). The whole idea of her own educational martyrdom and heroism helps her to resist the antagonism of the school authorities, as it divides the world neatly into herself on the good side and the headmistress and other teachers on the bad side. It also sums up the discrepancy of her own views of the relationship to her “girls” – a selfless pedagogical friendship on her side – and reality, which sees her exploiting the admiring devotion of her charges for her own

ends. In conclusion, one can say that the partial self-invention of Miss Brodie – and, to some extent, of Hector – mirror the differences between their self-proclaimed educational principles and the reality of their teaching and their relationships with their students.

40 Miss Brodie and Hector possess multifaceted and eccentric personalities, highly individual personal styles and teaching methods, and intriguing relationships with their colleagues and students, all of which provide valuable reasons for the fascination which those two characters can exude on readers and audiences. But in addition, there is a less tangible element about them that makes them appear slightly larger than life; figures that lead a critic to assert, for instance, that ‘the character Jean Brodie has escaped the confines and the discipline of the novel’ (Massie 45). Hector is perhaps too new a creation to have acquired such a position just yet, but he, too, has the capacity to intrigue and attract, especially since he is actually the better teacher of the two, genuinely practising education as ‘a process of drawing out rather than putting in’ (Billington par. 5) and providing eclectic but highly stimulating lessons which manage to transmit his enthusiasm for his subjects. He does not need to be perfect – indeed, the fact that he has a more questionable side to his character constitutes the strong appeal of *The History Boys*, where good and bad teachers are not as neatly divided as in films like *Dead Poets Society*, and where the homoerotic potential of close teacher-student relationships is not ignored.

41 The complexity of the numerous unconventional, sometimes erotically charged teacher-student relationships in both texts is indeed the second important reason why Hector and Miss Brodie are so capable of fascination. The divisions between erotic and platonic, homosexual and heterosexual, dangerous and pathetic, are never simple and often blurred, conforming perfectly of Sedgwick’s notion of homosocial relations as a continuum rather than a mere line. Ongoing debates concerning particular points, such as the nature of Miss Brodie’s and Sandy’s feelings for each other, demonstrate the richness of interpretations offered in the texts, and the need to adapt Sedgwick’s original concept of the homosocial triangle to approach *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *The History Boys* shows how unconventional and groundbreaking the depictions of teacher-student relationships in the two narratives really are. Finally, the absence of a definite and easy moral judgement in either of the texts only intensifies their appeal and their ambiguity, since every audience and every reader will form their own image of the intriguing figures of Hector and Miss Brodie.

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“My Stand”: Queer Identities in the Poetry of Anna Seward and Thomas Gray

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Abstract:

When we talk of love in our culture, we usually mean sex. When we talk of desire, we usually mean sex. If we are to fall in love with someone we desire, if we wish to dedicate our lives to someone, live with them, share a bed with them – then we better be having sex with them as well. It is one of the fundamental norms of our society that love is intrinsically bound to sexuality. Here we will examine two eighteenth-century poets. Anna Seward and Thomas Gray each fell in love and each wrote poetry about their love. The love each of them writes about, however, is nonsexual: it is even anti-sexual. Anna Seward and Thomas Gray wrote about romantic friendship. Both poets strongly believed in same-sex friendship and opposed opposite-sex marriage, a queer desire for which each was willing to sacrifice their well-being and reputation.

1 When we talk of love in our culture, we usually mean sex. When we talk of desire, we usually mean sex. If we are to fall in love with someone we desire, if we wish to dedicate our lives to someone, live with them, share a bed with them – then we better be having sex with them as well. It is one of the fundamental norms of our society that love is intrinsically bound to sexuality.

2 Here we will examine two eighteenth-century poets. Anna Seward and Thomas Gray each fell in love and each wrote poetry about their love. The love each of them writes about, however, is nonsexual: it is even anti-sexual. Anna Seward and Thomas Gray wrote about romantic friendship. Both poets strongly believed in same-sex friendship and opposed opposite-sex marriage, a queer desire for which each was willing to sacrifice their well-being and reputation.

3 It was Aristotle in the 4th Century BC who explicitly outlined and analysed the social conventions surrounding intimate friendship. In the eighth and ninth books of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (350BC) he describes friendship as critical to a happy and healthy life: “... Friendship is not only an indispensable, but also a beautiful or noble thing: for we commend those who love their friends ...” (Aristotle, 252). In the *Ethics* Aristotle outlines the three different forms of friendship: those based in utility, those based in pleasure, and those based in mutual regard for one another’s virtue: it is the latter to which he pays the most attention, as the ‘truest’ form of friendship. True friendship, the *Ethics* maintains, is not available to all, as virtue itself is an inherently rare quality. If one were capable, the most vital facets to true friendship were equality, trust, cohabitation, physical intimacy and exclusivity. If friendship, he argues, is not a unique and personal bond, established in openness and both

physical and emotional affection, then it is not true friendship. Equality was utterly crucial, and therefore an equal social status had to be maintained (Aristotle, 293). Of course inter-gendered ‘true’ friendships were not deemed possible, as women were of a considerably lower social status than men – Aristotle compares the relationship between husband and wife to that of the aristocracy to the masses (Aristotle, 273). Friendship in its purest form, therefore, was a purely same-sex phenomenon. Aristotle goes so far as to describe a true friend as a ‘second self’, one whose existence is securely tied to another – they should even be prepared to die for one another (Aristotle, 306).

4 Alan Bray’s highly influential study into same-sex friendship, *The Friend*, charts the course of friendship in Western Europe over the course of several centuries following the arrival of Christianity. Despite the influence of the pagan Aristotle on the ideals of friendship, it remained a vital institution until the eighteenth century. Friends would share beds, wallets and lives. They would kiss and devoted their bodies to one another – as Bray points out, the practice of platonically sharing a bed in such a bond is the origin of the term ‘bedfellow’ (Bray, 153).

5 The dawn of the eighteenth century saw fundamental social change. Relations between men started to become taboo, and we see the first cultural references to the ‘molly’ – the effeminate male sodomite: the historian Randolph Trumbach describes how same-sex sexual contact became tied to gender inversion – that is, it became increasingly associated with feminine men and masculine women (Trumbach, 77). Trumbach points out that – for men - the new effeminate associations to same-sex sexual contact carried a great degree of shame: many of those put on trial committed suicide, something men accused of sodomy had not done in previous decades. As he puts it, “Sodomy was now tied to a deviant gender role” (Trumbach, p. 80).

6 This had a profound impact on both male and female same-sex friendship. The new cultural archetypes of both the effeminate male sodomite and the masculine lesbian prompted the social decline of same-sex platonic love, and it began to gain unacceptable connotations. Slowly living together, sharing a bed and kissing one’s friend became taboo. This was coupled with a renewed focus on the institution of marriage and the rise of companionate marriage: a person’s spouse was now expected to provide the central emotional interest in their lives. Marriage was therefore placed in direct opposition to romantic friendship.

7 By Thomas Gray’s lifetime many prominent social philosophers were moralising on the subject of marriage, not least Daniel Defoe, who published *A Treatise Concerning the Use and Abuse of the Marriage Bed* in 1727, when Gray was entering early adolescence. Defoe

portrays an idealised vision of marriage, one which presents an idyllic and harmonious union – the one true path for happiness: “... the pleasure of the married state consists wholly in the beauty of the union, the sharing comforts, the doubling all enjoyments; it is the settlement of life; the ship is always in a storm till it finds this safe road, and here it comes to an anchor” (Defoe, 30).

8 And so increasingly the early eighteenth century saw love become the preserve of marriage. Defoe is scathing toward those whom he believes to have ignored the sound advice that marriage must be based in mutual love – particularly with regards to women, comparing them to prostitutes: “What will you do madam? Will you live with a man ... you do not love? As I said before, that such a lady must be a fool. I saw now it is worse; it is but a kind of prostitution, in the plain English of it, too gross and wicked to express” (Defoe, 32).

9 Yet to understand the social transition away from platonic love and towards sexual love, we need to turn to the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1976) largely concerns itself with the cultural shifts that comprised the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, particularly with regard to sexuality. Foucault argues that ‘sexuality’ is not an innate or universal aspect of humanity, but was invented by eighteenth-century discourse: that is, the discourses of the eighteenth century did not ‘uncover’ sexuality but in fact created it. This historical construct had wide-ranging implications for western society, a process that Foucault refers to as the ‘deployment of sexuality’ (Foucault, 105). Both the resultant ‘veritable discourse explosion’ and the creation of sexuality served to sexualise social views on relationships – including those surrounding the tradition of romantic friendship. Both Gray and Seward utilised their written works as a means of escaping this discourse and indeed the very creation of ‘sexuality’. Each sought an ideal in the platonic relationships outlined by Aristotle and as such found themselves both outside the boundaries of this discourse and in opposition to it – something which, as it could not be directly articulated, was expressed as an opposition to marriage. In short, Gray and Seward expressed a queer desire contrary to (relatively new) sexual and gender norms and as a result were both revolutionary and reactionary.

