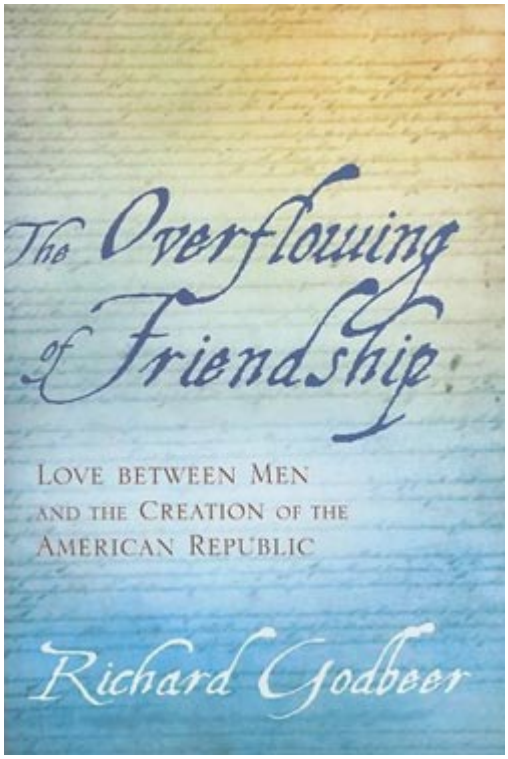
The Manly World of Love and Ritual



"I proceed, for all who are or have been young men / to tell the secret of my nights and days / To celebrate the need of comrades," wrote Walt Whitman in the *Calamus* section of *Leaves of Grass* (1860), a statement of allegiance to love between men he ultimately expands outward into a national vision of "inseparable cities with their arms around one another's necks." This discourse of fraternity is generally understood to reflect Whitman's homosexuality and its role in shaping the idiosyncratic genius of his democratic vision. While the mid-nineteenth century lies beyond the purview of Richard Godbeer's study, after reading *The Overflowing of Friendship* I cannot help but entertain a new reading of such lines. I wonder whether Whitman's expressions might not represent in part a late efflorescence of a deeply rooted and, as it turns out, mainstream historical phenomenon: a pervasive and influential culture of passionate male friendship that Godbeer convincingly establishes as common in the colonial and Revolutionary eras.

The friendships Godbeer describes here were intense sentimental bonds between two men (privileged white men, Godbeer is careful to note), not uncommonly formed in youth or in college and often sustained for many years, across temporary or prolonged separation, through marriages and many life vicissitudes. Carried out through ardent and at times highly stylized exchanges of letters as well as through personal interaction, male friendships were understood to depend on the virtues of sensibility and sympathy, which along with reason and moral instinct constituted essential parts of the era's integrated and virtuous individual. A man's choice of a particular friend was assumed to be based on admiration for that friend's sensibility and character;

men found in these friendships a context for being understood and encouraging their best selves. Such friendships were personal yet not private; they were typically known about and encouraged by the men's families and society, and for most men seemed to pose little or no conflict with developing other deep emotional bonds with a wife and family when the time came. Indeed, friendship and marital relationships were often understood as parallel or overlapping; as Godbeer writes, "Just as husbands and wives became members of their spousal families, though not related by blood, so friends also became elective kin. Family incorporated not only biological kin and conjugal relatives but also friends with whom one felt a sense of kinship" (8). Evidently living within such kinship circles, in which men could be sustained by lasting attachments to both wives and friends, was not just an ideal but a lived experience for at least some men.

The model of family and of elective kinship was also central to early American understandings of society. Thus *The Overflowing of Friendship* moves naturally from examining the dynamics and sources of male friendships to considering the role that such friendships and the values they embodied played in the Revolution and in the development of republican ideals in post-Revolutionary society. The first chapter begins by presenting the extended account of one complex and thoroughly documented emotional association, the friendship between several elite Philadelphians in their twenties, John Mifflin and Isaac Norris, and slightly later Mifflin's second friend, fifteen-year-old James Gibson. Even at two centuries' distance it can be a little tiring to be subjected to a detailed account of others' romantic ups and downs, but the chapter provides a rich entry into the range of feelings and self-understanding such relationships evoked, as well as the pronounced literary elements of their epistolary exchange. (The friends styled one another Leander, Castalio, and Lorenzo respectively, and their expressions to one another are simultaneously sincere and rhetorical, qualities not seen to be in opposition in eighteenth-century expression). The second chapter moves on to a wide range of sources to offer a more thorough overview of the structures and range of male friendships in early America, and how such friendships related to gender and social norms in the period. In the third chapter, Godbeer focuses on the relation of male love to traditions of spiritual communion, connecting the eighteenth-century phenomena he has described to earlier Puritan traditions of fraternal love as well as to the experiences of evangelicals and revivalists in the period of the Great Awakening—a fascinating discussion for anyone interested in religious studies and one that suggests male friendship is deeply woven into the origins of early America.

