

Early Modern Literary Studies

Communities and Companionship in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Introduction

Bronwen Price and Páraic Finnerty

University of Portsmouth

bronwen.price@port.ac.uk

paraic.finnerty@port.ac.uk

This special issue on early modern literature offers a set of new essays that re-evaluate the inter-relationship between communities and companionship across a range of contexts and genres.

Recent criticism has tended to individualise different types of historical communities, through, for example, royalist allegiance;¹ religious sectarianism;² female alliance;³ and epistolary and manuscript exchange.⁴ While this approach is important and such research has enriched our understanding of early modern literary contexts, it has also been inclined to view each community in isolation without enabling the possibility for significant cross-reference between different types of communities. The groundbreaking *Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature* is a notable exception in this respect.⁵ Providing the scope to expand across a broad spectrum of literary materials, it organises its discussions about literary texts and genres around the diverse range of institutional sites with which they interact (for example, the court, the city, the church, the household), thus highlighting how literary communities are often shaped by their connection to place. In line with this inclusive approach, this volume aims to

¹ See Jerome de Groot, *Royalist Identities* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Nicholas McDowell, *Poetry and Allegiance in the English Civil Wars: Marvell and the Cause of Wit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

² See Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion 1640-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Hilary Hinds, *God's Englishwomen: Seventeenth-Century Radical Sectarian Writing and Feminist Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); and Catie Gill, *Women in the Seventeenth-Century Quaker Community: A Literary Study of Political Identities, 1650-1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

³ See Carol Barash, *English Women's Poetry, 1649-1714: Politics, Community, and Linguistic Authority* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Nicole Pohl, *Women, Space and Utopia, 1600-1800* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

⁴ See Sarah Prescott, *Women, Authorship, and Literary Culture, 1690-1740* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁵ David Loewenstein and Janel Mueller (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Early Modern English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

highlight how different communities existed in close proximity to each other and to suggest how placing them in contiguity deepens our understanding of early modern community.

While early modern friendship has been given significant critical attention in recent years, the term ‘companionship’ implies a wider frame of reference as a relationship that signifies accompanying, associating or sharing with another (*OED*). In the letter to Peter Giles that prefaces his *Utopia* (1516), Thomas More identifies ‘companions’ in these broad terms: they incorporate those ‘whom either nature hath provided or chance hath made or’ those that one ‘hath chosen’ oneself, including friends and the members of one’s household, but not necessarily intimate relations.⁶ As Cornelia Wilde’s, Rosamund Paice’s and Bronwen Price’s essays indicate, the concept of friendship during this period often had quite specific implications of ideal classical amity. However, each of these essays shows how the concept of amity converges with other notions of affective companionship, such as marriage and Christian friendship, so as to complicate its terms. Moreover, companionship may also include other localised, specific relations, such as fellowship produced through mutual religious, social or professional values and links, as demonstrated in Stella Achilleos’s and Wilde’s essays, or shared experience that crosses social lines, such as that of female grief and mourning explored by Marion Wynne-Davies. The volume, therefore, examines a range of forms of companionship and considers their relationship to wider communities.

Such localised bonds may, indeed, become the basis of a wider set of ideas and shared values, and are often a means of working out, defining and identifying communal relations at a broader level. Indeed, as Price points out, Aristotle, a central reference point for early modern notions of community, views friendship as a building block for social cohesion more broadly, for ‘friendship is based on community’ and ‘seems to be the bond that holds communities together ... because concord seems to be something like friendship’.⁷ Exploring this relationship in an early modern spiritual context rather than a classical political one, Wilde shows how seraphic friendship both arises from membership of a Christian community and signals the means of entry into the heavenly community.

However, as this volume also demonstrates in a variety of ways, companionship may sometimes work in competition with the broader community in which it is located and

⁶ Thomas More, *Utopia in Three Early Modern Utopias*, ed. by Susan Bruce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 1-148 (p. 6).

⁷ Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by J. A. K. Thomson, 1953. Revised trans. and ed. Hugh Tredennick (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 215 and 201.

has the capacity to fragment and splinter as much as to unite and cohere (see Achilleos, Paice and Price, in particular). Inevitably, some of the essays focus more on community (Wynne-Davies, Achilleos) and others more on companionship (Wilde, Paice) in the attempt to explore the relationship between them.

