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Alan Bray


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ALAN BRAY



Winner of the 2004 Longman-History Today Book Award

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**Alan Bray : The Friend** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Friend:

18 of 20 people found the following review helpful. Subtlety in This Heterosexist Age Is Too Often Effacement By E. Garcia Reading reviews of Alan Bray's *The Friend* by some heterosexual critics--as by a few LGB ones also, I fear--is a dumbfoundingly astonishing experience. What book were these critics reading? Have they lost their critical faculties? Bray's book is largely a response to both John Boswell's (in)famous *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994) and its too predictably feral critics. Boswell contends that the eastern

"adelphopoiesis" (Greek, 'making brothers') rites are same-sex marriage ceremonies, whereas his critics aver they are merely ceremonies for ritual brotherhood or friendship (strictly platonic, little "p"). Addressing the corresponding western "ordo ad fratres faciendum" (Latin, 'rite for making brothers') and the joint tombs placed primarily in churches memorializing such "brothers" or friends, Bray declares BOTH parties wrong (35-41), which is the point missed by some critics. In fact, Bray's enterprise is far more radical than Boswell's, though disguised in carefully constructed rhetoric. Whereas Boswell simply wishes to say there were ancient same-sex marriages, leaving our notions of friendship, marriage, lovers, sex, and the erotic largely intact, Bray would erase our great divide between friendship and sex--both in premodern times and today--reminding Americans, perhaps, of Walt Whitman's radical sexual politics. His rhetorical strategy is to get heterosexist readers on his side against Boswell and then hit them with the "sisterhood" between Anne Lister and Ann Walker in chapter six, by far the longest chapter in the book. Of course, to judge by the critical response, that rhetoric has been less than a stunning success. Let's have a quick look at the most relevant excerpts. Bray clearly states that "an uncomfortable difficulty" for Boswell's critics "is the evidence for Boswell's consequent view that sworn brotherhood could be a relationship between two men or women that was (or could become) sexual," providing the brotherhood between Piers Gaveston and King Edward II as a firm example, for "it is beyond dispute that Gaveston and Edward's relationship was sexual," and "it is unlikely that Edward and Gaveston were unique in this respect" (38). Edward and Gaveston are briefly mentioned throughout the rest of the book. These comments of Bray's, it should be noted, are in keeping with similar comments I heard him make during his presentation at the conference, *The Future of the Queer Past*, held at the University of Chicago in September of 2000. After this brief and clear early mention, the rhetoric takes over, and one may easily forget Bray's point, just as he planned. Bray often seems to be refuting any possibility of sex in the subsequent friendships that he considers--or debunking it, in the misleading language of the front flap of the dust jacket. Such impressions are mistaken. Bray doesn't reject previous sexual interpretations of some of these relationships because they weren't sexual; rather, he rejects specific arguments for these relationships' sexual character as logically inconclusive, leaving the sexual question in those specific cases as unanswerable based on current data and scholarship. Herein enters the "sisterhood" or "marriage" between the "spouses" Anne Lister and Ann Walker (239-83; esp., for sexuality, 267-77), and Bray's rhetorical strategy openly takes the stage. Uniquely, we have Lister's quite extensive diary, from which it is clear that her relationship with her "sister" was starkly sexual, as it was also deeply social, familial, "sisterly," and religious. Bray then uses this much more clearly understood relationship to understand brotherhood and friendship in premodern times more generally--including, it must be understood, in the cases previously encountered in his book. Some excerpting makes the point clearly enough: "The diary arguably casts a light over this history in one important respect that has repeatedly challenged the parameters of this book. The unifying symbol across the world I have described was the body of the friend. It shaped the central chapter of this book, and the symbolism one sees there was not a metaphor. It embraced; it shared a common bed, a common table. It had a mouth, hands, arms. But did it not also have the body's genitals? Did its symbolic significance stop short there? The laughter that closed an earlier chapter suggested that it did not. Yet the sexual potential in these gestures has repeatedly come into view only to slip away again." (268) "This is not, of course, to say that the erotic has not been part of this history. But sexuality in a more narrow sense has eluded it whenever it has come into view. With the diary of Anne Lister that problem falls away. Lister's relationship with Ann Walker was unquestionably sexual. So also had been her relationship with Mariana Lawton. [. . .] The kisses that preface Lister's Easter communion with Walker, 'Three kisses--better to her than to me,' were indeed sexual kisses." (268-69) "Does this evidence provide a vantage point in this respect also? [. . .] the sworn friendship one sees here between Lister and Walker did have a sexual potential--even in the most narrow genital sense. If Lister is representative of this history, does her diary address these unanswered questions? [. . .] Within this history, would a sexual POTENTIAL have stood in the way of the confirmation of a sworn friendship in the Eucharist? The answer must be that it would not, in that it evidently did not do so here. Nothing that I have left to say will detract from that conclusion. [. . .] How much does that answer tell one? I have written this book for those interlocutors who are willing to ask that question." (269) Note, in those last two sentences, what the purpose of Bray's book actually is. Sneaky devil! Finally, Bray effaces the line between sex and friendship: "The question I raise instead is whether these passages, without their conservative religious frame, occlude the ethical uncertainty that ALL friendship was perceived to have within this moral tradition. The wider point, of course, is whether their effect also occludes that ethical uncertainty today." (321, from the afterword) How could such a modestly subtle rhetorical strategy go unnoticed by some critics? Apparently, in a heterosexist and homophobic age, even modest subtlety amounts to little more than the effacement and obliteration of the homoerotic--whether that heterosexism and homophobia be of the regular or internalized varieties. Make no mistake, however, Bray's seemingly stodgy and mild-mannered book is far more radical than anything Boswell ever proposed on the subject. So grab a friend and storm the ramparts! 0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. the friend By Steven T. Karpiak Jr. A detailed and involved account. Have patience while reading. It is worth the time and effort. The world is not as simple as it seems. 0 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Met my needs By Tom McConnell I needed this book for something very specific found in it and nowhere else. It met my needs on that point.