In the final chapters, Godbeer moves to consider the important role played by male friendship in the creation of the republic. First, he examines the role of fraternal love and the structures of elective kinship in the Continental Army, presenting views of the male attachments of such figures as Washington, Hamilton, and Lafayette. Even as the revolutionaries committed symbolic "parricide" against the British monarchy, as Godbeer explains, "they reimagined fatherhood itself in ways consistent with a more egalitarian model of society.

Washington would embody that new version of fatherhood, while the "'brother aides' who worked under him . . . embraced the spirit of 'mutual friendship and brotherly love' that patriots hoped would inspire and define their Revolution" (144). In the last chapter, in many ways the capstone of the book, Godbeer explores the profound consequences of the values of sentimental friendship to the emerging vision of the new republic. Citing the influence of moral philosophy derived from members of the Scottish Enlightenment such as David Hume, Adam Smith, and Frances Hutcheson, Godbeer explains how love between friends served to nurture the capacity for sympathy, and thus was hailed as an active social good; far from a merely personal form of relationship, it "would expand into a more comprehensive benevolence as personal relationships nurtured qualities that in turn enabled individuals to become better citizens" (157). Indeed, encomiums to friendship became staples of print culture during this period, and in many essays and poems the relation of marriage itself was figured as a form of friendship. In the last section of the chapter, a final piece clicks into place as Godbeer considers the notable growth of fraternal organizations in the period, most notably Masonic lodges. The freemasons saw themselves "as 'a society of friends, linked in a strong bond of brotherly love,' and committed to 'the advancement of humanity and good fellowship'" (183). While at times the object of suspicion and the butt of sexual satire implying associations with sodomy and sadomasochism, by 1800, Godbeer contends, "freemasonry and its celebration of brotherly love had become the epitome of respectable American manhood," and sought to spread across the nation "temples of brotherly love, dedicated to the promotion of moral affection, mutual benevolence, and national redemption" (185).

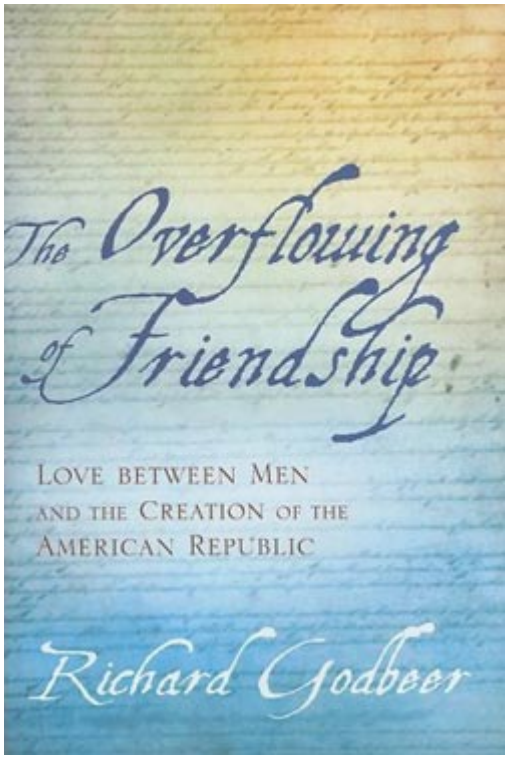
Throughout, *The Overflowing of Friendship* highlights important understandings about the complex relations in the eighteenth century between gender, emotions, and understandings of virtue. These differed significantly from most modern ones in that they assumed that male and female attributes coexisted within all individuals. As a result, men could "embrace roles and qualities identified as feminine without endangering their sense of themselves as men" (11). Thus while the culture of sensibility was associated with the feminine, cultivated men were expected to develop its virtues within themselves—and cultivating sentimental friendship was a prime means of doing so. Men evidently realized they were practicing an analogue to women's romantic friendships, and drew inspiration for their own relationships from female friendships.

