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# ARTICLES AND ESSAYS



## Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England *by Alan Bray*

### I. SEXUALITY AND THE HISTORIANS

This paper is a commentary on two images that exercised a compelling grip on the imagination of sixteenth-century England, if the many references left to them are a reliable guide to its dreams and fears. One is the image of the masculine friend. The other is the figure called the sodomite. The reaction these two images prompted was wildly different; the one was universally admired, the other execrated and feared: and yet in their uncompromising symmetry they paralleled each other in an uncanny way. Why this was and what it tells us of Early Modern England is what I have set out to explore in this paper.<sup>1</sup>

In doing this I hope though to suggest, by the way as it were, a more general conclusion also about the study of sexuality in the past and how it might develop. What then is this study? Its starting point is a recognition of the extreme degree to which the forms of sexuality are the creation of culture and change with it; and this is as true of homosexuality as it is of sexuality more broadly.

Elizabethan England was no exception to this. There are great differences between the 'sodomite' of Elizabethan England and the 'homosexual' of our own, which I shall mention in this paper, but these differences are only one expression of the more general fact of how relative are ideas about sexuality, homosexuality included. It is this that has allowed historians to begin to write an account of changing attitudes to homosexuality in the past which is more than a chronicle of toleration and persecution, and the importance of such an approach has been widely recognised; and rightly so.<sup>2</sup>

Yet this recognition seems to me in very many ways undercut, for the study not only of homosexuality but also of sexuality more widely in the past is still profoundly marginal to the interests of most historians. It may be interesting, sexuality usually is, but is it more? Few historians I suspect would be willing to claim *that* with any conviction.

The thesis I wish to put forward in this paper is I recognise for many historians a controversial one. It is that this marginality is mistaken. To demonstrate my case I propose to follow in this paper an analysis of the sin of Sodom in Elizabethan England that locates it not in the restricted field of the history of sexuality but at the centre of those concerns with power and its organisation that have been the traditional concerns of historians.

It is here that the curious symmetry between the sodomite and the masculine friend leads us. We need to begin among the shadows on the edge of social life, with the fears and fantasies of Elizabethan England, but if we press them we will come I believe to the very centre of Early Modern England. We will go though by a road, which I hope to lay open in this paper, which the Elizabethans themselves were unwilling to acknowledge was there.

## II. THE SODOMITE

Elizabethan society was one which lacked the idea of a distinct homosexual minority, although homosexuality was none the less regarded with a readily expressed horror. In principle it was a crime which anyone was capable of, like murder or blasphemy.

This is the New England minister Thomas Shepard in his *The Sincere Convert* of 1641:

thy heart is a foul sink of all atheism, sodomy, blasphemy, murder, whoredom, adultery, witchcraft, buggery; so that, if thou hast any good thing in thee, it is but as a drop of rosewater in a bowl of poison; where fallen it is all corrupted.

It is true thou feelest not all these things stirring in thee at one time . . . but they are in thee like a nest of snakes in an old hedge. Although they break not out into thy life, they lie lurking in thy heart.

It was, according to John Rainolds, not only a 'monstrous sin against nature' but also one to which 'men's natural corruption and viciousness is prone'. It is why it was sometimes attributed to drunkenness and why a sixteenth century minister accused of sodomy said when first confronted that what he had done he had done in his sleep. The logic is the same as that of Thomas Shepard. It was not part of the individual's nature: it was part of all human nature and could surface when the mind was dulled or sleeping, much as someone might commit murder in a drunken fit or in a dream.<sup>3</sup>

But the Elizabethan 'sodomy' differed from our contemporary idea of 'homosexuality' in a number of other ways also. It covered more hazily a whole range of sexual acts, of which sexual acts between people of the same sex were only a part. It was closer rather to an idea like debauchery. Another difference is suggested by the phrase John Rainolds uses: for all its vagueness, it was thought of as an essentially masculine sin. But it differed more fundamentally also in that it was not only a sexual crime. It was also a political and a religious crime and it was this that explains most clearly why it was regarded with such dread, and it is this point that I propose to dwell on in this paper.