10 The late Robert F. Gleckner, whose work *Gray Agonistes: Thomas Gray and Masculine Friendship* (1997) is vital to our understanding of Gray’s male friendships, focused mainly on Gray’s friendship with Richard West - which he makes clear early on to have been socially transgressive (Gleckner, 6). Gleckner does not, however, suggest that Gray’s friendships formed part of a unique social or cultural identity – the possibility that we need to explore here.

11 As a result of the conflicting social statuses of friendship and marriage, the two are inextricably tied in the poetry of Thomas Gray. 'Ode on the Spring', written to his romantic friend Richard West, presents the marginalised perspective of those forming an identity in nonsexual love and the unthinking, unaware nature of the social majority:

Where'er the oak's thick branches stretch
A broader browner shade;
Where'er the rude and moss-grown beech
O'er-canopies the glade,
Besides some water's rushy brink
With me the Muse shall sit, and think
(At ease reclin'd in rustic state)
How vain the ardour of the Crowd,
How low, how little are the Proud,
How indigent the Gre

Still is the toiling hand of Care:
The panting herds repose:
Yet hark, how thro' the peopled air
The busy murmur glows!
The insect youth are on the wing,
Eager to use the honied spring,
And float amid the liquid noon:
Some lightly o'er the current skim,
Some shew their gaily-gilded trim
Quick-glancing to the sun.

To Contemplation's sober eye
Such is the race of Man:
And they that creep, and they that fly,
Shall end where they began.
Alike the Busy and the Gay
But flutter thro' life's little day,
In fortune's varying colours drest:
Brush'd by the hand of rough mischance,
Or chill'd by Age, their airy dance
They leave, in dust to rest.
(Gray, Works, I, 1-3)

The social majority are referenced throughout 'Ode on the Spring'. The masses are invoked through reference to 'the peopled air', and the vain ardour of the crowd, with the dual references to mass activity and the calm of solitude in competition with one another. Humanity is compared to elements of nature, with the fertility of young insects being compared to the expectations of fertility on young men. Youth is associated with lightness, as the poet introduces words such as 'float', 'languid' and 'lightly' to convey the animalistic simplicity of life for the majority, who find themselves able to indulge in sexualised mainstream milestones such as marriage and procreation. This lies in sharp contrast to the

lonely philosopher. In the ode we see Gray's quiet yet firm criticism of sexuality, reducing the majority to the level of insects.

12 The poem ends on a similar note:

Methinks I hear in accents low
The sportive kind reply:
Poor moralist! and what art thou?
A solitary fly!
Thy joys no glittering female meets,
No hive hast thou of hoarded sweets,
No painted plumage to display:
On hasty wings thy youth is flown;
Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone –
We frolic, while 'tis May.
(Gray, Works, I, 3)

Here 'Ode on the Spring' provides further critique toward the masses: again the attitude of the youthful majority is imagined by Gray, this time in direct relation to his own circumstances as philosopher. Gray places the voice of the majority into the ode, who see him as alone as he has no wife (the term 'glittering female' once again brings to mind the imagery of mindless insects). The usual rituals for young men of finding a mate are to him morally pointless. Yet his rebellion against social norms was not a joyous or life-affirming choice for Gray, but something more akin to an affliction.

13 Yet Gray's queer devotion to romantic friendship was not without its pleasures, and his companionship with West provided numerous instances of delight and satisfaction in his written works. In a letter from 1735 we can see Gray's reassurance of the importance of West to his emotional life:

PERMIT me again to write to you, though I have so long neglected my duty, and forgive my brevity, when I tell you it is occasioned wholly by the hurry I am in to get to a place where I expect to meet with no other pleasure than the sight of you; for I am preparing for London in a few days at furthest. I do not wonder in the least at your frequent blaming my indolence, it ought rather to be called ingratitude, and I am obliged to your goodness for softening so harsh an appellation ... However, as the most undeserving people in the world must sure have the vanity to wish somebody had a regard for them, so I need not wonder at my own, in being pleased that you care about me. You need not doubt, therefore, of having a first row in the front box of my little heart, and I believe you are not in danger of being crouded [sic] there; it is asking you to an old play, indeed, but you will be candid enough to excuse the whole piece for the sake of a few tolerable lines. (Gray, Correspondence, 34)

There are several areas of this letter which require a closer reading, as with his poems, this correspondence needs to be analysed as a work in its own right. Firstly, Gray's use of the word 'duty' in writing which perpetuates the friendship suggests a moral imperative. 'Duty' is deliberately contrasted by 'pleasure', however, created by his friend's physical presence.

Already within the first two lines we see the poet present both a sober dedication to friendship and the pleasure which results from such a bond. A few lines later and the language shifts to become more self-effacing – use of the terms ‘indolence’, ‘ingratitude’ and ‘appellation’ regarding the author set a hyperbolic moralising tone which is distanced and perhaps ironic. Gray plays on the anticipation of his seeing West and the prospect of intimacy: here the written word (‘a few tolerable lines’) substitutes physical presence.

14 In the final section of the letter the humble tone shifts to one far more grandiose, and Gray uses the language of the theatre as an allusion to his own life and emotional bearings. It is in this context that Gray makes his most open declaration of affection, suggesting West to have a primary (though not necessarily exclusive) place in his heart. Despite the use of metaphor the statement is undisguised and rendered yet more powerful by the phrase immediately following, that there are few who have attained such a position. The humbled sentiment returns by the end as Gray chastises his 'old play', yet Gray suggests their attachment to be emotionally worthwhile for those brief moments of affection: 'a few tolerable lines'. The theatrical metaphor suggests an intention to set a public stage for his emotions which also became manifest in his poetry – yet with West as its true audience. We can see his dedication to the form of love they share, his own benefits from the relationship, his passion toward the attachment and the relative rarity of such a bond in his life. The poet himself barely seems to compare to the subject of his adoration, and the language – though somewhat hyperbolic – is used earnestly and without sarcasm.

15 This is not to say the two always communicated openly, and Gleckner makes a careful note of instances in which the two communicate with one another in Latin, though their exclamations are usually similar to the sentiments expressed in English. The two also shared a considerable interest in Roman poetry during the reign of Caesar Augustus, especially genres such as elegies and verse epistles, used to express male friendship. Crucially, one poem from West to Gray, a translation of Catallus, laments the influence of a hostile society on personal love – obviously of some relevance to the two living so many centuries later (Gleckner, p. 110).

16 Despite their Latin effusions, in a letter from September 1740 Gray expresses himself openly once more, again toward the end of the communication:

... be assured, that your future state is to me entirely indifferent. Do not be angry, but hear me; I mean with respect to myself. For whether you be at the top of Fame, or entirely unknown to mankind; at the Council-table, or at Dick's coffee-house; sick and simple, or well and wise; whatever alteration mere accident works in you, (supposing it utterly impossible for it to make any change in your sincerity and honesty, since

these are conditions sine qua non) I do not see the likelihood of my not being yours ever. (Gray, *Correspondence*, 178)

Here we see Aristotelian 'philos' expressed clearly. Gray (again openly) remarks that he loves West for his virtues (which he explicitly states to be 'sincerity' and 'honesty') – without a regard for which their relationship could not function (Aristotle, p. 283). He goes to great pains to emphasise the lack of importance to West's condition beyond virtue – even his intellectual merits are unimportant compared to them. The extensive use of repetition is a rhetorical exercise designed to demonstrate the depth of his affection, and his reversal in the third part of the pattern (which goes good-bad; good-bad; bad-good) further suggests any condition to be arbitrary in the fact of virtue. Gray then goes on to make a powerful and overt declaration of eternal love, suggesting that he will be West's forever – a bold and open statement of his affection.

17 A lighter side to Gray's queer identity is explored in his letters to his friend Horace Walpole. Gray's letters to his friend were often based in some theme or other, and here Gray uses the imagery of death, imagining himself rotting in a graveyard before hearing from Walpole:

... when in comes your Letter, which (as I told you before) made me stretch my Skeleton-jaws in such a horse-laugh, that all the dead pop'd up their heads & stared: but to see the frowzy Countenances of the Creatures especially one Lady-Carcase, that made most hideous Grimaces, & would needs tell me, that I was a very uncivil Person to disturb a Woman of her Quality, that did me the honour to lie so near me ... in her hurry she had lost her Wedding Ring, which she was buried in; nay, she said, she believed she should fall in fits, & certainly that should be her Death: but I gave her a Rowland for her Oliver, 'i'gad: I told her Ladyship the more she stirred, the more she'd stink ... now your arrival only can deliver me from such a state of Separation; for, as your Soul is large enough for the both of us, it will be ill-natured of you, if you don't reanimate my Corps: at least I hope for a place in your heart ... (Gray, *Correspondence*, 11)

Toward the end of the letter we see affectionate language affirming his friendship, yet first we see Gray's fears: fears which are largely centred around the corpse of a married woman. Despite the humour of the letter, it is telling both that Gray is so appalled by the 'Lady-Carcase' and by his using sexual language in her doing him 'the honour to lie so near'. Opposite-sex sexuality is tied to death, and Gray suggests that to make love to a woman is to make love to a corpse. The woman's main concern is her wedding ring and the fact that she is so concerned for a material object is a sign of Gray's misogyny, which is also echoed in his later poetry. Walpole is the only one who can save him from this rancid allegory for marriage, and from thereon, away from the death that is to lie with women, he utilises romantic language - hoping for a place in his friend's heart.

