

The Fraternization of Friendship and Politics: Derrida, Montaigne and Aristotle

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ABSTRACT

“O my friends, there is no friend”. Jacques Derrida uses this aphorism attributed to Aristotle by Montaigne as a motif throughout his book, *Politics of Friendship*. One of the aspects Derrida addresses is the androcentrism or phallogocentrism of Western political writings on friendship. I will use the works by Montaigne and Aristotle as examples of the classical canon, which Derrida is critiquing, and summarise Derrida’s analysis in which he uses the concept of ‘fraternization’ to demonstrate his claims. I will end by arguing that Derrida can be a friend (or is at least not an enemy) to feminism.

“O my friends, there is no friend”

This aphorism is used by Jacques Derrida as a motif, a focus and a keynote for each of the ten chapters of his book, *Politics of Friendship*. Derrida is here quoting Montaigne whose essay entitled ‘On Friendship’ was first published in 1580. Montaigne attributed this saying to Aristotle whose writings in the third century BC, *Nicomachean Ethics*, contain lengthy and comprehensive essays on friendship, although the original quotation has not been located in Aristotle’s work. With this citation of a citation of a quotation, Derrida aims to unsettle, to disturb and to disrupt our accustomed understandings and to provoke critical considerations of familiar concepts. He asks, and requires us to reflect... is this a complaint or a grievance? To whom is it addressed? How can someone be there to receive the complaint? How many people are being addressed? (Derrida, 1997: ix)

In this article I give a summary or interpretation of some of Derrida’s ideas on friendship and will then concentrate on one aspect of *Politics of Friendship* where Derrida highlights the androcentrism of Western philosophical writings on friendship, often symbolised by brotherhood. I will use Montaigne’s and Aristotle’s works as examples of the classical canon which Derrida is critiquing.

Derrida on Friendship

In *Politics of Friendship* Derrida (1997) presents a complex argument linking friendship, justice and democracy. His book is a genealogical survey of philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to Nietzsche and Levinas and highlights the paradoxes involved in the concepts of friend/enemy and self/other which are revealed in the performative contradictions of the statement “o my friends, there is no friend.” Derrida sees friendship as a particularly illusive concept which is not easy to define or to

describe. He discusses the perennial question of what is the difference between love and friendship. On this point, Derrida follows Nietzsche in querying whether friendship might be “more loving than love” (64). Traditionally friendship is considered to involve reciprocity, constancy, closeness, and commitment, but Derrida questions whether true friendship might rather recognise the importance of separateness, distance, boundaries and caution. He suggests that hesitancy rather than certainty about the concept of friendship *might* need to be explored. It could be, ‘perhaps’, that friendship is so special, so rare, that naming it in some way demeans it or negates it.

Perhaps, one day, here or there, who knows, something may happen between two people in love, who would love each other lovingly (is this still the right word?) in such a way that friendship, *just once*, perhaps, for the first time (another *perhaps*), will become the correct name, the right and just name for that which would then have taken place, the condition being that it take place between two, ‘two people’, as Nietzsche specifies. But how can you adjust a name to what could take place only once, perhaps, for the first and last time – how can you name an event? For this love that would take place only once would be the only possible event: as an impossible event. Even if the right name for this unique love were to be found, how would you convince everyone else of its appropriateness? And what about the task of convincing the partner, at the moment of the act in which this love would essentially consist, that of giving him or her the name? (Derrida, 1997: 66)

Having deconstructed friendship, Derrida, suggests as he does with other concepts, some possible terms which might partially address the inadequacies of our understandings and naming of concepts, and which might open up some other ways of thinking about and questioning our conventional ways of talking and writing. Derrida says he is tempted to use the term ‘lovence’ to describe: “love in friendship, lovence beyond love and friendship following their determined figures, beyond all this book’s trajectories of reading, beyond all ages, cultures and traditions of loving” (69).