One can see this sharply outlined in the accusations made in Elizabeth's reign against the rebellious nobleman Edward de Vere by his erstwhile fellow conspirators. The picture they draw is of a man who was not only a sodomite but also an enemy of society: a traitor and a man given to lawless violence against his enemies. He was also they tell us an habitual liar, an atheist and a blasphemer. The charge of sodomy was not merely added to the list. It symbolised it. If this man was a rebel against nature was it surprising that he was also a rebel against society and the truth (or the Truth) that supported it? Sodomy, the jurist Edward Coke wrote, was '*crimen laesae majestatis*, a sin horrible committed against the king: and this is either against the king celestial or terrestrial'. It was one of those horrible crimes according to James I that a king was bound in conscience never to forgive. It was in this way that the ubiquitous association of sodomy with treason and heresy was put together and why one encounters it so commonly in the polemics of Reformation Europe.<sup>4</sup>

### III. THE MASCULINE FRIEND

The image of the masculine friend was far removed from this, an image of intimacy between men in stark contrast to the forbidden intimacy of homosexuality. It is an image which will be very familiar to students of Elizabethan poetry and drama, where it frequently appears; but as a starting point for interpreting it the image there is misleading, for when we see how it was used in the tumble of daily life we see something more immediately practical than the literary images at first glance reveal. The 'voices of yourselves, your tenants and such other friends as you can procure'. That was how a northern landowner was asked for his support in an election early in the seventeenth century. 'It were pity to lose him' wrote an Elizabethan commander in the Low Countries about the possible loss of an influential supporter, 'for he is indeed marvelously friended'.<sup>5</sup>

It is in this way we see the word being used in such mundane documents and behind it is a web of social relations which will be recognised readily by students of Elizabethan society. What it points to is that network of influential patrons, of their clients and suitors and friends at court which

were its subtle bonds. A concept so necessary to social life was far removed from the 'uncivil' image of the sodomite, yet there was still between them a surprising affinity, as in some respects they occupied a similar terrain.

An illustration of this is the way each required a physical closeness although after four centuries have passed it is perhaps not immediately obvious how crucial this was to the way friendship worked. One striking expression of this is what it meant in Early Modern England to be someone's 'bedfellow'. This was a society where most people slept with someone else and where the rooms of a house led casually one into the other and servants mingled with their masters. Such a lack of privacy usually made who shared a bed with whom into a public fact. It was also a potentially meaningful one, for beds are not only places where people sleep: they are also places where people talk. To be someone's 'bedfellow' suggested that one had influence and could be the making of a fortune.

It is in that sense that the Countess of Oxford used the word when she complained about the influence a certain John Hunt was exercising over her son: 'Hunt hath impudently presumed to be his bedfellow and otherwise used him most unrespectively'. Anne Bacon uses 'bed-companion' in the same sense in a letter to Anthony Bacon in 1594: 'your brother . . . keepeth that bloody Pérez, as I told him then, yea as a coach-companion and bed-companion'. But the most striking illustration I know of this is an entry Archbishop Laud made in his diary in August 1625:

That night in a dream the Duke of Buckingham seemed to me to ascend into my bed, where he carried himself with much love towards me, after such rest wherein wearied men are wont exceedingly to rejoice; and likewise many seemed to me to enter the chamber who did see this.

Archbishop Laud's dream is of his patron the great Duke of Buckingham but the point of the dream is in its conclusion, that the powerful mark of favour he was dreaming of was public. It is in this sense also that we should read the now famous remark of George Villiers when he looked back with gratitude in a letter to James I, to that night when first 'the bed's head could not be found between the master and his dog'.<sup>6</sup>

The common bed shared in the public eye was only one expression of this. When two men kissed or embraced the gesture had the same meaning.

But I doubt not so soon as his name shall come into the knowledge of men and his worthiness be sounded in the trump of fame, but that he shall be not only kissed but also beloved of all, embraced of the most, and wondered at of the best.

That is the editor of the *Shepherd's Calendar* in 1579 introducing its hopeful author and such a public kiss carried the same meaning as the equally public fact of being a powerful man's bedfellow. At the beginning of

Davenant's play *The Cruel Brother* of 1627 one of the characters points to just such public embraces as evidence of a certain Lucio's influence with the duke: and it is in such terms that Thomas Howard recorded Robert Carr's rise to power at the court of James I:

The Prince leaneth on his arm, pinches his cheek, smooths his ruffled garment . . . We are almost worn out in our endeavours to keep pace with this fellow in his duty and labour to gain favour, but all in vain; where it endeth I cannot guess, but honours are talked of speedily for him.