18 Indeed, Gray's rebellion against sexuality in favour of romantic friendship was based in a stern distaste for women, both in form and intellect. This was, of course, reflected in his poetry. Prompted by Walpole's modest upset at having lost his favourite feline, Gray sent him 'Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes'. Despite the overtly humorous nature of the poem, the reality of their relationship impacts heavily upon the piece, and Gray's views on women are revealed halfway through:

The hapless Nymph with wonder saw:
A whisker first and then a claw,
With many an ardent wish,
She stretch'd in vain to reach the prize.
What female heart can gold despise?
What Cat's averse to fish?
(Gray, *Works*, 4)

Both cats (a symbol of selfish sensuality) and women are presented as feeble and helpless in the face of their own desires, be it for gold or for fish. Gray's stance draws on traditional enlightenment critiques of effeminacy / femininity and luxury. The misogyny present in this poem is clear and his graveyard letter to Walpole is echoed in this poem: women are simple, base, and materialistic.

19 The poem goes on:

Presumptuous Maid! with looks intent
Again she stretch'd, again she bent,
Nor knew the gulf between.
(Malignant fate sat by, and smil'd)
The slipp'ry verge her feet beguil'd,
She tumbled headlong in.

Eight times emerging from the flood
She mew'd to evr'y wat'ry God,
Some speedy aid to send.
No Dolphin came, no Nereid stirr'd:
Nor cruel Tom, nor Susan heard.
A Fav'rite has no friend!
(Gray, *Works*, 5)

Gray's love of antiquity is once again invoked with his poetic pagan personification of fate and his polytheistic reference to the divine ('evr'y wat'ry God'). In stating 'A Fav'rite has no friend' the poet hints both pets and women to be incapable of real friendship (echoing the viewpoint of Aristotle). The ode ends:

From hence, yes Beauties undeciev'd,
Know, one false step is ne'er retriev'd,
And be with caution bold.
Not all that tempts your wand'ring eyes

And heedless hearts, is lawful prize;
Nor all that glitters, gold.
(Gray, *Works*, 5)

This final stanza returns to Gray's view of women, somewhat patronising and traditionally misogynistic. Returning to the human the rhyme is tighter, though it could certainly be argued that his comparison of human females to female felines calls into question his view of women as fully human at all. Though Gray's misogyny is unmistakable in this Ode, it is not unique to it, yet forms a part of Gray's wider beliefs and desires: as we have seen in his letters, these beliefs and desires are based around attachments to men, rather than women.

20 It would have caused Gray some surprise to find his poetic devotion to romantic friendship taken up by a woman: specifically, the poet Anna Seward in the second half of the eighteenth century. Like Gray, Anna Seward devoted herself to a queer ideal. She shunned the prospect of sexual love and marriage in favour of an Aristotelian mode of friendship, one grounded in equality, esteem for virtue and need for cohabitation. Unlike the misogynistic Gray she had friends of both sexes, though she only pursued true romantic friendship with other women.

21 This has prompted many of those who have worked on Seward to label her as lesbian, yet at no point does she infer her relationships with women to either have erotic potential nor does any sexual behaviour form an identity or socio-political position on the part of the poet. Seward's romantic friendships were first (albeit briefly) explored by Lilian Faderman. Faderman was the first to use the term 'lesbian' in relation to Seward in *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1985), and though she neither confirms nor denies the possibility of an erotic connection in female romantic friendships, she utilises a term ('lesbian') which connects her to twentieth-century sexual identities and in an eighteenth-century context implies transgression (Faderman, 'Who Hid Lesbian History', 75). Since Faderman's work the poet has become a marginalised fixture of the lesbian poetic canon.

22 Yet Seward was not homosexual. Nor, as many scholars have ascertained, was she heterosexual. The argument in favour of Seward's heterosexuality has most recently been put forward by Teresa Barnard. Barnard's biography of Seward directly challenges the viewpoint that Seward's emotional motivations were toward women rather than men. Her work suggests that such an interpretation is the result of 'misreading' Seward's poetry and ignoring her unpublished letters (Barnard, 5). Barnard uses letters stored at the Johnson Birthplace Museum to support her assertion that the letters suggest Seward to have in fact been in favour of marriage, as she initially approved of the union between her friend Honora Sneyd and Richard Edgeworth (which we shall focus upon shortly) (Barnard, 15). However, in this

article we shall also examine archival research (from unpublished letters by the poet stored in London and at Yale University) to demonstrate the exact opposite: that Seward intensely opposed the institution of marriage, as well as fervently supporting same-sex friendship in her correspondence.

23 Throughout her poetry and elegiac works she violently rejects social norms on relationships and seeks to establish an alternative, idealising friendship and nonsexual love. The poet seeks to distance herself from mainstream institutions with a vigour she consciously recognised – it was a social and political position she referred to as her ‘stand’.

24 It was in Anna Seward’s sonnets - amongst the best-known of her works - that we find some of the most obvious poetic expressions of her radical views. Many of her sonnets centre around her friendship with Honora Sneyd, who had joined the Seward household as a child. The poet’s love for her was all-encompassing, and she would have a profound impact on her emotional life and her writings. When Sneyd’s father was later to withdraw her from the Seward’s home, after many years of their living together, Seward felt a profoundly painful sense of loss. After leaving the Seward household Honora Sneyd was to betray her by marrying and becoming Honora Edgeworth. This loss was more terrible than the last, and whilst in her letters she adopts a comparatively moderate tone in describing the arrangement, her sonnets from this period are wild and dramatic, and untempered in their use of highly emotive language:

HONORA, shou’d that cruel time arrive
When ‘gainst my truth thou should’st my errors poise,
Scorning remembrance of our vanish’d joys;
When for the love-warm looks, in which I live,
But cold respect must greet me, that shall give
No tender glance, no kind regretful sighs;
When thou shalt pass me with averted eyes,
Feigning thou see’st me not, to sting, and grieve
And sicken my sad heat, I cou’d not bear
Such dire eclipse of thy soul-cheering rays;
I cou’d not learn my struggling heart to tear
From thy lov’d form, that thro’ my memory strays;
Nor in the pale horizon of Despair
Endure the wintry and the darken’d days.
(Seward, *Original Sonnets*, 12)

Seward’s loss represents a failure to adhere to the Aristotelian ideal of sharing a home and therefore a life with one’s intimate friend. The sonnet is addressed to Honora, though whether she actually read it is difficult to ascertain. As the sonnets were not published until many years afterward it is likely they were intended as a means of private self-expression. Seward utilises strong imagery to signify the cooling of her own emotional landscape with the

departure of the warmth of her friend's presence: the poet's comparison of her subject to the sun grants her a centrality which lights all aspects of her life – physical, emotional and spiritual. The poet both conveys a fear of loss and the sense that she has had something worth holding on to. The positive language relating to Sneyd is both romantic and above bodily desire (with reference to their souls having connected). From this sonnet we see the emergence of a state of separation far more grievous to the poet – one which was not only physical, but also emotional.

25 The deep sense of fear conveyed in this poem was realised, and the friendship between the two was ended forever when Sneyd left for Ireland to be with her new husband. Though Barnard's evidence may suggest Seward to have been initially supportive of her companion, it was certainly not to last. The fear in her sonnets transforms into rage:

INGRATITUDE ,--how deadly is thy smart,
Proceeding from the Form we fondly love!
How light, compar'd, all other sorrows prove!
Thou shed'st a night of woe, from whence depart
The gentle beams of patience, that the heart
'Mid lesser ills illumine.--Thy Victims rove
Unquiet as the Ghost that haunts the grove
Where MURDER spilt the life-blood.--O! thy dart
Kills more than life, e'en all that makes it dear;
Till we the "sensible of pain" wou'd change
For Phrenzy, that defies the bitter tear,
Or wish, in kindred callousness, to range
Where moon-ey'd IDIOCY , with fallen lip,
Drags the loose knee, and intermitting step.
(Seward, *Original Sonnets*, 16)

The sonnet opens with the cry 'INGRATITUDE', suggesting rejection to be the most miserable of circumstances: "How light, compared, all other sorrows prove!" Seward compares the betrayal of friendship to murder. Seward literally presents herself as a victim (line 6) condemned to a ghostly nocturnal existence. This sentiment is carried on into the nineteenth sonnet in the collection, where Seward refers to Sneyd as a 'false friend' and even states that she has broken a vow to her.