Derrida wants to point out that the way in which friendship is defined, written about, analysed and understood has political implications. The concept of friendship has been evident in philosophical discussions as is revealed in the historical accounts. This close association between friendship and Western philosophy Derrida calls “philosophical-friendship” or “friendship-philosophy” which he sees as an “indissociable” concept (146). The political aspect, has been much less overt or even invisible, and Derrida describes the political as being situated next to the hyphen between philosophy and friendship (146). This invisibility of friendship within politics is partly because discussions of politics more often include references to the unfriendly relationships of enmity, war, battles, soldiers, sworn brothers in arms. What is more, in these traditional descriptions of politics as a space of conflict, there are only men:

Yes, but men, men and more men, over centuries of war, and costumes, hats, uniforms, soutanes, warriors, colonels, generals, partisans, strategists, politicians, professors, political theoreticians, theologians. In vain would you look for a figure of a woman, a feminine silhouette, and the slightest allusion to sexual difference (Derrida, 1997: 156).

The identification of politics with war means that, as women are usually not associated with war, they then also become excluded from politics. Not only is war and enmity male-focused, but even friendship is described in male terms. Derrida ‘unpacks’ the canonical tradition of considering friendship by questioning the male-centredness of the enquiry and the historical indistinctiveness of friendship and fraternity. Derrida exposes and contests the uncritical link between friendship and brotherhood. He asks, “Why would a friend be like a brother?” (Derrida, 1997: viii). If friendship is so closely linked to brotherhood, or in Derrida’s terminology is ‘fraternized’, how might this affect politics? Is fraternization a form of patriarchy? Is brotherhood enough to conceptualize friendship? Derrida questions the effect of using terms, which are male-related and therefore implicitly exclude women from the accounts of the philosophical history of friendship.

Derrida demonstrates the way in which women have been silenced by examining comprehensively the canon of philosophical writings in the Western tradition. I am here taking two of the examples he uses, Montaigne and Aristotle, to illustrate two approaches which are part of the ‘fraternity’ of writings about friendship. While they acknowledge that women are capable of being

involved in some forms of friendship, both Aristotle and Montaigne argued that the highest form of friendship, perfect or true friendship, could not be engaged in by women.

Montaigne on Friendship¹

Montaigne, in a tribute to his greatest and dearest friend, Etienne de la Boetie, describes their friendship as “so entire and so perfect that certainly you will hardly read of the like, and among men of today you see no trace of it in practice” (Montaigne, 1580, cited in Pakaluk, 1991: 188). This friendship was beyond understanding, beyond comparison, beyond definition. It was an extraordinary and particular friendship which bound two souls together. Montaigne describes it in language which has the ring of romantic love:

In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again. If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I (192).

However, although Montaigne describes his relationship with La Boetie as a deep and abiding love, he distinguishes this love from sexual, erotic love which has “a fleshly end, subject to satiety” (190). He associates those experiences with the love of women, which, while this love might be “more active, more scorching, and more intense”, it is nevertheless “an impetuous and fickle flame, undulating and variable, a fever flame, subject to fits and lulls, that holds us only by one corner” (190). He maintains that the male friendship he enjoys with La Boetie is so superior to this that there should never even be any comparisons attempted, “the first keeping its course in proud and lofty flight, and disdainfully watching the other making its way far, far beneath it” (190).

The relationship between Montaigne and La Boetie, while being a model of constancy and commitment, is also unlike a marriage. Although marriage resembles friendship in that it is entered into voluntarily and freely, a marriage is determined by a compulsory and complex contract and Montaigne feels that the deals and bargains required are constraining and put a strain on any affection: “there supervene a thousand foreign tangles to unravel, enough to break the thread and trouble the course of a lively affection” (190).

For Montaigne, there is the theoretical possibility that a man and a woman could have a ‘full and perfect’ friendship, engaged with each other body and soul, but this to him seems an unlikely scenario:

Besides, to tell the truth, the ordinary capacity of women is inadequate for that communion and fellowship which is the nurse of this sacred bond; nor does their soul seem firm enough to endure the strain of so tight and durable a knot (Montaigne cited in Pakaluk, 1991: 190).