This publicly displayed intimacy is part of what Francis Bacon in his essay *Of Followers and Friends* called 'countenance', the appearance of a patron's evident favour; and its withdrawal could mean ruin. This is what Henry Howard later advised the now greatly powerful Robert Carr:

There is no better way to pare their nails . . . than by some withdrawing of your favourable countenance, which I do assure you is a groundyard to their boldness and a discharge of many watchful ears and eyes.<sup>7</sup>

Such kisses and embraces were for such 'watchful ears and eyes' as these, as was the common bed Archbishop Laud dreamed of; but the physical intimacy they expressed was not the only sign recognised by the Elizabethans of a friendship between two men. It was expected to be matched by an equivalent emotional bond, and this had a part in the conventions of friendship as deep as the physical intimacy I have been describing. One can see this at length in the letters Antonio Pérez wrote, the renegade secretary of Philip II, while part of the circle around the Earl of Essex when he visited England in the 1590s. Love between men is the theme of these letters, which are suffused by an understood emotional attachment both between Essex and his servants and among them. Typical of many more is the letter of Antonio Pérez in which a mere note arranging a meeting in the morning becomes an elaborate reflection, as moving now as it was then, on the nature of one man's desire for another. We should not be misled though by Antonio Pérez's neoplatonic decorations: this is in essence the same language that a great earl uses when he signs a stern note to one of his clients 'Your loving master' or a great lord when he closes a message with the injunction to love this messenger, adding significantly that the recipient of the letter should also receive its bearer into his protection. In these letters Antonio Pérez was merely using the ubiquitous convention.<sup>8</sup>

One might well wonder of course how genuine were such expressions of affection. Antonio Pérez was a man on the make and those sentiments he scattered about rarely convince. But one can see alongside his friendships others which had all the utilitarian functions the Elizabethans expected of friendship and yet did contain within them obviously genuine emotion. The correspondence between Michael Hikes, the patronage secretary of Lord

Burghley, and his friend John Stubbe (now in the Lansdowne Manuscripts) is one of these. We see Michael Hickes putting out money on John Stubbe's behalf. We see him trying to obtain payment of a debt due to him. We also see John Stubbe asking Michael Hickes to use his influence on behalf of a friend. But these letters also document an intense personal friendship which began when they were students together in Cambridge and which in its time included both passion and jealousy. In 1570 we see Michael Hickes writing John Stubbe an emotional and jealous letter complaining of his friendship with a friend of their Lincoln's Inn days. Which of the two, he asks angrily, do you love the best? And one can see from a teasing letter John Stubbe sent him in 1575 that he was still prickly about this friendship several years later. There are also in these letters evident expressions of affection in quieter times and a glimpse in a late letter of John Stubbe of that youth, as he put it, that they spent together.<sup>9</sup>

One can see the same combination of usefulness and affection in the letters of Tobie Matthew and Francis Bacon. But there is a striking isolated illustration of the same thing in the emotion evident in a letter written after a long and anxious separation to Casiodoro de Reina, the minister for several years of the Spanish protestant congregation in London, by his friend and collaborator Antonio del Corro. If it had not been for his wife, he writes, he would have hastened to him long ago, the very day 'I saw and realised how impossible it was for me to live without you'. He then goes on to explain that in desperation he had set off impetuously to find Reina, without even knowing where to set out for, when 'almost miraculously' he received Reina's letter. He then turns from this emotional introduction to the business in hand: the arrangements he is making for the printing of Reina's translation of the Bible into Spanish.<sup>10</sup>

Emotional bonds such as these had their place alongside the physical links of friendship but in contrast these were directed inwards to the participants themselves not outwards to the world at large. They were an assurance that their friendship would remain, in good fortune or bad: a sign and a telling guarantee that they could indeed rely on each other.