26 Honora Sneyd was to perish eight years following her wedding, and the two never spoke again. The sonnets go on to display Seward's grief at hearing of her lost friend's death, and the anger is shifted to the husband, whom the poet blames both for Sneyd's actions, and even for her death itself: 'Sonnet XXXII' displays a theme of hostility, directed at the male rival but also at the faithless friend herself:

Behold him now his genuine colours wear,
That specious false-one, by whose cruel wiles

I lost thy amity; saw thy dear smiles
 Eclips'd; those smiles, that used my heart to cheer,
 Wak'd by the grateful sense of many a year
 When rose thy youth, by Friendship's pleasing toils
 Cultured; - but Dying! - O! for ever fade
 The angry fires. - Each thought, that might upbraid
 Thy broken faith, which yet my soul deploras,
 Now as eternally is past and gone
 As are the interesting, the happy hours,
 Days, years, we shared together. They are flown!
 Yet long must I lament thy hapless doom,
 Thy lavish'd life and early hasten'd tomb.
 (Seward, *Original Sonnets*, 34)

Faderman uses the poem as an example of Seward's intense hatred toward Edgeworth, asserting that she blamed him for Sneyd's death (Faderman, *Surpassing*, 136). In these sonnets, however, he as a subject is responsible not only for Sneyd's death, but also her betrayal of female friendship. Sonnet XXXII opens with an invitation to Sneyd and the reader to join in the author's judgement of the subject: 'Behold him now', for the poet refers to her in the second person when she states 'I lost thy amity'. The author appears to be referring to a fictional and idealised version of the subject, as imagined in her own mind after her friend's early death. Once again the language points the melodramatic contrast between the female victim Sneyd and the false villain Edgeworth, one being 'dear', the other 'cruel'.

27 'Sonnet XXXII' has another contrast, one which extends beyond the two individuals: that of friendship and of marriage. Seward would not only mourn Sneyd, but the prior destruction of their friendship, which is referred to directly as 'cultured' by the years and a source of great pleasure in the past. Even after Honora's death, the speaker has to quell her rising resentment at her beloved's 'broken faith', presumably as a result of prioritizing her marital vows. Here Seward presents friendship as a higher form of love, one which also entails vows and fidelity. This elegy ends on a bleak note, with the final rhyming couplet of 'doom' and 'tomb', terms which cannot spare her, however 'cultured' and 'lavish'd' the subject may have been. For the time being, both Friendship and Sneyd are in the grave.

28 However, Seward was not to be deterred indefinitely. Her letters share the same commitment to friendship and aversion to marital vows we have seen in her sonnets. In a letter from her youth Seward states:

"It is true, the chances are extremely against a woman ever marrying, who resolves not to approach the altar of Hymen without she is led thither by a man she prefers to all the rest of his sex. But, to a female mind, that can employ itself ingeniously, that is capable of friendship, that is blessed with affluence, where are the evils of celibacy?"
 (Seward, *Poetical Works*, cxciii)

Seward's near-worship of celibacy here – especially via Hymen – establishes her desires as outside of the scope of sexuality. Though Seward is careful not to refuse all marriage outright, it is a theme she repeats many times throughout her published letters, and one which is amplified in her unpublished, unedited ones.

29 One such letter – stored at the British Library – shows her to lose yet another friend in circumstances similar to the ones which lost her Honora Sneyd. Seward writes: “Since I opposed Mrs. Smith’s wish a year ago to marry with ruinous imprudence, she has never deigned to come near me - & resisted all her father’s requests that she wd. accept the offers of reconciliation wh. I made ...” (Seward, MSS Add. 46400 f. 305). This undiscovered detail is a rare instance of Seward directly and clearly detailing such a dispute, and proves that she would never withhold her opposition to the women around her becoming wedded – even if it meant a mortal wound in her relationship.

30 Seward’s most overt and startling letters, however, are to be found in the archives at Beinecke library at Yale, addressed to a figure almost entirely overlooked by those investigating the life of the poet – a woman named Sophia Weston. In the Seward-Weston letters the poet firmly and unapologetically announces her opposition to marriage, her expectations on her female friends and even her previously unacknowledged reputation as a dangerous hazard for young women.

31 One of the first letters at Yale was written six years after Honora Sneyd’s death, and gives a great deal of insight into the scars her desires had left on both her emotional state and her reputation:

But O Sophia can you wonder if I wish to steel my heart against its native tenderness, when ever friendship seeks to engage it? – Consider how bitter have been my disappointments – that soreness and jealousy are their natural consequences – You must not wonder that I say to myself – Why shou’d I follow the [illegible word] fire of professed amity, which have so often led my peace into whirl-pools, & quicksands? ... From the time that the world began to say ill-natured things of me, & to judge harshly of a conduct, whose motives they cou’d not adequately know, I never sought the Friendship of any body ... my very soul revolted from the idea that others shou’d suffer the most [illegible word] species of mortification on my account ... You say, Sophia, that you have purchas’d my amity by sacrifices. There is extreme pain in for me in this idea. (Seward, MSS OSBORN C202)

Seward’s private assertion as to the damage done to her reputation is astonishing in a figure widely regarded in our own time as having been well-respected and inoffensive. Seward had established her queer views and had to endure the resultant gossip and slander. In the letters Seward describes her decision not to marry as a: “Nice & hazardous state!” (Seward, MSS OSBORN C202) Seward’s queer desire was not applied on an ad-hoc basis to whichever

women gained her trust. It was an active and conscious socio-political position. In another of the letters stored at Yale she demonstrates the fundamental incompatibility of friendship and marriage, and makes clear her own position:

These horrid Men, with their humors, & their pride, are so continually the annihilation of their wives' former friendships, that when first Miss Rogers sought mine, I confess'd to her an unwillingness to pledge my amity from that unpleasant consciousness. Few women are generous enough to make my stand for the Friend against male-caprice. (Seward, MSS OSBORN C202)

This statement directly reveals Seward's belief that marriage was always an impediment to friendship and that she was unwilling to befriend those who were likely to betray her or put her second on account of the priority of their marital vows: all of which she acknowledges as 'my stand'. This statement shows a political devotion to friendship manifest in social identity. The Yale letters go on to show the breakdown of the friendship between Seward and Weston, and they indicate that history in fact repeated itself: Weston betrayed Seward for a sexual relationship.

32 Commitment to queer friendship came at a high price, and both Gray and Seward suffered damage to their reputations and – as we have seen – even lost the love of those closest to them. The decline of nonsexual love was something each fought bitterly against, but it was not a battle they could win - their identities remained marginalised and each would be continually disappointed. As Seward states in a letter she wrote as a young woman: “We swear eternal truth – but say, my friend / What day, next week, th' eternity shall end?” (Seward, *Poetical Works*, xlvi).

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Revisit but not Revise: Friendship and the Romantic Imperative

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Abstract:

Popular culture apparently feels the need to return, yet again, to Harry's and Sally's statement that "men and women can't be friends" (*When Harry met Sally*) in another of Hollywood's romantic comedies. *Friends with Benefits*, as a close relative of the iconic *When Harry met Sally*... in terms of theme and plot, is not only revealing with regard to concepts of friendship and/as opposed to romance. The romantic imperative it constructs and represents is certainly a gendered imperative, as well: The crucial issue is the avoidance of romance in a specific constellation, namely cross-sex friendship between two heterosexual individuals – attempts at which, the films suggest, are doomed to failure. In this sense the narratives are driven by (the question of) a "romantic imperative", that is by debating and depicting the unavoidability of falling in love. *When Harry met Sally* and *Friends with Benefits* both participate in the "contemporary phrasings" which, as Victor Luftig puts it, "define male/female friendship according to what it is not". Concepts such as "'just friends,' 'only friends,' 'not lovers'" all "in effect describe friendship negatively" (1) and testify to our lack of conceptions of male-female relations outside heteronormative frameworks. The films' plots confirm those frameworks in denying alternatives to heterosexual romance. I would like to suggest that at the core of the "friends turned lovers" theme is a particular dynamic of likeness and difference, and that the narration of a process of transition from friendship to romance allows a production of difference that serves certain purposes.