Montaigne refers back to the classical canon of the ancient Greeks and Romans who also rejected the possibility of women’s capacity for perfect friendship. While Montaigne accepts the authority of these philosophers in their dismissal of women, nevertheless, he challenges other aspects of their writings regarding love between men. Montaigne wants to distance himself from the pederasty of the Greek friendship model, where a significant age difference gave separate roles to lover and beloved. Montaigne does not believe that such a relationship can produce the “perfect union and harmony” which form the basis for a superior type of friendship (191).

For Montaigne, the family as an analogy for ‘natural’ friendship is likewise insufficient. Fratricide and infanticide can occur when some of the family relationships break down. The relationship between father and son has too great a disparity. The nearest comparison he sees is between brothers, and the name of brother for Montaigne “is a beautiful name and full of affection”. It resonated enough with him and his beloved friend to call their own alliance a brotherhood (189). Nevertheless, he felt it was inadequate to describe the perfection of his relationship with La Boetie.

While it falls short of mirroring accurately the friendship which Montaigne wishes to reflect, brotherhood or fraternity is the relationship which he feels most closely resembles friendship. It is, however, not just through this 'fraternization' of friendship that Montaigne excludes women from friendship. Montaigne refers much more explicitly to the inadequacy of women's character for forming perfect friendships. Montaigne is only one of the examples taken from the philosophical lineage who demonstrates the androcentrism of the canon.

Aristotle on Friendship²

Montaigne's reflections on friendship are an extension of Aristotle's writings, in particular in *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, a true friend is 'another self' and friendship is a necessary virtue, or involves virtue. Aristotle identifies different types of friendship. Utility or pleasure friendships are more common and less valuable. The highest ranked type of friendship is the most complete, most virtuous, perfect friendship between good people who unconditionally will the good for the other. An equality of virtue and goodness is essential for this perfect or true friendship. Like Montaigne, Aristotle dismisses the pederasty advocated by his fellow Greeks. It is the inequality between the older lover and the younger beloved which will not allow for an enduring friendship. They are unlikely to be perfect friends "for these do not take pleasure in the same things: the lover takes pleasure in seeing his beloved, while the beloved takes pleasure in being courted by his lover". When beauty fades, "sometimes the friendship fades too" (Aristotle, cited in Pakaluk, 1991: 34).

This requirement of equality for Aristotle means that he cannot accept that perfect, virtuous friendship can exist between man and wife. Aristotle uses forms of government as analogies for different relationships in society and describes the relationship between man and wife as a kind of aristocracy. An aristocracy represents the rule of the few best people of a society. According to Aristotle, aristocracies can deteriorate into oligarchies if the goods of a society are not distributed according to people's worth. An oligarchy is also the rule of the few, but of the vicious instead of the virtuous. If a marriage relationship is to be arranged according to the worth of each of the partners, it is the man who decides how the relationship is to be conducted. If "he commits to the woman what is fitting for her", then this is an aristocracy. If, on the other hand, "the man controls everything, he changes it into an oligarchy" (Aristotle, in Pakaluk, 1991: 43). If a woman were to rule, this would not reflect virtue and worth, but would be on the basis of her having more wealth, and so this would also be an oligarchy.

When the friendship relationship between man and woman is 'aristocratic' this is an example of justice, because "it reflects virtue, in assigning more good to the better, and assigning what is fitting to each" (44). However, because men and women are naturally unequal in worth and virtue, then the friendship between the two sexes cannot be of the highest order. There cannot be perfect friendship between men and women. The same is true of some other familial relationships, such as father and son, or mother and child, which are likewise based on inequality of love and power (44).