Such comments give us a vantage point from which to judge the elegant garments in which friendship was often dressed in Elizabethan England, as much in its daily use as in a poem or a play or a piece of imaginative literature. Typical of the carelessly beautiful manner in which it was usually presented is the picture of Euphues's friendship with his friend Philautus in John Lyly's Elizabethan novel *Euphues*:

But after many embracings and protestations one to another they walked to dinner, where they wanted neither meat, neither music, neither any other pastime; and having banqueted, to digest their sweet confections they danced all that afternoon. They used not only one board but one bed, one book (if so be it they thought not one too many). Their friendship augmented every day, insomuch that the one could not refrain

the company of the other one minute. All things went in common between them, which all men accounted commendable.

This is idealised of course; and there are literary echoes here, especially of Cicero's essay on friendship *De Amicitia* and of the numerous ornate treatises on love which popularised Ciceronian and neoplatonic ideas on friendship. Indeed the same could be said of all the letters between friends I have referred to. But when one looks at the details of this account one sees something surprisingly more mundane. Its material is made up virtually entirely of the conventions I have been writing of: the embraces and the protestations of love, the common bed and the physical closeness, the physical and emotional intimacy. All had their ready parallels in the accustomed conventions of Elizabethan friendship. Its idealisation consisted rather in what it missed out: its tactful omission of those bonds of mutual interest of which the everyday signs were such conventions. The engaging artifice is part of a tough reality, and the realistic comment to set by it is that of Francis Bacon at the end of his essay on followers and friends when he says that such friendship as there is in this world is in truth between those who have the same material interests, those 'whose fortunes' as he puts it 'may comprehend the one the other'.<sup>11</sup>

But John Lyly was fully right to declare such intimacy to be accepted by all. There was no suggestion at all about it of the possible signs of a sodomitical relationship. When William Prynne edited Archbishop Laud's diary he tried to read into it the sodomitical sin one would expect of the papist in heart that Prynne presented him as being, but when he came to his dream of sleeping with the Duke of Buckingham he merely transcribed it. Its meaning was too obvious to do otherwise. And one would be greatly mistaken to assume a softness towards sodomy on the part of these writers. Sodomy for Tobie Matthew was one of 'those crimes which are against nature . . . ever to be detested and punished', and the sodomite for John Lyly was 'a most dangerous and infectious beast'. So also when Antonio del Corro preached in London on the sin of the sodomites in Paul's letter to the Romans he elaborated the horror of the sin with all the exuberance of a popular preacher.<sup>12</sup>

The great distance between sodomy and friendship and the nature of that distance is well illustrated by a sodomitical joke Antonio Pérez includes in one of his letters to the Earl of Essex, in which he likens himself to the girlfriend of his newly arrived assistant. One can see that this is a joke but it seems rather a dangerous one. The Inquisition charged Antonio Pérez with being a sodomite as well as a heretic and a traitor; and yet it would have been quite out of character for him to have added fuel to the charge by a rash remark. But how rash was this remark? The joke rested securely on a real distinction between the joke itself and the actuality. It turned the world upside down. In it, it is the patron who becomes the conventionally weaker part and the servant the powerful: it is Pérez and not the servant who

becomes the girl. That was why the joke was only a joke and not to be taken seriously.<sup>13</sup>

In the same way, how seriously could one then take the apparent similarity between the sodomite and the masculine friend? The signs of the one were indeed sometimes also the signs of the other but the conventions of friendship were set a world away from the wild sin of Sodom by the placid orderliness of the relationships they expressed. The anarchic crime of which Edward Coke wrote was a clear different thing.

#### IV. AN UNNATURAL INTIMACY

The distinction between the two was then apparently sharp and clearly marked: the one was expressed in orderly 'civil' relations, the other in subversive behaviour; and this simple distinction explains a good deal of what we see. But it does not explain quite all. On occasion one can also come across a document that appears – against all our expectations – to be putting the two together and reading a sodomitical meaning by such a monstrous image into just those conventions of friendship which elsewhere seemed protected from that interpretation.

Rare though they are, these documents are not to be dismissed as mere curiosities and I propose to look at two such documents closely for they suggest that this distinction was neither as sharp nor as clearly marked as the Elizabethans would have us believe. They cast by this an unexpectedly bright light on that hidden road I mentioned at the beginning of this paper: the unacknowledged connection between the unmentionable vice of Sodom and the friendship which all accounted commendable.