How to Fail to Stay Friends: Romantic Imperatives Revisited

1 They meet. They decide not to become romantically involved. They sleep with each other. And then they cannot be friends any more. In 1989 they were called Harry and Sally and their struggles over friendship vs. romance have become proverbial, even commonplace. In 2011, they are called Dylan and Jamie and it seems that little has changed. Obviously, popular culture feels the need to return, yet again, to Harry's statement that "men and women can't be friends" (*When Harry met Sally*, 00:11:30) in another of Hollywood's romantic comedies. *Friends with Benefits* (2011, dir. Will Gluck), as a close relative of the iconic *When Harry met Sally*... (1989, dir. Rob Reiner) in terms of theme and plot, is not only revealing with regard to concepts of friendship and/as opposed to romance. The romantic imperative it constructs and represents is certainly a gendered imperative, as well: The crucial issue is the avoidance of romance in a specific constellation, namely cross-sex friendship between two heterosexual individuals – attempts at which, the films suggest, are doomed to failure. In this sense the narratives are driven by (the question of) a "romantic imperative"¹, that is by debating and depicting the unavoidability of falling in love.

¹ The term "romantic" is here not supposed to designate the Romantic period – as in Friedrich Schlegel's "Romantic imperative", explained, for instance, in Frederick C. Beiser's *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept*

2 When Harry met Sally and *Friends with Benefits* both participate in the “contemporary phrasings” which, as Victor Luftig puts it, “define male/female friendship according to what it is not”. Concepts such as “‘just friends,’ ‘only friends,’ ‘not lovers’” all “in effect describe friendship negatively” (1) and testify to our lack of conceptions of male-female relations outside heteronormative frameworks. The films’ plots confirm those frameworks in denying alternatives to heterosexual romance. I would like to suggest that at the core of the “friends turned lovers” theme is a particular dynamic of likeness and difference, and that the narration of a process of transition from friendship to romance allows a production of difference that serves certain purposes. These purposes are the affirmation of the privileged status of heterosexual romance and, contributing to this affirmation, a replacing of likeness with difference that can be read as expressing the need for otherness that Jean Baudrillard attributes to contemporary society. I would also like to debate, however, if maybe the films are not as single-minded as they appear to be. The dominant impulse is certainly to turn a relation that is difficult to grasp in terms of conventional gender concepts into something well-known and well-established, i.e. heterosexual romance. “Friendship” as starting point of the transitional process, however, is also the state which enables the transition in the first place, and is thus an essential part of the result. If those narratives – and others of their kind – want friendship to imply romance, do they not also want romance to imply friendship? If so, there is not only a need for difference that can be read in those stories; there is also – indirectly expressed – a need for likeness which would soften conventional boundaries. Ultimately, though, the unification of friendship and romance and the transcending of the paradigm of difference run into the same dead end that versions of “happily ever after” typically face: *Friends with Benefits* is no more “a movie about what happens after the big kiss” (Jamie in *Friends with Benefits*, 00:25:14) than *When Harry met Sally...* is. The characters in *Friends with Benefits* voice dissatisfaction with existing modes of partnership, but the film can only *announce*, in its final scenes, the union of friendship and romance, but it cannot represent an actual update of relationship models. The impulse to leave clichés behind is expressed, but is dominated by the imperative yet paradoxical happy ending of romance, which cannot represent what it affirms.

Same, Self, and Other

3 “Starting with modernity, we have entered an era of production of the Other”, Jean Baudrillard argues. “It is no longer a question of killing, of devouring or seducing the Other,

of Early German Romanticism (cf. 19f.) – but rather “romance” and “romantic” in their everyday use as terms that refer to narratives and themes related to love and relationships.

of facing him, of competing with him, of loving or hating the Other. It is first of all a matter of producing the Other” (“Plastic Surgery for the Other”). Our “entire cultural movement” is driven by “a frenzied differential construction of the Other”, a construction which actually consists in a “perpetual extrapolation of the Same through the Other” that ultimately serves “self-seduction to the extent that this likeness virtually excludes the Other and is the best way to exclude a seduction which would emerge from somewhere else” (ibid.). Both likeness *and* difference thus appear as sources of seduction in Baudrillard’s reflections.

4 They do so, too, in romantic comedies of the “Harry and Sally”-kind. There is the “seductive lure of like-mindedness” – which Claire Colebrook names as one of the structural aspects of friendship (109) – as well as hetero-sexual attraction.² That the couples start out from the likeness often allocated to friendship – where people find ‘kindred spirits’ – to the difference allocated to romance – where people find their ‘counterparts’ – quite tellingly illustrates Baudrillard’s point about a quasi-compulsive production of difference: A “frenzied differential construction of the Other” might be read in the fact that romantic comedies continue to turn symmetrical into complementary relations.³

5 To turn friendship into romance is a production of otherness also in the literal theoretical sense: It means to instantiate an other, an object of desire that structures and thus stabilises a relation that is otherwise hard to grasp. Friendship as likeness is not based on difference, difference being “the mark of the signifier” (Belsey 10), and thus, one might say, structurally opposed to the symbolic as we know and employ it. Stories like Harry’s and Sally’s and Jamie’s and Dylan’s cannot end with friendship: Friendship appears, in contrast to romance, as the ‘non-symbolic’ – the non-symbolisable and non-symbolised – relation, the relation that those narratives are puzzled over and that they abandon in favour of a relation based on difference and thus in tune with the symbolic order. The meaning of romance might be taken for granted rather than spelt out, yet where friendship as likeness remains as mysterious as the pre-symbolic and hence structurally inconceivable inside a symbolic framework, romance as complementary relation and thus instance of difference generates meaning. That we experience far less difficulties in conceptualising male/male- and female/female-friendship is certainly attributable to the fact that those relations are in a sense “protected” by heteronormative standards: Friendship does here not compete with the

² “Empirically, you are attractive”, Harry explains to Sally shortly after they meet for the first time (00:10:23); when Dylan asks Jamie, who visits him at his office, to join him for lunch, she immediately assumes he is asking her out (cf. 00:20:15).

³ When “friendship is figured as dialogue or cooperation between men and women, expressions of sexual identity may at least be posited as coequal, rather than inherently oppositional or hierarchical”, Luftig argues (9). This illustrates our intuitive configuration of friendship as symmetrical and romance as complementary.

romantic union as the ‘default case’. Rather, those standards exclude a romantic/sexual relation in this constellation, or at least make it appear an “exception to the rule”.

6 Accordingly, “sources to which one would turn for a true story of friendship between the sexes” – that is, for a representation and thus symbolisation of friendship – are rare, as Victor Luftig points out (cf. Luftig 2). “‘Friendship’”, he says,

marks a challenge to basic and accustomed categories for relations between the sexes. [...] ‘Friendship’ between the sexes is, and has been for some time, a fundamental threat to the stability and separateness of the prevalent categories for gender relations; it challenges the boundaries of socially acknowledged interaction between men and women. [...] Where discourse would validate only a few mutually exclusive categories for relations between the sexes, ‘friendship’ invites the likelihood of exceptions, trespassing across borders that commonly accepted expressive modes would preserve.
(3)

This kind of friendship and with it a category Luftig speculates might be called “heterosocial” draws “attention primarily to the social, public significance of dynamics whose sexual identity is hardly ever challenged” (7). It holds subversive potential because “it may help show heterosexuality to be diverse”, so that it may “be figured as no more or less stable than other sexual identities” (8).

7 Before the protagonists are officially turned into a “proper” romantic couple, their relation is rather obscure. The films themselves seem unable to make sense of its nature. Apart from Dylan’s and Jamie’s official agreement to “stay friends” even if they sleep with each other and Jamie’s later observation that what is important about friendship is that “friends don’t go talking shit about each other” (01:21:35), *Friends with Benefits* does not even get close to making a coherent suggestion about the nature of friendship other than suggesting it is different from romance. *When Harry met Sally...* does not contribute a lot to this question, either. It has one great advantage in terms of defining the relationships it portrays, though: It excludes sexual from friendly relations and thus has a simple tool at its disposal to sort out who is a romantic couple, and what makes a romantic couple a romantic couple. Right from the beginning, in Harry’s and Sally’s (in-)famous debate on the journey from Chicago to New York, sex is seen as what precludes friendship between “men and women” (00:11:36).⁴ The night that they spend together is the turning point that shifts their relation to romance; no further definitions are needed. Things are not quite as easy for *Friends with Benefits*. Because the mere fact of sleeping with each other is not sufficient any more to define romance, the film goes to great lengths to make sex outside of romance appear a technicality (a business-like deal: “No relationship. No emotions. Just sex.” – “So I guess we

⁴ *When Harry met Sally...* does not bother to point out that it only considers heterosexual relations.

should just start.” – “What’s wrong with the couch? It’s less emotional.” – “The bedroom has better light.” (00:28:00-28:30)).

8 The dubiousness of Harry’s and Sally’s and Dylan’s and Jamie’s relation before they are officially a couple is also conveyed through the reactions of the protagonists’ (same-sex) friends. Harry and Sally are, repeatedly, prompted to explain to their acquaintances who “don’t understand this relationship”⁵ (00:41:38) that they are “just friends” (00:50:02). Dylan’s colleague Tommy refuses to believe that ‘friends with benefits’ is a realisable concept (the reason, for him, is that all women are unable to exclude emotional attachment from sexual relations): “She’s a girl”, he insists. “Sex always means more to them even if they don’t admit it” (00:40:30). Both films in this respect assign almost the same conventionalised roles to their male and female protagonists, respectively. Even though *Friends with Benefits* seems to be trying to add details that dissolve the all-too-obvious sentimental-girl-rational-boy-combination, it ultimately cannot resist placing its protagonists in precisely those categories.

