

Critically examine the concept and expression of friendship in the poetry of Katherine Philips, relating your discussion to other Seventeenth-Century writings on the subject.

“Friendship is one mind in two bodies.”

– Mencius.¹

Katherine Philips, who is best known today for her poems on female friendship, was one of the few British women poets whose works were widely read in the 1650s and early 1660s. To her contemporaries, she was "the Incomparable" (1664) or "the Matchless Orinda" (1667), as it was stated on the title pages of the first two editions of her Poems. Philips' poetry explores the challenges and pleasures of friendship and love. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, friendship is defined as a 'Friendly feeling or disposition felt or shown by a person or group of people.'² This dissection of feminine intimacy stands in stark contrast to the conventional perception of women. The seventeenth century saw the application of courtly love poetry's language and themes to elevate male friendships, henceforth, never have the friendships between women received such serious examination. In terms of its concept and mode of expression, Philips' depiction of friendship has frequently been compared to and contrasted with other sixteenth and seventeenth-century texts. The concepts of freedom and intimacy with friends are used as illustrations of this proclaimed idea of friendship in Philips' poetry.

Katherine was raised in a Puritan household. Her desire to avoid public recognition for her poem was because she was a royalist poet in the 1650s when the commonwealth government was in power, and also because she was married to James Philips, a prominent Parliamentarian and Puritan. Although this division of political views could have caused conflict in their marriage; which it probably did, the biggest problems were those that were caused by other people. According to Elaine Hobby, 'Colonel John Jones apparently attempted to discredit

¹ BrainyQuote, *Mencius Quotes*, 2001 [online] Available at: <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/mencius_105268> [Accessed 16 October 2022].

² The Oxford English Dictionary, 2013.

James Philips by publishing some writings of Katherine's.³ Philips wrote a poem addressing her husband on the need to protect the harmony of their marriage from outside influences. She apologises and acknowledges that she damaged her husband's reputation, but she makes no commitment to change her opinion. The poem served as a declaration of her independence from him and a plea for people to view her as such, rather than as an integral part of her marriage. In a time when a husband and wife were considered to be one person for the purposes of marriage,⁴ that was a bold assertion. Philips believed that both men and women should be seen as autonomous beings who are in charge of their own decisions. The poem *A Countrey life* contradicts those beliefs. Having married James, she now has to move to Cardigan where her new life awaits. "I live not by necessitie, But wholly by my choice," (lines 17-18) on the contrary, due to her marriage, Orinda had no choice but to live in Cardigan. Patrick Thomas remarks: 'the emphasis of friendship in the poem reveals that she had already developed the philosophy that was to shape her life and poetry throughout the chaotic interregnum years',⁵ which was using the concept of friendship as a modum for freedom.

Katherine was well aware of the fragile character of the society she lived in because she was the wife of a well-known local politician. In stanza 6 of the poem, *A retir'd friendship, to Ardelia*, 'friendship' and 'innocence', according to Katherine, were a "charme" that might shield the two companions from the perils and tragedies of the time. Upon Charles II's failed attempt to capture the throne, Patrick Thomas stated that 'Katherine's answer to this apparent collapse of the traditional framework of society was to bring together a group of like-minded people governed by ideals of friendship and social harmony.'⁶ Philips's goal for her Society

³ Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing, 1649-88* (London: Virago Press, 1988), p. 133.

⁴ Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing, 1649-88* (London: Virago Press, 1988), p. 133.

⁵ Patrick Thomas, *Writers of Wales: Katherine Philips ('Orinda'), 1632-1664* (Wales: University of Wales Press, 1988), p. 7.

⁶ Thomas, p. 9.

of friendship was to offer a civilised, tranquil contrast to the unrest that seemed to be threatening both Wales and England. In the majority of Katherine's poetry, she speaks so passionately about friendship, which she skilfully intertwines with intimacy. John Donne's unique fusion of sensual love with philosophy and religion is one of the influences on Philips's expression of loving friendship. Donne's influence, while not very courtly, was strong and passionate. When completely viewed, Philips' poems tend to honour friendship for its virtue and selflessness. We see Philips' perspective on how platonic love is purer than romantic love as she writes in the poem *Friendship*:

All Love is sacred, and the marriage-tie
Hath much of honour and divinity.
But Lust, Design, or some unworthy ends
May mingle there, which are despis'd by Friends. (lines 31-34).

