The Meaning of Friendship in Renaissance Florence

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Quite appropriately, I’ve written this in honor of the “family” of friends I have found in the SCA. Cicero once complained to his friend Atticus that “…in all the multitude I cannot find one with whom I can make an unguarded joke or sigh familiarly.” I have been much more fortunate.
INTRODUCTION

During my study of Renaissance Italy, I noted that the citizens of Florence behaved in social and political situations according to terms of personal obligations owed to *parenti, vicini e amici*¹. An individual was entwined from birth to death in a network of overlapping circles of personal associates, beginning with kinsmen and extending outward to include relatives by marriage, neighbors, and friends they were bound by honor to assist and promote in all endeavors. This research offers, not a conclusive description of Florentine friendship, but rather an introduction to fifteenth-century perspectives on the relationship.

Florentines were enamored with the classical conceptions of *amicizia*² such as those written about in Cicero’s *De Amicitia*³ and Aristotle’s vision of the positive powers of friendships. Renaissance men understood Augustine’s grief at the death of his boyhood companion, as related in his *Confessions*: “Whatever I had shared with him, without him became sheer torment...I hated all places because he was not in them” (Sheed, 1970).

Renaissance Florentines had a much different view of the role of friendship than we do in modern society. Modern definitions place friendship in a fluid context as a bond freely contracted between two willing individuals that is separate from family or other social ties (Konstan, 1997). This examination focuses on the ideas of friendship present in Renaissance Italy. Friendship in Florence was not an alternative relationship to kinship, marriage, or patronage but was embedded in those bonds. Friends were embraced as honorary fathers, brother, and sons (Alighieri, 2008).

During the Renaissance era of 1450-1600 the social self and the private self were the same. In fifteenth-century sources there was no distinction between the two in terms of friendship (Gill, 1972. The modern obsession with a search for sincerity in friendship and attempts to separate political or public aspirations from private ones did not exist in the small society found in the Italian city-state of Florence (Trexler, 1991). Modern historians have dismissed many Renaissance friendships as patronage. For Florentines, relationships between patrons and apprentices were an essential form of close friendship (Archive, 1429). The pattern

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¹ Relatives, neighbors, and friends  
² Friendship  
³ On Friendship
of Florentine relationships, which Leon Battista Alberti called the *filo e tessura*\(^4\) of friendship, cannot be applied to modern formulas. For example, in Renaissance Florence the most significant patronage relationships frequently existed between social equals, which we see rarely today (Alberti, 1973).

Friendship, love, and trust were not defined by the absence of necessary bonds, but based on the fact that those mundane bonds required friendship, love, and trust in order to function properly. Friendship was framed by classical, civic, and Christian traditions. Borrowing from these traditions, friendship was defined as familial bond, as Christian love, and as civic concern. For example, rather than measuring affection with an abstract definition, Florentines sought to “only connect” (Lavin, 1993). The range of friendship in Florence was vast; ranging from utilitarian, companionist, erotic, and spiritual (Brunt, 1988).

This paper primarily explores friendships consisting of two or more men. This is because Florence was a very patriarchal society in fifteenth-century Europe and friendship was seen as a male construct. Women were regarded as imperfect and considered incapable of ideal friendship. Women also did not have a role in the creation of civic record, which leaves their relationships without as rich as voice as their male cohorts (Robin, 2007).

**FOUNDATION OF THE CONCEPTS**

In his *De Amicitia*\(^5\), Cicero argued that friendship commonly involved three main elements or motives – profit, virtue, or pleasure, but that only the alliance of loving, virtuous men not out for personal gain could be considered true or ideal friendship (Cicero, 1923). The classical Ciceronian definition of friendship tended to conclude that true friendship was almost impossible to achieve. However, Renaissance Florentines turned to the supreme ideal friend, God, or his son, Jesus Christ as examples of true friendship. Mariotto Davanzati, another poet and patrician of Florence, wrote that God’s mercy shows us the true function of friendship:

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\(^4\) The thread and fabric

\(^5\) On Friendship
“a friend helps us...by bearing the punishment for our faults...for our sins, and to expiate such crimes put his Son on the cross as our friend” (Weisman, 1982).

In Alberti’s treatise *Della Famiglia* in 1434 he wrote about friendship and reassessed Cicero’s ideas using his own experience (Konstn, 1997). Much of what Alberti wrote echoes popular sentiment expressed in the *ricordi* of merchants and men of power, but it also reflects his personal experience which had been particularly harsh. Leon Battista Alberti was an illegitimate son of an old distinguished family exiled from Florence in 1401 for opposing the standing political regime. In 1428 the Florentine government lifted the ban of exile against the Alberti, allowing their return when he was 24 years old. Alberti presented friendship as a defensive strategy for survival in a cruel world where enemies and friends work side by side daily as his family had to during exile.

**PROFIT**

In economics, fifteenth century Florence was a bridge between the medieval and modern worlds. Like friendship, economic and business transactions such as loans, partnerships, and credit depended on trust (*fede, fiducia*), and trust depended on the existence of personal ties between the participants. Florentines did business with relatives, neighbors, and friends rather than with strangers, so trust was a necessary basis for business as well as friendship (Brucker, 2005).