Though Godbeer does not make it an explicit part of his argument, he implicitly asks us to do some hard thinking about what has been assumed to be a distinctly female phenomenon. If publicly-accepted romantic friendship does not emerge from anything unique to the gender expression or social conditions of women, as influentially described in Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's now-classic 1975 article "The Female World of Love and Ritual," what, if anything, does? This is thus an urgent work for feminist historians of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America to consider, suggesting we may need to revise some of our assumptions about women's culture, and one that strongly, if indirectly, makes the case that we cannot begin accurately to understand the past without an integrated

project of gender studies that does not split masculinity and femininity into separate areas of inquiry.

The most contentious scholarly issue the book raises is, of course, the question of sexuality. To reduce the question to its most basic and inevitable terms, were male friends lovers—often? Sometimes? Ever? The issue of physical sexual expression and the specter of homosexuality is inevitably evoked by countless expressions in the book's sources of passionate devotion and, especially, of the intimate private times in shared beds which many male friends seem to have looked forward to and treasured in memory. Homoeroticism is precisely a specter here: it haunts our modern reading of these early modern materials, yet it can be proven neither present nor absent. And how to interpret evidence of sexual behavior or desire in the absence of proof is a subject of heated methodological debate.

In the book's introduction, Godbeer (author of a major 2002 study, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*) stakes out a judiciously considered position at some length, emphasizing the very different ways early modern individuals understood sexuality and the possibilities of physical yet nonerotic love. Combined with the rarity with which *any* couples made reference to sexual intimacy in personal letters, the surviving evidence is simply impossible to read definitively—though occasional expressions such as Virgil Maxcy to William Blanding that "Sometimes … I think I have got hold of your doodle when in reality I have hold of the bedpost" (58) are suggestive to say the least. Godbeer's refusal to make claims beyond what the evidence supports has infuriated one activist gay author, Larry Kramer, who excoriates him—and ultimately academic queer studies in general—for supposedly refusing to engage with sexual histories lying in as plain view as we are ever going to find them. ("Homo Sex in Colonial America.") Yet Godbeer in fact merely refuses to sacrifice the evidentiary standards of the responsible historian to the motive of locating a queer "usable past," and instead emphasizes a point that in its own way might be at least as challenging to the limits of our own period's conventional norms of same-sex interaction: that "premodern American men embraced a range of possibilities for relating to other men that included intensely physical yet nonsexual relationships" (5). And whether or not sexual expression was in some cases involved, male friendship was central to normative public understandings of virtue and social cohesion in the new republic—the very opposite of a subterranean tradition of sexual relationships "hidden from history." The new vision of the past Godbeer offers, I would suggest, queers our understanding of the past just as much—if differently—than readings that insist on genital contact.



Richard Godbeer, The Overflowing of Friendship: Love Between Men and the Creation of the American Republic. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. xii+254 pp., hardcover, $35.00.

The Overflowing of Friendship is a relatively short yet wide-ranging and deeply researched book; Godbeer draws on an impressive array of archival materials and demonstrates his mastery of the many intersecting dimensions of scholarship pertaining to his case. A number of the elements and cases the volume touches on have been studied before, but never have they been assembled into such a coherent and compelling master narrative. Godbeer's scope as an early American historian is notable; the author of three previous books, he moves with authority between seventeenth-century Puritan contexts and the Revolutionary and early national periods. Most notably, perhaps, *The Overflowing of Friendship* is an extremely readable work. Godbeer has a clear and accessible style, and both within and across chapters his narrative, as befits its subject, flows pleasurably. Nor does Godbeer affect a pose of artificial neutrality. With admirable openness, he admits that he was "moved over and over again by the intensity of feelings that these men expressed and their clear sense of emotional commitment to one another" (xi), and he concludes his Epilogue with the statement that "this book is in part an elegy for a world of love, and even the possibility of love, that we have sadly lost—let us hope not forever" (197). Finishing the volume, I could not help but participate sympathetically in this elegiac response. Whatever a prospective reader's initial stance on relations between men or on contemporary studies of gender and sexuality, it seems to me virtually impossible one could read this book and not have something of a similar reaction—and most crucially, to have one's understanding of the emotional dynamics of the American past shifted in a subtle but unforgettable way.