In the chapel of Christ's College, Cambridge, some twenty years ago, historian Alan Bray made an astonishing discovery: a tomb shared by two men, John Finch and Thomas Baines. The monument featured eloquent imagery dedicated to their friendship: portraits of the two friends linked by a knotted cloth. And Bray would soon learn that Finch commonly described his friendship with Baines as a *connubium* or marriage. There was a time, as made clear by this monument, when the English church not only revered such relations between men, but also blessed them. Taking this remarkable idea as its cue, *The Friend* explores the long and storied relationship between friendship and the traditional family of the church in England. This magisterial work extends from the year 1000, when Europe acquired a shape that became its enduring form, and pursues its account up to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Spanning a vast array of fascinating examples, which range from memorial plaques and burial brasses to religious rites and theological imagery to classic works of philosophy and English literature, Bray shows how public uses of private affection were very common in premodern times. He debunks the now-familiar readings of friendship by historians of sexuality who project homoerotic desires onto their subjects when there were none. And perhaps most notably, he evaluates how the ethics of friendship have evolved over the centuries, from traditional emphases on loyalty to the Kantian idea of moral benevolence to the more private and sexualized idea of friendship that emerged during the modern era. Finely nuanced and elegantly conceived, *The Friend* is a book rich in suggestive propositions as well as eye-opening details. It will be essential reading for anyone interested in the history of England and the importance of friendship in everyday life. *History Today's Book of the Year, 2004* Bray's loving coupledom is something with a proper historical backbone, with substance and form, something you can trace over time, visible and archeologicable. . . . Bray made a great contribution in helping to bring this long history to light. James Davidson, *London Review of Books*

"Magisterial. . . . This intricate book so suggestive and so valuably different from many 'popular' treatments of the history of intimacy offers a promising way forward for historians of sexuality and the family."