For example, the Medici bank was managed almost entirely by relatives or close friends bound to Cosimo de’ Medici by ties of love and trust through blood or marriage [such as the Martelli, Portinari, Sassetti, and Tornabuoni]. After Cosimo was exiled, instead of failing, his bank flourished. Cosimo attributed this to his friends’ determination to maintain the trust their relationship commanded (de Roover, 1963). Similarly, many Florentines shared the view expressed by Cicero in his treatise *On Friendship*, that an ideal friendship was one where self-interest was of minimum importance.

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*6 On the Family*

*7 diaries*
To showcase the use of the Italian language as an equal of Latin, Leon Battista Alberti organized a competition for the best poem on the subject of friendship. This *certame coronario* brought men of every rank to listen to the recital of eight entries describing friendship. In imitation of similar competitions held in ancient Rome, this was held in an enormous forum, the cathedral, where significant civic and religious events were often staged (Gorni, 1972). The competition was held in the cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore on October 22, 144 and sponsored by the Medici family.

Alberti’s own entry in the contest was a short and sarcastic verse suggesting that true friendship dwelt in heaven and seldom descended to earth to face her mortal enemy, envy. Envy was also a theme of the writings of Cosimo de’ Medici who was exiled in 1433 by his political opponents (Grafton, 2000). The envy these men both spoke of could be tempered by the bond of friendship if, as Cosimo taught his sons, you link potential enemies to you by business and marriage.

In the poetry contest Cicero’s ideals were referred to frequently. Aristotle was scarcely mentioned, although his *Politics* was well known, showing Cicero to be the classical hero of the early Florentine Renaissance. Even so, Aristotle’s view that the “perfect” friendship is between the good and virtuous is more closely aligned with Florentine reality in the Renaissance than Cicero’s idealized version (see Figure 1) (Aristotle, n.d.).

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8 Poetry contest
Anselmo Calderoni, herald and entertainer to the magistrates of Florence, focused on Cicero’s authority by entering a poem stressing the importance of motive for making friends. Calderoni’s verses speak of the benefits of a friendship contracted in pure love (Konstan, 1997):

“a friendship solely for his own ends, is a travesty of a friend.”

Calderoni also touched on Cicero’s idea in his lengthy entry stating this of all friends:

“…I conclude in effect that the friendship of God is perfect, and never false; and yes, all else is partisanship” (Cicero, 1968 pp. 290-291).
The nature of friendship was a favorite subject in private diaries and notebooks (zibaldoni) of the Florentines, who were obsessed with record-keeping. In this poetry contest the nature of friendship was brought to the attention of the city at large. In addition to Florence itself, within ten days more than 200 copies of the entries were transcribed and sent to the neighboring royalty and educated men to be evaluated and praised (Bertolini, 1993).

The poetic entry of Francesco d’Altobianco degli Alberti, a fellow exile of Leon Battista, presented utilitarian friendship in a positive light when operated within the context of faith and religion:

“the principal qualities it [friendship] includes… generosity, munificence, and beneficence (grazia, munificenzia, benefizio). Each of these has its proper function; along with truth, trustworthiness (fede) and religion, which maintain our good judgment” (Bertolini, 1993 pp. 198)

The essence of Renaissance friendship was the obligation to assist one’s friend in all endeavors and to intercede with others on his behalf. This mimics the Florentine view of heaven as a spiritual court consisting of patron saints who act as avvocati\(^9\) with God on our behalf (Weisman, 1982). Images of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints were images of supreme friendship to the Florentines. This is illustrated in Fra Angelico’s altarpiece commissioned by Cosimo de’ Medici in the 1440s for the high altar of the church of the Convent of San Marco (see Figure 2). Cosimo, as a patron and friend, provided father-like assistance to his clients and friends. In return for his devotion and charity to the church, Cosimo’s patron saints, Cosmas and Damian, protected and interceded for him before God, the supreme Father and judge. Like Cosimo on earth for his friends, Saint Cosmas in heaven was a direct link to the supreme intercessors, the Virgin and Christ Jesus (see Figure 3).

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\(^9\) Lawyer, one who advocates your case
Figure 2. Fra Angelico’s *Virgin and Child with Saints Cosmas and Damian*

Figure 3. *The Intercession of Christ and the Virgin*, attributed to Lorenzo Monaco
Such religious ways of thinking may be foreign to the modern audience, but relating heavenly and earthly patronage to friendship shaped the course of personal action in Renaissance Florence. Friendship as experienced by fifteenth-century Florentines were revealed in images as shown, but were also written about in private letters. Many patronage letters spoke of the affection and love shown between friends.

**PLEASURE**

Raffaello Bonciani wrote to Lorenzo de’ Medici, Cosimo’s grandson, that his request for assistance was prompted by “love and trust” (Medici Archive, 1436). Piero de’ Ricci, asking a favor of Cosimo’s son Giovanni, assured him that “when something occurs to you that I could do that would please you, I will do it with love and fidelity” and signed his letter “your brother”. Niccolo Bonvanni, also requesting Giovanni’s help, appealed to the “affection” and “goodwill and love that Cosimo and all of you bear toward me and my family” (Medici Archive, 1472 and 1445).