However, Aristotle argues that brotherhood has the capacity to constitute the most equal friendship as long as the brothers do not differ much in age (44). They are likely to have similar feelings and characters, according to Aristotle. Brothers love each other because they are "come from the same parents" (45):

Being brought up together and being of an age contributes largely to friendship; for 'two of an age' get on well, and those with the same character are companions. That is why the friendship of brothers and that of companions are similar (46).

Although the same argument could be used of sisters, Aristotle fails to mention this, or any possibility of a friendship between women. So women are excluded again by the use of the fraternal to indicate friendship.

Fraternization of Friendship and Politics

It is this androcentrism in the historical literature which Derrida picks up. He illustrates why the omission of the female is political and undemocratic. He reflects on how often familial metaphors are used to describe the state and politics and illustrates how much the concept of fraternity or brotherhood is used, particularly by the left (but also by the right). Fraternity can stand for the idea of working equally together as comrades, or can be placed alongside equality and freedom in republican mottos (such as the cry of the French revolutionaries for '*liberte, egalite, fraternite*'). He argues that democracy is "rarely determined in the absence of confraternity or brotherhood" (Derrida, 1997: viii), and this 'fraternization' of democracy ignores the female.

As Derrida illustrates, political discourse is littered with metaphors relating to family, genealogy and kinship, implying a 'natural' relationship. We talk about the 'birth' of a nation, the universal nation of human 'brotherhood'. The idea of brotherhood rests on a common parentage, or at least either the same mother, or the same father. Fraternization, for Derrida, is using the brother as the metaphor or symbol which purports to stand for all, for equality, and for friendship, but which, as a gendered word, can actually only represent the male. This fiction of 'fraternization':

is what produces symbolically, conventionally, through authorized engagement a determined politics, which be it left- or right-wing, alleges a real fraternity or relegates spiritual fraternity, fraternity in the figurative sense, on the symbolic projection of a real or natural fraternity (93).

By identifying both friendship and democracy with brotherhood and fraternity, the male is privileged. This is seen as natural, real and therefore a good model of government. The fact that sisterhood can be logically connected in the same way is seldom mentioned, so women are rendered invisible in the discourse about democracy. In fact, by deconstructing the discourse of democracy and naming the 'fraternization', what is revealed is closer to Aristotle's idea of aristocracy, where men are explicitly named as the superior party, able to rule in both government and friendship.

Derrida acknowledges the work of Emile Benveniste in tracing this kinship terminology through Greek and Latin, demonstrating that fraternization is evident too in Christianity. Derrida refers to this as the Christianization of fraternization, or fraternization as the essential structure of Christianization. Although women were present in the formation of the early Christian movement, Christian theological discourse has evolved using the terminology of brotherhood rather than sisterhood to describe close connections between fellow Christians. This means that while the fraternization of language can be taken as inclusive of the female, it has the effect of neutralizing sisters, cousins and mothers. Sisterhood would not be used to describe both males and females. Employing the terminology of brotherhood and fraternity, always will conjure up the image of a male. As Derrida (1997: viii) puts it: "Including may dictate forgetting, for example 'with the best of intentions', that the sister will never provide a docile example of the concept of fraternity".

Turning back to the mantra "O my friends there is no friend", Derrida asks again:

What does 'a friend' mean? 'A friend' in the feminine? 'Some friends' in the masculine or feminine? 'No friends', in either gender? And what is the relationship between this quantum of friendship and democracy, as the agreement or approbation of number? (101)

He argues that this fraternization of friendship and democracy, this neutralization of the female, and the misnaming of aristocracy as democracy, must be examined, otherwise, we would be committing *the political crime* which is "the crime against the possibility of politics ... the crime of stopping to examine politics (*arraisonner la politique*) reducing it to something else and preventing it from what it should be" (ix). Feminist critiques of the ancient canon are usually expressed by using the term patriarchy. Derrida's deconstruction of the politics of friendship uses a different approach which traces historical development of language use, and demonstrates how the concept of fraternity has been used as a symbol for close relationships in politics, religion and friendship. The Greco-Roman as well as the Judeo-Christian traditions have valorized the fraternal, thus excluding women. And

there is, as Derrida states, a “*double exclusion* we see at work in all the great ethico-political-philosophical discourses on friendship: on the one hand, the exclusion of friendship between women; on the other, the exclusion of friendship between a man and a woman” (279).