She underlines the divine sanction of marital unions while also emphasising that friendship is the purer form of love since it is free of the "unworthy ends" that were commonly linked with marriage partnerships at the time. Illicit impulses such as lust and passion may be present in marriage, however, her love is not sexual, and she and her friends "despis'd" lust. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "design" here as a plan or scheme created in the mind and planned for subsequent execution,⁷ therefore, Philips seems to suggest that there is no worry about this because everyone in the Society of Friendship shares the same values that brought them together in the first place.

In her Poem *To My Excellent Lucasia, on our Friendship* she writes, "No bridegroom's nor crown-conqueror's mirth / To mine compared can be;" (lines 17-18) Philips is contrasting romantic love with the pleasures of friendship, not love with a man versus love with a woman. All of her acquaintances who were accepted into this exclusive group were royalists, so their

⁷ The Oxford Educational Dictionary, 2013.

correspondence and company must have greatly lessened her loneliness. In essence, these friends have a lot in common, and because of their shared ideologies and interests, they are able to live up to Philips' ideals of friendship and love. Philips adopted the pseudonym "Orinda," and gave her companions similar pastoral names in order to address poems to them which made use of courtly love traditions' language and imagery. The idea of friendship in her poems was developed using traditional elements like love, emotion, and innocence, which Philips thought were typical qualities of women. This concept served as the basis for establishing unconventional friendships with other women outside of her marriage and founding the Society of Friendship. In a piece of writing, French philosopher Michel de Montaigne discusses the characteristics of friendship. He claims that friends should have a high level of familiarity, trust, and respect for one another; qualities Katherine may have valued dearly. In contrast to Philips' idea of a Society of Friendship, Montaigne thought that true friends are not only difficult to find but that there should only be one for the sake of loyalty.:

“If two friends asked you to help them at the same time, which of them would you dash to? If they asked for conflicting favours, who would have the priority? If one entrusted to your silence something that was useful to the other, how would you manage?”

—Montaigne, *Essais*, “On Friendship”⁸

Moreover, Katherine Philips aims to develop both her own independence and the independence of the other women she is friends with through these relationships. For anyone who desired to dedicate themselves to family responsibilities, this would have seemed problematic in terms of conventional practices. Katherine's most popular genre of writing her friendship poems was letter writing.

⁸ Manuel Bermudez, *Can we have more than one friend? According to Montaigne*, no. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Since the early humanist movements of the Renaissance, seventeenth-century Britain, valued letters as a literary form to write to friends. They were occasionally written in poetic metre, which was characterised by the development of intimacy, or at least a language of intimacy. As a result, letters virtually became poems of dedication. Similar to Katherine, an Italian poet, translator and classical scholar, Petrarch, was a humanist who was also well known for his letters, which were his favourite form of writing. He addresses his letters to friends he had developed long-lasting connections with and has known all his life. In his letters *To Socrates*, ‘To return again to the letters, you will find many written in a familiar style to friends,’⁹ Petrarch, just like Philips uses pseudonyms to represent his most intimate friends. However, unlike Philips, Petrarch does not display his friends as intimately as her. He in turn found difficulty in finding true friends, ‘How many true friends I know not, for friends are not only exceedingly few, but difficult to distinguish.’¹⁰ Katherine wrote many poetic letters such as *To the Excellent Mrs Anne Owen upon her receiving the name of Lucasia, and adoption into our society. 29 December 1651*, and *Friendship’s Mysterys, to my dearest Lucasia*; just to name a few.

In the poem *Friendship’s Mysterys, to my dearest Lucasia*, the concept and intimate expression of friendship are portrayed throughout the poem, for instance in line 5, to characterise her relationships with other women, Katherine borrows Donne’s religious language of love, “There’s a religion in our love.” The religious and spiritual metaphors Philips uses in her poems to describe friendship seem to imply that their intimate friendship is blessed by God; divinely favoured. Philips expresses that the love between Orinda and Lucasia is in accordance

⁹ Robinson, J., *Petrarch’s Preface to his First Collection of Letters*, 2000 [online] History.hanover.edu. Available at: <<https://history.hanover.edu/texts/petrarch/pet02.html>> [Accessed 16 October 2022].