Following Roger D. Sell's analysis, a number of the essays show how texts function as modes of communication leading to the development of communities.⁸ Thus Achilleos demonstrates how the broadside ballad contributes to the creation of alehouse communities. By contrast, Wilde examines how epistolary communication leads to the formation of a very specific type of spiritual friendship that characterised a particular aspect of mid-late seventeenth-century Christian culture. In each instance, the construction of communities through textual production is built, to a greater or lesser extent, on a notion of exclusion, as much as inclusion, of differentiation as well as identity.

In turn, while the essays treat texts as literary performances of friendship, companionship and community, they also often signal how literary texts create their own external communities of readers. Indeed, they sometimes offer advice to their specific target audiences, from spiritual counsel (Wilde) to the dangers of drinking (Achilleos) to female creativity (Price).

The Special Issue, then, investigates a variety of communities in terms of location, genre and concept, exploring ones which cross gender and social lines. The essays incorporate contexts that embrace courtly, pastoral, alehouse, urban, spiritual, Biblical and imaginary domains within genres that include the high and the low, public and private, from the epic to the broadside ballad, courtly poetry to intimate letter writing. The communities they address range from the familial to social fellowship, from the marital to the intimate bonds of platonic friendship, from ties forged through mourning to ones premised on drinking, including both homosocial and cross-gendered relationships. The essays consider both real (Wynne-Davies, Achilleos, Wilde) and imagined communities (Wynne-Davies, Paice, Price) and also treat the intersection between them, demonstrating the various ways in which literary texts explore and enact the complex dynamic between lived experience and ideal concept.

Diverse though the scope of this volume is, however, there are common threads running through the essays. The creation of communities is frequently a means of defining the identity of an otherwise marginalised group and/or enabling alternative identities from

⁸ Roger D. Sell, *Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000).

the norm to be expressed. Thus Wynne-Davies explores female communities united by mourning, Price examines platonic female friendship, Achilleos investigates lower-class identities and Wilde seraphic friendship.

To some extent, all of the essays indicate the ways in which the formation of diverse communities threaten or unsettle social orthodoxies. Wynne-Davies shows how the communal and excessive features of female mourning employed to assuage grief undermine the protocols of a patriarchal economy of mourning and dominant notions of the grieving process; Price shows how female friendship disturbs the ideals of masculine amity; Achilleos explores the disruptive potential of alehouse culture to the notions of good fellowship and social cohesion; Wilde investigates an alternative cross-gendered relationship to marriage, a seraphic friendship that offers a pathway to union with the divine; alternatively, Paice examines the capacity of companionate marriage to fracture divine principles and oneness with God. In turn, the troubling of social orthodoxies offers a means of exploring, reworking or stretching literary modes, whereby aesthetic questions become inseparable from the notions of community for which they provide expression, be that elegy or ballad, epic or utopian fantasy, epistle or tragicomic drama.

The articulation of communities often becomes a means of negotiating the relationship between theoretical models and practical material experience. Wynne-Davies places official notions of mourning practices alongside the actual experience of grief; Achilleos shows how the concept of good fellowship is unsettled by the ever-present threat of economic degradation informing the lives of the lower classes; Paice demonstrates how the ideal of companionate marriage set out in Milton's earlier divorce tracts is undermined by its practical evocation in *Paradise Lost*; Price shows how theories of ideal amity are wittily questioned in Cavendish's *The Blazing World* by the negotiations friendship must make both with internal desires and external pressures.

Several of the essays explore the competition between the exclusivity implied by companionship and the larger community of which they are or seem to be a part. For example, Achilleos shows how the broadsheet ballads register distinctions between lower-class social groups, signalling fragmentation within alehouse communities through the pervasive underlying anxiety about social displacement. Examining the very different contexts of respectively Biblical and Christian communities, Paice and Wilde identify the potential tensions that arise between an exclusive companionate relationship and the broader spiritual community. In contrast, Price explores the competition between the bonds of friendship and the social ties to which the friends are also bound.