Derrida ends his book with these words:

When will we be ready for an experience of freedom and equality that is capable of respectfully experiencing that friendship, which would at last be just, just beyond the law, and measured up against its measurelessness?

O my democratic friends ... (306).

Derrida a friend of feminism?

There has been a debate in the literature about whether or not Derrida is pro- or anti-feminist. This debate is well illustrated in Holland’s 1997 work entitled *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*.³ On the one hand are those who argue that Derrida’s work is essentially a male enterprise and is unhelpful for feminists. Spivak⁴ claims that deconstruction, and Derrida in particular, ‘displace’ women in their critique. In linking Derrida to both Nietzsche and Freud, Spivak argues that women can only ever ask questions within deconstructionism from the position of men. Fraser,⁵ commenting on Derrida’s essay ‘Force of Law’, criticises Derrida’s focus on the metaphysical basis of law and argues that his work cannot be used for any meaningful political discussion. Her argument is not the “usual complaint that deconstruction leads to nihilism, immorality, or amorality” (Fraser in Holland, 1997: 158). Instead she uses a political critique to demonstrate what she sees as substantive flaws in Derrida’s account and to claim that it is via political critique, not deconstruction that the androcentrism within a culture can be made evident (162). Olkowski⁶ argues that Derrida often unconsciously excludes women from his texts, by keeping a distance from ‘*la femme*’, and thus continues to reinforce the traditional philosophical silence about women (Olkowski in Holland, 1997: 229).

On the other hand, there are also feminist interpretations which view Derrida as contributing in a positive way to the feminist debate. Holland acknowledges that the collection she has edited is, in part, a tribute or a ‘gift’ to Derrida as “a thinker who, if nothing more, does take feminism as a serious part of the philosophical enterprise” (Holland, 1997: 20). Armour⁷ cites feminist anxieties about Derrida appropriating women’s voices while carrying on philosophical discussion as “business-as-usual among men” (Armour in Holland, 1997: 194) However, she believes that feminists should recognize that the challenges Derrida poses to their work can reveal alternative possibilities for furthering feminist goals, and that Derrida’s work can be used to supplement feminist writings (195). Similarly, Grosz⁸ feels that feminist theory is at the stage where it should be prepared to be self-critical as part of its “coming-to-maturity” (Grosz in Holland, 1997: 74). She agrees with Armour and argues that feminists can learn from deconstruction and that, while Derrida’s works are not feminist in themselves, his challenges can be usefully employed to illuminate gaps which feminist theory needs to address (75). Kamuf⁹ drawing on different aspects of Derrida’s work and looking at the distinction between jealousy and envy, also points to a positive use for deconstruction as providing another way of understanding feminism in relation to the subject. In her essay, Birmingham¹⁰ suggests that Derrida offers something more than merely a “negative feminism” (128). She argues that Derrida’s work is fertile ground for rethinking concepts from a feminist perspective, and gives the example of how Derrida can provide another way of thinking about “an ethics of desire” (128). In a more recent publication, Tina Chanter (2002: 235) confirms Derrida’s contributions to feminism by “re-sexualizing” the philosophical and theoretical discourse, and she agrees that deconstruction “provides one way of articulating the shifting categories of feminist discourse” (253).

Derrida himself does not claim to be a feminist, and is circumspect when challenged to explain his position.¹¹ However, what Derrida’s analysis does is to approach the social and philosophical

problems from another direction which, while not explicitly feminist, does highlight some of the same issues which feminism has attempted to address head-on. His project is not a feminist one, but his work helps to explain some of the inconsistencies, paradoxes and anomalies which exist in feminist thought, and some of the difficulties which feminists face in their political quest for recognition and empowerment. I agree with Elizabeth Grosz that: "His work cannot be assigned a definitive position on one side or the other of a divide separating feminist from antifeminist positions – indeed it problematizes this very dividing line..." (Grosz in Holland, 1997: 75).