¹⁰ Robinson, J., *Petrarch’s Preface to his First Collection of Letters*, 2000 [online] History.hanover.edu. Available at: <<https://history.hanover.edu/texts/petrarch/pet02.html>> [Accessed 16 October 2022].

with Plato's concept of platonic love. She, therefore, explicitly condemns sexuality in her works on love, which is why she compares her intimate relationships to religion in order to keep its chastity. "For though we were designed t'agree, / That fate no liberty destroys." (lines 6-7) Katherine seems to imply that she and Lucasia are 'designed' to be together, in other words, this friendship is "fated," and not even the "liberty" to choose differently can tear it apart. This concept of friendship is also seen in her poem *Friendship*, where Philips seems to suggest that because of this ideal friendship, neither chance nor design; two opposed beliefs, have any bearing. Their friendship is not "bought" it is an "eternal destiny" that no one can undo:

It is not bought for money, pains or wit;
For no chance or design can spirits move,
But the eternal destiny of Love:
And when two souls are chang'd and mixèd so,
It is what they and none but they can do. (lines 22-26)

The sensual relevance of the concept of love, particularly among women, as well as the development of women and their importance in a changing world, are highlighted by this language. Because it involves metaphysics, it cannot be "undone". Reverting back to the poem *Friendship's Mysterys, to my dearest Lucasia*, lines 14-15, "And we whose minds are so much one, / Never, yet ever, are alone." she continues to reinforce the notion that friends can be spiritually connected via their love for each other, their mind uniting as a result, making them never alone. This expression of friendship was also portrayed in the poem *To Mrs. Mary Awbrey*, "Thy heart locks up my secrets richly set, / And my breast is thy private cabinet." (lines 9-10) The poem seems to suggest that everything that is in Orinda's head and heart is known to her companion Mary, and vice versa, according to the poem, implying emotional and mental intimacy. Lines 11-12, further suggest that Orinda and Mrs Awbrey reflect

each other; they are one and the same. The influence of Donne is notably visible in the rhetorical agility of the poem's succession of 'metaphysical' paradoxes; two persons becoming one. Since the statement is paradoxical, that is, seemingly rather than actually contradictory, which in Philips' case are frequently dualities that are resolved into unities due to the assertion being paradoxical. If "you" Mrs Awbrey shed tears they are "my moisture", and when I, Orinda, sigh it is your breath (Mrs Awbrey). Their relationship is so intimate that it is almost as though their bodies are fused together, "Thou shed'st no tear but what but what my moisture lent, / And if I sigh, it is thy breath is spent." On the other hand, one might argue that due to their wholeness after becoming one entity they are now alone. To add, Montaigne also shared the view that true friends are one in the same person:

‘...but in the friendship I speak of, they mix and work themselves into one piece, with no more sign of the seam by which they were first conjoyn’d.’

–Montaigne, *Essais*, “On Friendship”¹¹

Additionally, stanza 4 of the poem *Friendship's Mysterys, to my dearest Lucasia*, shows that Philips appears to be criticising the affairs of state or that of their marriage by contrasting the regal imagery of thrones, ornamentation, and the monarchy, with all of their patriarchal connotations, against innocence, bondage, and captivity, much preferring the private affairs of love and friendship:

We court our own captivity,
Than thrones more great and innocent;
‘Twere banishment to be set free,
Since we wear fetters whose intent
Not bondage is, but ornament.

¹¹ Manuel Bermudez, *Can we have more than one friend? According to Montaigne*, no. Oxford University Press, 2017.

Katherine seems to liken marriage to being held in servitude. She sought to build their independence from household responsibilities because she felt confined in her marriage and since being with people of the same sex gives her the greatest freedom to be and express herself.