“Shut up, Katherine Heigl!”

9 In particular at the film’s beginning, *Friends with Benefits* attempts to emphasise parallels in its protagonists’ emotional states. Both are shown to be broken up with right at the beginning, making them, independently, announce that they are going to “shut” themselves “down emotionally”(00:04:33). Both are presented as “career types”, Jamie being a headhunter and Dylan the one that is recruited. When they first meet, though, a piece of dialogue already hints at Jamie’s turn into the conventional romance heroine, whose genuine feelings for the hero finally make him admit his “true”, caring nature.⁶ When Jamie picks up Dylan’s suitcase when she is meeting him at the airport to convince him to accept the offered job, he asks her: “You’re really gonna carry my bag? You’re that girl?”, and Jamie promptly replies: “I’m gonna change your life. I’m *that* girl” (00:06:53-06:57). Still, she acts as the sober one at first, excluding potential romantic involvement between her and Dylan right away:

Dylan: “Hey, I was thinking of getting some lunch. Do you know a place?”

Jamie: “Are you asking me out?”

Dylan: “Whoa, I’m not asking you out. I’m asking you to show me a restaurant.”

⁵ “You enjoy being with her?”, Harry’s friend Joe asks, “you find her attractive? [...] And you’re not sleeping with her?” When Harry agrees to all aspects, Joe concludes, “You’re afraid to let yourself be happy” (00:41:40-41:49).

⁶ As Janice Radway says about the typical romance hero, his “tenderness [...] cannot help but reveal itself when he learns to trust and love a truly good woman” (128f.).

Jamie: "I mean, I'm the only friend you have in New York. You don't wanna complicate that."

Dylan: "I know. I'm not asking you out."

Jamie: "I mean, sure, we'd have fun, roll around, get into some erotic humiliation fantasy..."

Dylan: "Erotic?"

Jamie: "...but it'd all blow up in our faces, end badly, and we'd never speak to each other again."

Dylan: "I'm not fucking asking you out! I swear to God!"

Jamie: "Okay...you don't like me like that. You don't have to be so mean about it."

Dylan: "I'm sorry, I didn't..."

Jamie: "Haha, God, you're such a girl. Come on, it's my treat." (00:20:15-47)

Despite the obvious note of paranoia, Jamie manages to make Dylan look like a fool in this exchange. She quickly loses the upper hand throughout the course of the film, though: She is characterised by her mother as a "true love sort of girl" who looks like a "princess" with her hair braided.⁷ Most significantly, it is her who, just like Sally, ends up "wanting more". Dylan's prediction when they set the parameters for their explicitly non-romantic sexual relation – "I know how you girls get" (00:27:30) – turns out to be true after all. Just as Sally does when she sleeps with Harry, Jamie experiences a crucial moment which is shown to break her composure.

10 Together with Dylan, she visits his family home, which is run by his sister Annie, who takes care of her son Sam and Dylan's father, who suffers from dementia. The film clearly commends Annie as a character: Her perceptiveness anticipates Dylan's feelings for Jamie long before Dylan admits them himself. It is quite telling that Annie, in taking care, as it were, of the children and the sick, also fulfils a stereotypically "female" role, and is portrayed as fully accepting this role. Jamie, whose own mother is portrayed as highly unreliable and who does not know her own father. The issue of who Jamie's father is is discussed repeatedly between Jamie and her mother – unsuccessfully, since Jamie's mother does not remember. Jamie's mother's unreliability puts Jamie in the position of the typical romance heroine, who more often than not is portrayed as being socially isolated at the beginning of the narrative (cf. Radway 134)., seems to quickly find her place in the family. She spends a night with Dylan which, the film suggests, is quite different from the ones before. Missing all the "technical talk" and comic effects from before – "My chin is ticklish", "I don't like dirty talk", "I keep my socks on" (00:28:48-29:03) – the scene is more or less an average mainstream Hollywood love scene, the difference reminiscent of the difference Sally makes

⁷ Jamie's reaction to a romantic movie she watches with Dylan, for example, confirms this assessment: She knows the final dialogue of the happy end by heart and concludes, when the film is over: "God I wish my life was a movie sometimes" (00:24:24-24:45).

when she talks about “making love to somebody when it is making love”(01:00:56). Just as in *When Harry met Sally...*, the scene arises from the female protagonist’s emotional disappointment – Jamie just being “dumped” (01:02:04), Sally learning that her ex-boyfriend is getting married – and it is suggested that in their request for emotional support, Jamie and Sally respectively initiate serious romantic and physical involvement. There is a shift in expectations and responses after this turn of events. The next morning is shown to be an interplay of caring gestures from Jamie – removing a smudge from Dylan’s chin during breakfast, trying to cheer him up with regard to his father’s illness – and evasive reactions from Dylan – changing the topic when his nephew Sam mentions Jamie, refusing to talk to Jamie about his feelings (just as when in *When Harry met Sally...*, Harry signals that he is refusing emotional involvement). When Jamie confronts him about “acting weird” and asks him, “Is this about what happened the other night?”, her reaction clearly appears as somewhere between annoyed and seriously hurt when Dylan cuts off the topic by insisting, “What, sex? You know that doesn’t mean anything. [...] And I haven’t been acting weird” (01:13:05-13:20). Just as Harry backs out of potential commitment, Dylan is presented as being unable to admit romantic feelings. The film voices this opinion through Dylan’s sister Annie, whose sisterly advice positions her as the clear-sighted and Dylan as the overly-defensive one. When she tries to demonstrate to him that he and Jamie should be a couple, he insists: “I could never go out with her. She’s too fucked up. Okay, she doesn’t want a boyfriend. She’s too damaged. Magnum P.I. couldn’t solve the shit going on in her head” (01:15:36-01:15:43). Jamie, accidentally overhearing this, hurriedly leaves Dylan’s family home. Now, at the latest, both Jamie and Dylan fit the templates the audience knows from *When Harry met Sally...* and related narratives.

11 All of this is, quite obviously, a rather unoriginal repetition of commonplaces concerning gender and genre stereotypes: the heroine struggling with “emotional isolation”, but “compassionate, kind, and understanding”, the hero hurt by previous negative experiences and thus acting “harsh” (cf. Radway 127-129). It affirms conventional models of gender roles and modes of partnership. It portrays the “defeat” of less conventional relations and gender identities – *Friends with Benefits* even more so, maybe, than *When Harry met Sally...*, because it abandons the “headhunter Jamie” for the “emotional Jamie”, whereas Sally does not change much throughout the film. Both Harry and Dylan change, of course, when they finally come to admit their respective affections at the end of the respective films, but this change is generally included in the formulae of popular romance (cf., for example Radway 128).

12 In particular in *Friends with Benefits*, the force of romance is emphasised by a double strategy: Its protagonists are presented as being aware and tired of romantic clichés. „I really have to stop buying into this bullshit Hollywood cliché of true love”, Jamie announces at the beginning of the film. “Shut up, Katherine Heigl! You stupid liar!” (00:04:22-00:04:28). Right after Dylan has moved to New York, he and Jamie exchange their annoyance with ex-partners, claims to “stay friends” after break-ups, and relationships in general:

Jamie: “You’re emotionally unavailable? [...] Oh my God, I’m emotionally damaged. I haven’t seen you at the meetings.”

Dylan: “I’m *done* with the relationship thing.” Jamie: “Girl, you are preaching to the congregation!” (00:20:50-21:22)

Yet in spite of those claims and their explicit intention to have sex like “playing tennis” (00:25:23) – with no emotions involved – the two end up as a happy couple. Thus, the protagonists and with them, the film supposedly avoid “false innocence” (Eco 67) and at the same time strengthen the concept of all-powerful, inevitable romance – the message seems to be that love conquers all, even those who do not believe in it.

“Men and Women can’t be Friends”

13 There are, of course, the conventions of the romantic genre and narration in general to consider. As Victor Luftig points out:

One of the greatest challenges to representing friendship [...] is a set of narrative conventions according to which friendship must always give way for the sake of narrative closure. *When Harry met Sally...* is, from its title to its final scene, a romantic comedy whose narrative is impelled by attraction first suppressed, then acknowledged, then countered, then consummated [...]. The film is designated so that, as a comedy, it can *only* end in sexual union. If the couple at the film’s center were to remain ‘just friends’, there would be no way for it to end happily – indeed, there might be no way for it to end at all. *When Harry met Sally...* illustrates the continuing pertinence of a problem registered by a number of [...] texts [...]: how can a story remain genuinely about friendship, rather than position friendship as a merely temporary stage on the way to something the story is more essentially about? (13; emphasis in original)

Friends with Benefits, as a recent Hollywood production, illustrates not only that the romance genre still employs the same formulae⁸, but also its restrictedness with regard to interpersonal relations, romantic, sexual, and otherwise – friendship can only end in romance and romance is primarily heterosexual in nature.