I have demonstrated how Derrida's deconstruction of the concept of the politics of friendship highlights a feminist concern and this, I would argue, can be used to support the feminist cause. While unpacking the notion of friendship, and exploring the history of the canonical writings on friendship, Derrida reveals that by consistently representing friendship as fused with the concept of brotherhood, equates it with the masculine. While friendship is not in itself a gendered term, its association with male kinship has meant that the male has been prioritized, and that friendship has been 'fraternized'. Derrida's use of the term fraternization plays on the multiple meanings of 'fraternity' which is used to refer to the family relationship between brothers, a secret male political association, a male religious order, part of the battle cry for freedom and equality. By equating friendship with fraternity, women are neutralised, and thus become invisible.

A feminist positivist trawl through the canons of writings on friendship can come to a similar conclusion.¹² Indeed, the quick examination of two examples from this canon, Montaigne and Aristotle, explored in this article demonstrates that women are often explicitly excluded. However, the value of Derrida to feminism is that, as a disinterested party using a distinctive methodological and philosophical approach, he has revealed and acknowledged the intractability of the problem with which feminism is confronted. This is not an intentional, deliberate conspiracy to exclude women from power, but a subtle, pervasive, and therefore extremely potent phenomenon, which is much more difficult to counteract, especially by means of mere politics. Although Derrida does not offer solutions for feminism, his work on deconstructing language needs to be recognised by feminists as, at the very least, an important supplement to the second wave feminist project which identified numerous ways in which women were discriminated against and disadvantaged when compared to men, and to the on-going post-modern feminist debate which questions and challenges the certainty of the modernist approach.

O friends there is no friend, O feminists there is no enemy, O enemies there is no feminist.

Notes

1. Michel Eyquem de Montaigne 1533-1592. His essay 'Of Friendship' was published in a collection of 57 philosophical essays, and was written in Montaigne's 'Stoic' period. The version cited in this article is a 1958 translation by Donald M. Frame in Pakaluk, 1991.
2. Aristotle 384-322 B.C. His treatise on friendship is found in Books VIII and IX of *Nicomachean Ethic*. The version cited in this article is a translation by Terence Irwin in Pakaluk, 1991.
3. Nancy J. Holland (Ed.). (1997). *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press. Although this work illustrates nicely those feminists who stand on both sides of the debate, it does not directly address Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, as this was not published in its English version until the same year as Holland's book.
4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (1997). Displacement and the Discourse of Women. In Holland (Ed.), (pp. 43-72).
5. Nancy Fraser. (1997). The Force of Law: Metaphysical or Political? In Holland (Ed.), (pp.157-164).
6. Dorothea Olkowski. (1997). Kolossos: The Measure of Man's Cize. In Holland (Ed.), (pp. 215-230).
7. Ellen T. Armour. (1997). Crossing the Boundaries between Deconstruction, Feminism, and Religion. In Holland (Ed.), (pp. 193-214).

8. Elizabeth Grosz (1997). *Ontology and Equivocation: Derrida's Politics of Sexual Difference*. In Holland (Ed.), (pp. 73-102).
9. Peggy Kamuf (1997). *Deconstruction and Feminism: A Repetition*. In Holland (Ed.), (pp.103-126).
10. Peg Birmingham (1997). *Toward an Ethic of Desire: Derrida, Fiction, and the Law of the Feminine*. In Holland (Ed.), (pp.127-146).
11. See the 1982 interview 'Choreographies' with Christie V. McDonald, reprinted in Holland (Ed.), (pp. 23-42).
12. See, for example, my unpublished paper 'Love and friendship in antiquity: searching for the women.'

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