While very different from one another, each community is borne out of a sense of exclusion and being haunted by the anxiety of division, dislocation and disunity, mirrored in the very first human community of Paradise. They are all underscored by the desire for restoration, the recovery of lost bonds and the search for new ones. Indeed, the uneasy relationship between the ideas of unity and fragmentation is a notion that informs all of the essays to a greater or lesser extent. By placing these communities alongside each other, this volume hopes to show how they reflect one another, as well as offering competing discourses for ideals of community.

The volume is framed by two essays treating very different types of female community at different ends of the chronological spectrum of the period under discussion. Marion Wynne-Davies's essay examines the representation of female communal mourning in works by Mary Sidney Herbert and Mary Wroth in a context in which displays of excessive and extreme grief, associated with such communities and Catholicism, were condemned; and rational, contemplative and masculine-inflected grief, connected with Protestantism, was promoted. Reversing these protocols, these women writers, in comparable but distinctive ways, validate the legitimacy of women's communal lamentation, reflecting their participation in such coteries—for example, at Wilton House, after the death of their relative, Philip Sidney—and exclusion from formal and public expressions of grief. Focusing on the language used in three of Sidney Herbert's translations, *A Discourse of Life and Death*, *The Triumph* and *The Tragedy of Antonie*, Wynne-Davies shows this writer's awareness and disruption of the rules of mourning that advocated stoicism and restraint, but permitted elaborate forms of memorialisation, such as tombs, monuments and public procession. *The Tragedy of Antonie* pointedly contrasts the excessive grief of the subjugated Egyptian people, in particular Cleopatra's, with the self-serving, status-orientated grief of their Roman conquerors. In sharp contrast to such contrived and pompous male memorialisations, which are implicitly condemned in Sidney Herbert's translation of Psalm 49, are communities of women expressing real grief in a private space. Sidney Herbert adds one such community to her text *The Triumph* and, more controversially, in her elegy 'The Dolefull Lay', written after Sidney's death, presents female shepherdesses mourning him in an excessive and extreme way. Like her aunt's work, Wroth's tragicomedy *Love's Victory* contrasts the genuine emotions of communities of female mourners with the materialism, fame and individual self-assertion associated with male displays of grief, but stresses even more vigorously the importance of female-centred networks of support and companionship. Wroth's ability to reconcile community and companionship here is in direct contrast to one of the key scenes of her aunt's *The Tragedy of Antonie* in which Cleopatra turns away from her female companions to express her inconsolable grief.

Interrogating the relationship between female communities and female companionship, Bronwen Price's essay explicates the ways in which Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* has her protagonist, the Empress, explore the workings of various types of internal communities in the alternative domain called the Blazing World. These communities, over which the Empress is given absolute power, are far from ideal, suggesting the limitations of her sovereignty and raising questions about her ability to govern. This remains the case until, feeling isolated and disconnected, the Empress invites the Duchess of Newcastle to enter her soul to assist her in the writing of a cabbala. Although the focus of the *Blazing World* shifts from the issue of community to that of companionship, both are shown to be inextricably connected on a theoretical and practical level. Price demonstrates the way Cavendish evokes but unsettles the ideals prescribed by classical amity that imply that such unity involves a loss of personal identity and necessitates that each friend is a complete and self-sufficient individual before they merge into one. Instead, the Duchess and the Empress's friendship allows the possibility of an intermingling of souls that preserves individual identity, and of a companionship that produces autonomy and makes each friend an equal and similar, yet separate individual. Moreover, each woman's self-sufficiency and sovereignty are increased by her creation of inner communities that, in turn, generate social amicability within the Blazing World. This essay, therefore, presents a utopian companionship that is open, joyful and conversational, and centred on the preservation of the inner integrity of both friends, and the facilitation and encouragement of their personal creativity. This is underlined by the Epilogue that concludes with the Duchess offering to create 'another world for another friend'. Yet, as Price shows, Cavendish's presentation of companionship is also essentially transformative and outward looking: not only do these companions have the power to transform and be transformed by each other, their friendship is always located in and through their on-going negotiation with other communities.