14 *When Harry met Sally...*, in its initial debates about the possibility of “friendship between men and women”, does not even consider same-sex relations: Harry’s and Sally’s

⁸ Corinne Saunders expresses the genre’s unbroken vitality in saying that the “timelessness” of romance makes it “an enduring mode of infinite potential” which is indeed “thriving as we enter the twenty-first century” (539f.).

discussion assumes heterosexual attraction as natural automatism (“Men and women can’t be friends”, Harry clarifies, “because no man can be friends with a woman that he finds attractive.” It is irrelevant if the woman in question returns those feelings, since the “sex thing is already out there so the friendship is ultimately doomed, and that is the end of the story” (00:11:36-12:23)).

15 Friends with Benefits, being not quite as narrow in scope, does include homosexual relations, with Dylan’s colleague Tommy as a representative. Yet due to the eccentricity of Tommy as a character, those relations are nevertheless marked as a “special case”. Also, the considerations are limited to male relations: Not once are female homosexual relations even mentioned. Tommy is clearly meant to be a comic character, constantly shown trying to dissuade others from their heterosexual orientation. “Are you sure you’re not gay?” he repeatedly asks Dylan (00:19:05), “Any of you gay?” his basketball team, adding: “Not even you? Oh, come on, man. Come talk to me after. Give me five minutes of your time. I might be able to let you see some reason” (00:40:00:40:07). Tommy does have a short moment in which he suddenly fulfils a serious function. It does not last long, though; at the end of the scene, the character is set back into a comic and exaggerated mode. He is advising Dylan that his arrangement with Jamie cannot be kept up without emotional consequences:

Dylan: “What do you know about women anyway?”[...]

Tommy: “[...] I would be with women to my dying day, but [...] I’m strict-aly dick-aly.”

Dylan: “So it’s always just about sex then?”

Tommy: “No. I’ve been in love. I went down that rabbit hole. You know what I discovered? It’s not who you want to spend Friday night with, it’s who you want to spend all day Saturday with. [...]”

Dylan: “Yeah but then it’s every Saturday for the rest of your life...”

Tommy: “It’s ok. You don’t get it. It’s no big deal. But you will. One day, you’ll meet someone and it’ll literally take your breath away. Like you can’t *breathe*.

Like, no *oxygen* to the *lungs*. Like a *fish*–

Dylan: “–yeah I get it Tommy.” (00:40:17-41:38)

Tommy’s proclaimed promiscuity in combination with his views on love indirectly implies that the inevitable failure of an arrangement like Jamie’s and Dylan’s is not that much due to the nature of romantic attraction, but mostly due to the fact that women are involved. In this case, we would be confronted with a construction of femininity rather than heterosexuality. Still, it is hard to judge which stance the film actually takes in this regard, since Tommy is the only concession the film makes to the diversity of romantic and sexual relations, and this concession only takes male homosexual relations into consideration. With Tommy’s obvious eccentricity added on top of that, the view the film presents on interpersonal relations ultimately stays a heteronormative one. There are some instances where Dylan’s sexual

identity is thematised. When Tommy and Dylan meet for the first time, Tommy immediately assumes – “art director, and, you know...” (00:18:48) – that Dylan shares his sexual orientation. In another instance, talking about his teenage idols, Dylan says, “I was a little into Harry Potter back then”. When Jamie comments by asking, “Were you also gay back then?” he answers, rather sharply, “Harry Potter doesn’t make you gay!” (00:34:26-34:30). These are scenes, though, which ultimately confirm heterosexuality as the norm by associating other possibilities with comic effects.

16 *When Harry met Sally...* provides its protagonists each with one major same-sex friend, Marie and Jess. *Friends with Benefits* does not parallel its central cross-sex friendship with same-sex friendships in the same way. *When Harry met Sally...* takes clear and simplistic stances in this regard: Friendship excludes sex, whereas sex marks romance; friendship is what holds between individuals of the same sex, romance (inevitably) between those of different sexes. Because *Friends with Benefits* does not stick to the first principle, it cannot quite as easily “define friendship” at least “negatively”. Ultimately, though, it does return to *When Harry met Sally*’s categories in suggesting that any relation that does not keep friendship and sex apart – that does not restrict sexual to romantic relations – must fail.

Update the Fairytale

17 Which place, if any, does friendship hold in this affirmation of (heterosexual) romance both as a genre and as a model for interpersonal relations? Even though the films experience difficulties conceptualising friendship, they do seem to share the idea that friendship is in some way about conversation, about exchanges of opinion and about lending company to each other. Harry and Sally, when they meet again in New York after several years and decide that they are “becoming friends now” (00:32:52), are shown in phone conversations, talks in the park, discussions over dinner tables on past relationships, dates, and trivia. The same goes for Dylan and Jamie – discussing music, “who’s your type”, stories from their youth. Both couples, who are shown to have skipped the romantic part, thus confirm, albeit often on a rather trivial level, Claire Colebrook’s theoretical conception of friendship as something that lies “beyond” seduction, that is more advanced than romantic or erotic involvement: She conceptualises “the passage from seduction to friendship” as “the theoretical ideal”⁹ because “rather than relating to the other as one who promises a way to pure plenitude, rather than relating to the other *sexually* as a conduit to *jouissance*, one would allow the other to stand

⁹ By “theoretical ideal“, Colebrook means to express the structural parallels and interactions between friendship, seduction and theory. Although scientific theory is not an issue here, her model of “converser” fits the fictional representations of friendship discussed here quite well.

apart as a converser rather than an object” (111; emphasis in original). In more simple terms, it is precisely this function as “converser”, as undemanding companion and confidant for exchanges of opinion, that is expressed as the value of friendship – and in particular, of friendship as opposed to romance – by the protagonists. Their great advantage is that they can “tell each other things” precisely *because* they are not a couple: Dylan, in a discussion with Jamie, for example says “Now see? If you were my girlfriend, I couldn’t tell you to shut up right now” (00:37:30); Harry celebrates his relation to Sally as “freeing” because, since he is not romantically involved, he can “say anything to her” (00:42:09-42:12). Colebrook’s theoretical deliberations reflect this idea of liberation when she says that to transcend the mechanisms of seduction is to “abandon[...] the ethics of dependence that would strive to obtain the other as object who would then guarantee our pleasure” (111).

18 “The tradition of courtly love”, in contrast, “is one of sexual difference and seduction” (111). The object of desire, Colebrook states with reference to Lacan, is “beyond dialogue” (*ibid.*), which is why it can become the object of desire in the first place: it is unattainability which constitutes desire, and desire which constitutes unattainability (cf., for example, Žižek 4). It is, both in Colebrook’s reflections and in the narratives discussed here, presented as the great advantage of friendship that it foregoes this chase in which both participants are denied autonomy and non-relational individuality and that thus holds the potential of a relation in which partners are “liberated from [their] definition through an other” (109). “Indeed”, Colebrook formulates, “if you are to be my friend, if you are to regard me as a worthy other, then I need to be more than a helpful, recognised and fellow human; there must be that in me which resists appropriation” (115f.). Appropriation of the other, though, is what the narratives ultimately cannot resist. They succumb to seduction – are seduced by their genre, one might say – after all, and thus to a situation where partners are driven by the “desire that one be an object for an other” (Colebrook 113). Harry’s and Sally’s and Dylan’s and Jamie’s development is a vivid illustration of the centrality of seduction which means that “we speak and live always with a sense of the desire the other directs towards us, that we live our very selves through the enigmatic gaze of the other” (Colebrook 113).

19 Psychoanalysis is said to grasp “the truth of the ego’s relational being” when positing “the primacy of seduction” (cf. Colebrook 112). Indeed the primacy of seduction is, as is exemplified by the two stories discussed here, evident in narrations of this kind (in romantic narratives in general and in those of the “Harry and Sally”-kind in particular) and maybe essential to narration as such. “Narrative is on the side of desire and opposed to the death drive” Rob Lapsley and Michael Westlake explain (193); it is so because it stages the struggle

for obtaining the object of desire and it suggests, in its happy ending, the success of this struggle; but it does not depict “ultimate satisfaction” but rather projects the final union of its lovers “to an imaginary time outside the text” in “the standard happy ending in which the lovers come together all set to live happily ever after” (195). It thus does and does not depict what is “unrepresentable” (193). Both films resolve the major conflict that arises between the couple towards the end of the movie, and as soon as this is accomplished, they end in the usual “happily ever after” of romantic comedy [...] that excludes the romantic union as such from representation.