The majority of the hundreds of thousands of patronage letters from fifteenth-century Florence were addressed to members of the Medici family. Letters from close Medici friends and residents of the city give us insight into the complex nature of friendships within the framework of patronage. The Medici family’s most intimate associates used simple phrases as well as flowery expressions. Ugo della Stufa replied to an invitation from Giovanni by saying “Would that it were possible to sprout wings to please you” (Medici Archive, 1445).

Patronage was the pursuit of mutual honor and profit, and was also considered a pleasure. Patronage letters were instrumental in expressing the benefits, responsibilities, and rights inherent to these friendships. Once a relationship was firmly established the letters then served as a conduit through which personal feelings were expressed. Friendships among members of patronage networks were nourished by the familial feelings that their language evoked. Sons inherited from their fathers the responsibility to love and protect friends. Orlando de’ Medici
wrote to Piero di Cosimo in 1436 “recalling to memory the ancient friendship maintained between the men of our houses both past and present” (Medici Archive, 1436).

The following letter from Cosimo de’ Medici illustrates how patronage operated though a chain of obligations passed on from one generation, and one friend, to another:

“Rienzo di Biagio is my dear friend, and similarly his father was always a friend of all of us here, and as he drew near to his death, in his will he left in our hands the affairs of his son…so you can see that I am obliged in everything that concerns him to give him all my favor and aid. And since he will be coming here and will need your help and favor I have advised him that he should go to you, and that for love of me, in everything honest and reasonable you will give him your aid and favor…considering whatever aid and favor you do for him as done for me myself” (Medici Archive, 1445).

Civic friendships were fostered by writing letters, visiting, and exchanging gifts. Ugo della Stufa apologized to Giovanni di Cosimo “for not having fulfilled my duty to write”, while Iacopo Lottieri wrote from a distant city that it was so long since he had heard from Giovanni “that our old friendship seems to me to be extinguished” (Medici Archive 1436). While traveling in the Veneto, the prosperous Medici banker Giovanni Tornabuoni assured Cosimo that “I have made the obligatory visits to those cardinals and other friends” (Medici Archive 1445). Such visits refreshed relationships and paid honor to those in power.

When one could not visit in person a gift was often sent as a tribute and a source of pleasure. Zanobi Bonvanni wrote “Since I was too far away to be able to speak with you face to face, through faith and with love, I consider to be with you in person…I have been hunting these feast-days, wishing to do my duty” (Kent, 1978). His note was accompanied by a gift of game. For Florentines, *benivolenza* \(^{10}\) was an instrumental and natural part of friendship, manifested in by letter writing, visiting, and gift giving (Boschetto, 2003).

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\(^{10}\) *benevolence*
LASTING EXPRESSIONS

Formal expressions and recognitions of friendships could be displayed with a public promise or handshake. Others felt the need to notarize documents or swear oaths on the Bible or on relics. Many Renaissance men sent their friends portrait medals as a token of affection in accordance with the passage from Cicero’s *De Amicitia* (Waldman, 2000):

“He who looks upon a true friend looks, as it were, upon a sort of image of himself.”

By the early sixteenth-century, the friendship portrait had become a standard vehicle for the expression of friendship. The portrait *Two Men with a Passage from Cicero’s “On Friendship”* was a painting of two of the artist’s closest friends (see Figure 4). The passage from Cicero on the sheet of paper one of the figures is holding states:

“Friendship embraces innumerable ends; turn where you will it is ever at your side; no barrier shuts it out; it is never untimely and never in the way” (Cicero, 1923).

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 4. Iacopo Pontormo, Two Men with a Passage from Cicero’s On Friendship*
Painted works were used to depict the bond between friends and the images acted, like patrons, as mediators to the community at large (Brown, 2006). The Medici incorporated not only their immediate family, but also household associates and faithful friends into chapel portraits and commissioned works. In the *Procession of the Magi* portrait, Cosimo is pictured along with his sons Piero and Giovanni, his illegitimate son Carlo, Piero’s sons Lorenzo and Giovanni, friends of the Sforza, Malatesta, and Tornabuoni families (see Figure 5). These lastimg mementos represent the rich Renaissance concept of friendship in which alliances with men blend with the honoring of God, and the friendship of the saints assert the essence of Florentine will on the earth and in the heavens (Cadogan, 2000).
CLOSING

Relationships in Renaissance Florence were defined by the presence of necessary bonds, but enhanced by the fact that those mundane bonds required true friendship, love, and trust in order to function properly. Borrowing from established traditions, friendship was defined as familial bond, as Christian love, as affection for one’s associates, and as civic concern. Florentines sought to connect with one another based on spiritual and classical examples and ideals. After studying primary sources illustrating the range of amicizia\textsuperscript{11} we are better equipped as anachronists to understand the ties that bound the Florentines together and to more accurately internalize the mindset and motivations of this society as it entered a period of enlightenment and grandeur.

\textsuperscript{11} friendship
REFERENCES