In contrast to these two essays, Stella Achilleos's examines male communities that frequented urban alehouses and are represented in black-letter broadside ballads. The complex representation of communal drinking, sociability and male camaraderie in these ballads derives from a context in which the increased numbers of alehouses in London had become sites of concern for authorities and the middle and upper classes who regarded them as places of drunkenness, idleness and criminality, where, as many contemporary pamphleteers implied, vagrants and vagabonds congregated. Although some of these ballads present the alehouses as sites of social gathering associated with male homosociality, respite and the joy of cheap food and drink, others, echoing the views of the pamphleteers, stress the dangers posed to this community by lazy, idle and

itinerant individuals, as well as by thieves and penny-pinchers. In some ballads, for instance, manual workers are celebrated, whereas upper- and lower-class idlers are belittled and vagrants absolutely condemned.

This may reflect, as Achilleos suggests, the fears manual workers had about their own social and economic instability, the always-present threat of degradation and of losing their social position, as well as, by implication, their place within the alehouse community. The ballads, therefore, create a class-inflected male homosocial community through strategies of inclusion and exclusion, but present this community as an unstable site where solidarity and collectivity are as fragile and precarious as each member's social standing. Thus, the celebration and affirmation of male companionship and good fellowship is undercut by the possibility of their loss. This is evident in the ballads, some of which praise the sociability of drinking, associating it with mirth and the breakdown of social hierarchies, and others that warn about the suffering and social and economic degradation caused by excessive drinking. This essay reveals not merely the diversity of the subject matter of the ballads, but also points to the complexity and heterogeneity of early modern lower-class subjectivities and communities.

The central essay within this special issue, Cornelia Wilde's, focuses on a male-female spiritual relationship by examining the extant letters, the majority dating from 1665, exchanged between Simon Patrick, a clergyman, and Elizabeth Gauden, one of his parishioners. The chaste, impassioned companionship, revealed in these letters, is an example of a seraphic friendship, which centred on spiritual advice and guidance and was firmly located within an early modern community of parishioners. This epistolary relationship indicates the ways each friend sought to guide the other's spiritual development and journey towards a fuller relationship with God. Examining the Christian and philosophical framework that underpinned this intimate cross-gendered friendship, and Patrick's own connections with the contemporary philosophical movement known as Cambridge Platonism, Wilde suggests that this affectionate and intellectual relationship put Platonic metaphysics and Christian concepts of divine and human love into practice. This epistolary seraphic companionship, which also included personal meetings, involved discussion of devotional practices and theological and philosophical issues, as well as discourse on more mundane matters. Thus, like other chaste cross-gendered friendships of the period, this one provided women with mediated and vicarious access to wider intellectual communities. Moreover, drawing on evidence in Patrick's published sermons, Wilde suggests that this type of friendship was not in conflict with the wider Christian community or the notion of universal charity, but was an intense and exemplary Christian interpersonal relationship. Again, this essay makes clear that this example of companionship was compatible with and had a role

within various communities, including religious and intellectual ones, and offered foundational preparation for each friend's incorporation into the heavenly community.

In direct contrast to this benevolent view, Rosamund Paice's essay suggests that from its very first Biblical occurrence human companionship has been fraught, as has been its relationship with the larger communities in which it is always already located. Through a close interrogation of the language of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Paice reveals that the prelapsarian companionship of Adam and Eve was far from perfect or ideal, and certainly not as harmonious as Milton presents it in his *Tetrachordon*. In *Paradise Lost*, the companionship of Adam and Eve disrupts the companionate-marriage model Milton sets forth in his divorce tracts, but also unsettles the classical tradition of amity, which Milton drew on to set out the achievability of the companionate-marriage ideal. The essay suggests that the problems of companionship in this poem rest on the tension between the language that describes and the human being who enacts companionship. This is caused not merely by the practical application of an ideal set out in language, but is also a means of finding a way of representing the failure of this ideal back into language. Examining the sections of the poem that represent Adam's request of God for a companion, Adam and Eve's asymmetrical relationship and Adam's companionship with Raphael, Paice suggests that prior to the Fall of Man, companionship, although desired, was doomed from and by its very conception. The recurrence of exclusion, dependence, exclusivity, hierarchy and idolatry in the various forms of companionship in the poem, as this essay shows, reflects elements that are central to the relationship between God and humanity, but also between God and his other creations. If so, then Milton's dramatisation of the impossibility of human companionship, according to Paice, is symptomatic of contradictions within the makeup of the broader spiritual community ordained by God.