20 In *When Harry met Sally...*, Harry, after finally realising that he is in love with Sally after all, runs to catch her at a New Year’s Party. When Sally refuses his declaration of love, explaining that “it doesn’t work this way”, Harry protests:

Harry: “Then what about this way: I love that you get cold when it’s 71 degrees out. I love that it takes you an hour and a half to order a sandwich. I love that you get a little crinkle above your nose when you’re looking at me like I’m nuts. I love that after I spend a day with you, I can still smell your perfume on my clothes, and I love that you are the last person I wanna talk to before I go to sleep at night. And it’s not because I’m lonely, and it’s not because it’s New Year’s Eve. I came here tonight because when you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.”

Sally gives in to this speech, saying: “You see? That is just like you Harry, you say things like that and you make it impossible for me to hate you!” When they kiss to “Auld Lang Syne” playing, Harry asks: “What does this song mean? My whole life, I don’t know what this song means.” And Sally, reminiscing their personal history, tells him: “It’s about old friends” (01:23:00-01:27:30). And with this – and the added information that the two marry a few months after – the film ends.

21 In *Friends with Benefits*, Dylan sets up flash mob for Jamie to a song they both like in order to apologise for rejecting her:

Dylan: “You said you wanted your life to be like a movie. [...] I messed up. I was scared. Look what happened with my mom and my dad. Of course I was scared. So I ruined it. Everything that happens in the day, all I can think is, ‘I can’t wait to tell Jamie about this’. When I see someone cursing, all I can picture is you blinking. And when I hear a kid’s been cured of cancer, I pray it’s not by that douchebag tree-hugging fucking doctor who ran out on you. [...] Hey, I miss you.”[...][Dylan kneeling]

Jamie: “Oh, no, no, no-“

Dylan: “-shut up, it’s not what you think. Jamie, will you be my best friend again?”

Jamie [laughing]: “That is so lame.”

Dylan: “Oh I know. That’s some Prince Charming shit though, right? [...] Look, I *can* live without ever having sex with you again. It’d be really hard. Hey, I want my best friend back – because I’m in love with her.”

Jamie: “Under one condition.”

Dylan: "Anything."
Jamie: "Kiss me." [...]
Jamie: "Okay. So. What do we do now?"
Dylan: "Have our first date." (01:34:44-01:38)

Friends with Benefits's tendencies are maybe a little less straightforward, since the film displays a certain awareness that what it is showing at its end is a beginning and not a final resolution. Still, the audience is obviously meant to think of Dylan and Jamie as a happy future couple.

22 Symbolisation thus ends when the struggles are resolved, representation and the romantic union not compatible. The narrative stops where romance proper begins. It is not essentially surprising to see language – representation – and the fulfilment of desire thus opposed: Signification is often seen as what "alienates" the subject and its needs, thus producing desire and preventing its fulfilment at the same time (cf. Belsey 57). This can also be transferred to the dynamics of friendship vs. romance: In Colebrook's reflections, "dialogue" is posited, as it were, as the "beyond of seduction" (it allows "the other to stand apart as a *converser* rather than an object" (emphasis added)). This implies that whatever it may be, romance is something else than dialogue and conversation. *Friends with Benefits* illustrates this nicely in the way it distinguishes love scenes between Dylan and Jamie into scenes of casual sex vs. scenes of lovemaking: When emotional attachment breaks its way through, as the film suggests, during the friends' visit with Dylan's family, there is none of the "touch my ears"-sort of talk that adds a comic angle to earlier love scenes between the two (cf., for example, 00:29:45-30:00). Following pop culture's commonplace¹⁰, the film suggests that true romance does not need words.

23 That leaves us at a point where we have to conclude that essentially, neither romance nor friendship are symbolisable, expressible in the language of the protagonists or the fiction as such.¹¹ Romance might be presented as the less puzzling relation – it is Harry's non-romantic/-sexual relation to Sally, for example, that Joe explicitly does "not understand". Yet what is well-known about romance are, ultimately, a) the conventions of the genre, and b) the struggles that lead to it and that enable the genre in the first place. There "can be little doubt", as Lapsley and Westlake say, that "our culture does want romance and the promise of happiness it brings" (180). It does not search for "mere friendship" and thus cannot contain itself with a relationship that must necessarily appear vague and unclear in a conceptual

¹⁰ As it is regularly expressed in song lyrics, for instance (think of Depeche Mode's "Enjoy the silence" or Ronan Keating's "Nothing At All", for example).

¹¹ Actual friendships might be seen to be made up out of conversation, but the concept itself is at odds with explanations.

framework that privileges romance and with it, an understanding of subjectivity through difference and otherness. Friendship maybe does not by definition disenable the reciprocal construction of subjectivity through the respective partners' gaze that conventional romantic models offer, but when it is conceptualised as "conversation" between ultimately independent individuals, it does not hold the same promise as romance does for "self-expression" (of which, as Lapsley and Westlake put it, "relations of love between individuals" are "held to be the supreme form" in western culture, 185).¹²

24 In this sense, it is quite fitting that Victor Luftig's examination of textual depictions of friendship is called "Seeing Together": The conversational structure attributed to friendship implies that one looks in the same direction, instead of looking at each other. There is less potential for the consolidation of subjective identity, at least no potential that is as well-established as the gaze of the romantic couple, who "only have eyes for each other". *Harry and Sally* and *Friends with Benefits* as chief examples of their genre confirm this analysis of culture's concepts of love and friendship; the latter one in particular, since it illustrates that the subject matter is still held to be of interest.

25 In spite of all the conventional and conventionalising impulses of the films, though, it should be taken into consideration that while friendship has to make way for romance in those narratives, romance is depicted as arising from friendship and as actually being indebted to a relation which does not hinge on the partners' difference, but rather on their likeness. In this genealogy from the "seeing together" of friendship to the "seeing each other" of romance, a valorisation of friendly dialogue is included after all. In *When Harry met Sally...*, this valorisation might be reduced to a short rhetorical gesture to "old friends" in the final scene, but *Friends with Benefits* puts friendship at the centre of its final dialogue and thus its happy ending: Dylan explicitly wants Jamie to be his best friend *and* his lover. In this, the film might be repeating a commonplace, but it does assign value to a relation of likeness and symmetry instead of sticking to complementary relations only. That a couple is depicted as being not only lovers, but also 'best friends' is hardly a revolutionary claim; yet the progress from friends to lovers that provides the material for romantic comedy does implicitly allow that interpersonal relations can be varied and (at least) two-dimensional. One might read Dylan's words in the final scene – "Everything that happens in the day, all I can think is, 'I can't wait to tell Jamie about this'" – as asking for more than the conventional romantic model includes: namely that dialogue and conversation should not be excluded from "happily ever after".

¹² A promise that, following Lacan, can never be fulfilled, since we have no control over the other's gaze: "When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that – You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see." (102f.)

26 “You gotta update your fairytale, baby”, Jamie’s mother informs Jamie towards the end of the film (01:28:11). In fact, *Friends with Benefits*, in contrast to *When Harry met Sally...*, does seem to feel the urge to update the concepts – gender- and plot-wise – that make up its narrative. We can see this in certain aspects of Jamie’s character – mostly her initial, supposedly dominant position with regard to Dylan – and in the awareness of its own genre conventions that the film voices through its characters’ initial attitude towards relationships. Phrases like the “bullshit Hollywood cliché of true love” that Jamie refers to express an awareness of stereotypes, to which to fall prey to would have to appear naive. In order to avoid this “false innocence”, the film starts out as if to abandon those stereotypes, making its central couple less chaste, more casual. By referring to its own species (“Hollywood love story”) as if from a meta-position, the film establishes a (pseudo-)distance towards its own genre which suggests that it will try to add a “new” twist to an “old” story.

27 The logic of “happily ever after” is perfidious, though. “Happily ever after” does and does not represent the ideal union: It *announces* the fulfilment of desire and thus simultaneously includes it into and excludes it from signification. It thus enjoys what Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* refers to as the “speaker’s benefit” (6), namely the benefit from the function of prophecy (cf. 7) that puts the speaker in the position to be the one to “pronounce a discourse that combines the fervour of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights”, the one to make “the proclamation of a new day to come” (7). The happy ending of *Friends with Benefits* evades having to present an *actual* update of romance and thus the obligation to really suggest what this merging of friendship and romance that it announces might look like. The paradigm of difference prevails and thus illustrates what Catherine Belsey refers to as “desire’s impossible project”:

Desire is desire of the other precisely as other, and it characteristically includes the longing for closure. The quest for closure represents the wish to master difference, the very alterity on which desire depends. This, in the end, not the unity of mind and body, nor unity within the subject, is desire’s impossible project. (37)

“Happily ever after” thus figures as a relief from signification but is also proof of its power. The beyond of signification, in which romance is positioned – even more so because it is set off from the conversational mode of friendship – is conceptualised as desirable, which is precisely why it remains and has to remain out of reach.

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