One of these two documents is a denunciation made in 1601 by a paid informer by the name of William Reynolds, whose subject was a certain Piers Edmonds, a soldier who had been in Ireland with the Earl of Southampton before Southampton joined Essex's illfated rebellion of that year. Piers Edmonds, he implies, was likely to have been a rebel as his master had been; and into this implication William Reynolds weaves a story of an unnatural intimacy between the two men that told its own tale.

I do marvel also what became of Piers Edmonds, called Captain Piers or Captain Edmonds, the Earl of Essex man, born in Strand near me, one which has had many rewards and preferments by the Earl Essex. His villainy I have often complained of.

He dwells in London. He was corporal general of the horse in Ireland under the Earl of Southampton. He ate and drank at his table and lay in his tent. The Earl of Southampton gave him a horse which Edmonds refused a hundred marks for him. The Earl Southampton would coll [embrace] and hug him in his arms and play wantonly with him.

This Piers began to fawn and flatter me in Ireland, offering me great courtesy, telling me what pay, graces and gifts the earls bestowed upon

him, thereby seeming to move and animate me to desire and look for the like favour. But I could never love and affect them to make them my friends, especially Essex, whose mind I ever mistrusted.

Behind this account is the familiar Elizabethan stereotype that the man guilty of 'unnatural filthiness' would be also very likely a traitor. But the evidence William Reynolds points to so menacingly – the common tent in which they slept, the embraces William Reynolds saw – were all the conventional signs of friendship; and that the characters in this drama understood them in this way is strongly suggested by the openness of Piers Edmonds's boasting and the public nature of these embraces, for they must indeed have been public if someone like William Reynolds could have been a witness of them.<sup>14</sup>

A document such as this poses an interesting question about what its author is doing, but first the other such document I mentioned. This works in a similar way but is far more famous.

The relationship of Edward and Gaveston in Marlowe's play *Edward II* is of a piece with all that I have said of friendship in this paper and is the spectacular centre of the play, in that it is Edward's love for Gaveston and Gaveston's rise to power which prompts the rebellion of Edward's resentful nobles and his ensuing tragedy and death. Modern critics of the play have recognised that its conventions are those of sixteenth-century not fourteenth-century England. But the many who have written of the apparently openly 'homosexual' nature of the play have not grasped its irony or that the intense emotion, the passionate language and the embraces we see between these two men have ready parallels in Elizabethan England in the daily conventions of friendship without being signs of a sodomitical relationship.<sup>15</sup>

When we look for signs of overt sexuality, what we see are rather Edward as a father and his determination to marry Gaveston to his niece. The latter is no incidental detail, nor is it an accident that she is referred to quite simply as the king's niece, as her role is to unite Gaveston and Edward as well as to give Gaveston a wife. In the same way Henry Howard in the daylight world of Jacobean England sought to bind himself to the powerful Robert Carr by Carr's marriage to his grandniece Frances Howard. An expression in one of Howard's letters puts the point neatly. If he had any pain, he writes, in reading Carr's last letter it is but 'like the pain which my Lady Frances shall feel when the sweet stream follows'. The image extends the erotic relationship to include Howard and it is entirely appropriate that it should, for though this was a heterosexual relationship it united also two men.<sup>16</sup>

Yet there are in the relationship of Edward and Gaveston dark suggestions of sodomy. It is there in the sexual ambiguity of the opening. When the naked and lovely boy in Gaveston's entertainment for Edward holds a bush 'to hide those parts which men delight to see' is it the body of the boy which is being hidden or of the goddess he is playing? It is there in the later comparison of Gaveston to the classical Ganymede, the beautiful

youth caught up by Zeus to be his cupbearer. Giles Fletcher could compare Christ's ascension without embarrassment to the fate of Ganymede but a 'ganymede' was also used more crudely as a synonym for a catamite. It is there also in Gaveston's foreign birth and italianate ways, both of which were associated in Elizabethan England with sodomy. It is there most clearly but most disturbingly in the hideous sodomitical murder of Edward at the end of the play. Yet this one clear statement of Edward's sodomitical sin is put in the hands of a man called Lightborne, whose name is but an anglicised echo of Lucifer, the father of all lies.<sup>17</sup>

Marlowe describes in this play what could be a sodomitical relationship, but he places it wholly within the incompatible conventions of Elizabethan friendship, in a tension which he never allows to be resolved. The image we see is simultaneously both that of friendship and its caricature.