Katherine concludes her poem *Friendship's Mysteries, to my dearest Lucasia*, by reiterating the link between an intimate friendship and a religious experience. By employing terms like "hearts"; the organ most likely to be extracted in a human sacrifice, "victims," "altars," "priests," and "offerings," Phillips compares her ideal love to sacrifices and religious accoutrements. She portrays Orinda and Lucasia as "victims," or martyrs, who gave their lives as a sacrifice in the service of a higher power, which is this ideal friendship. To Philips, having a friend with whom one could relate was as close to heaven as one could get during the Restoration. Philips experiences both fulfilment and destruction as a result of her great love's demands. However, the closing lines revive these lost hearts by asserting that "they grow deathless" as a result of the sacrifice. For those who are willing to make the sacrifice for love, a new, greater, and "everlasting" soul, a whole formed from the two parts, waits for them. In other words, if you love enough, you will lose your soul due to the sacrificial cost of that love. For Philips, the concepts of love and friendship are elevated to a spiritual, almost cosmic level.

Subsequently, Katherine continues to hold her friends in high esteem, which was evident in her poem *Mrs. Anne Owen, upon her receiving the name Of Lucasia, and Adoption into our Society, December 28, 1651*. The cultivation of friendship outside of marriage is portrayed as Orinda proceeds to declare that upon Lucasia joining the Society of Friendship this circle of friends is now complete. By speaking about friendship in religious terms, Katherine appears to imply that whatever religion can provide, friendship can also provide. She exclaims that this Society of Friends should go down in history because it is so unique from the rest of the world, and even the most significant historical occurrences pale in comparison to the fame of

their friendship. In light of the reputation brought about by the addition of Lucasia, the Society of Friends will be regarded as the most significant phenomenon in human history. Compared to her contemporaries, Philips elevates friendship to the highest degree. Further, Philips goes on to metaphorically describe Lucasia as the sun, giving reference to the literal sun that shines its' light vigorously because it has no confinement when you look at it through the lens of a telescope. As it is intimated that Lucasia is such a fantastic fit for the circle because she is such a good friend to have, she continues to admire her. Lucasia's mind is so brilliant, which means she is so intelligent that they must interact with her directly through her body. This platonic philosophy, which goes beyond the notion that the self is not the body but the mind; the immortal soul, is what influences Philips. Therefore, Lucasia is her mind, and what is being utilised to communicate with her and block off her light is her body. It is intimated that being in the presence of Lucasia is like being in a sanctuary away from the men, their husbands, and, more broadly, the outside world. Their group of friends has turned into a temple of divinity, with everyone worshipping her as if she were a deity.

Katherine's life and work are filled with inconsistencies. She strives to form connections and relationships with a large number of female acquaintances, with the goal of becoming one with her companions. Her existence, on the other hand, is marked by oppositions, contradictions, and dualities. For instance, this may be observed in her Puritan family background, her marriage to a politician named James Philips, as well as her own high church Anglican and royalist beliefs. Spiritual Love was the friendship that Phillips felt was real love. The intensity and passion of Phillips' poetry about friendship led people to believe that these were lesbian relationships. Nevertheless, that was not the case. She, in turn, had the freedom to choose her friends, and it is believed that she connected with them in a manner that she was unable to do with a man who had been chosen for her. She did not feel pressured to play a character other than herself in her friendships, which gave her a sense of freedom. There is no

other way to find selfhood but through friendships, and Katherine's Society of Friendship excludes a sense of strength and freedom; freedom from marriage and its' conventional wifely duties.

Women had no voice during the Restoration. In the public domain, men predominated.

Women needed to write among themselves and create their own social outlet in order to engage in discussions about anything political, hence the founding of the Society of Friendships. Readers of Katherine Philips' poems are shown that love is more than just lust.

Through her friends, she discovered herself. They were her most important source of encouragement as she developed her literary abilities and encouraged the advancement of a relatively recent genre of poetry in that era; letter writing. Through these poems, other people were able to understand how much friendship meant to a woman. It gave the women in Katherine's group the freedom to, at the very least, whisper their opinions on social issues. Katherine found true love through her friendships that derived from the creation of the Society of friendships, which she started as a hobby during her time at school. Now, it is acknowledged as having the ability to serve as a model for the restoration of civilised society.

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