## V. A CHANGING CONTEXT

Such unlikely texts as these of William Reynolds's denunciation and Christopher Marlowe's play prompt though the same question. These texts appear to be bringing together images which were usually kept quite detached from each other. Why, we might well then ask, did their authors think they would be believed?

The answer casts a light on the society in which these documents were put together quite as much as it does on the documents themselves. The answer in short is this. As a contemporary would have seen far more readily than we do, some of the conventions of friendship are missing in these accounts and the missing ones are precisely those that ensured that the intimacy of these conventions was read in an acceptable frame of reference; but they were not only missing in these accounts: by the end of the sixteenth century they were also often missing in society at large. It is this that these documents point up.

One of these was the assumption that both masters and their close servingmen would be 'gentle', men (as the *Health to the Gentlemanly Profession of Seruingmen* of 1598 puts it)

made of their own metal, even a loaf of their own dough, which being done . . . the gentleman received even a gentleman into his service.

It is this missing propriety that William Reynolds indirectly alludes to when he describes Piers Edmonds as a man born in the Strand 'near me' or as another description of Piers Edmonds puts it more bluntly 'a man of base birth', and the nobles' frequently repeated complaints of Gaveston's 'base' birth in Edward II make the same point.<sup>18</sup>

A second assumption which is missing is that the bond between a master and such an intimate servingman was personal not mercenary. Such a servant did not seek a reward although both master and servant would rightly care for the interests of the other. Rather the relationship was like

that of father and son, to which it was habitually compared. The convention is well expressed in a letter home in 1595 of the secretary of Antonio Pérez, in a description he gives of a conversation he had one day with his master.

My master called me unto him the other day and amongst many promises he willed me to tell him what thing I would most desire he should do for me. I answered for him that I only desired him to love me. He again asked me (as not being satisfied with that answer) and I answered him again the same. He then assured me that he loved me as his own son and would do as much for me as for his own son.

It is this missing assumption which William Reynolds alludes to in the damning commentary he quietly adds to Piers Edmonds's boasting, beginning with that simple but all important participle

‘seeming to move and animate me to desire and look for the like favour’.

His motives were as base as his origins; that is what William Reynolds indirectly is telling his reader.<sup>19</sup>

Gaveston's motives are as suspect as William Reynolds would have us believe Piers Edmonds's were. The opening scene in the play makes that all too clear, as also does the image Marlowe later has him unconsciously lapse into. It begins with the same – eminently proper – sentiment which Antonio Pérez's servant professed. It ends brutally different.

It shall suffice me to enjoy your love,  
Which whiles I have I think myself as great  
As Caesar riding in the Roman streets  
With captive kings at his triumphant car.<sup>20</sup>

The absence of these two reassuring conventions left what remained open to a darker interpretation. What then was it that one was seeing? If someone had acquired a place in society to which he was not entitled by nature and could then because of it perhaps even lord it over those who were naturally his betters, the spectre likely to be conjured up in the minds of an Elizabethan was not the orderly relationship of friendship between men but rather the profoundly disturbing image of the sodomite, that enemy not only of nature but of the order of society and the proper kinds and divisions within it. Perhaps, it darkly suggested, it was the signs of *this* that one was seeing? It is this fear that William Reynolds and Christopher Marlowe played on with such skill.

Such documents warn one against making a mistake one might otherwise easily fall into; they clarify that what one is seeing in such a structure of ideas as I have described in this paper is not a collective and automatic mentality, of any kind. It is rather a kind of code: the difference between the two lay in that a code was something individuals were still free to manipulate. They

may not have done it very often but the possibility of consciously manipulating the signs of this code, for their own benefit, was always there; and it is not an accident that the two clearest examples I have seen were created by authors whose task was to shape and manipulate meaning: to tell tales.

But this was not merely sleight of hand and it is this that makes these documents so revealing. These two authors were able to present such credible pictures precisely because the conventions which were so crucially absent in these accounts were also in practice often absent in daily life. It was because contemporaries were often *not* following the ideals of service that Elizabethans wrote their tracts expounding them, as the tracts themselves make clear. A master looking for a useful servant might well prefer the industrious servant who was poor but able and anxious to better himself to the better born one and the protestations of disinterested service one reads so frequently were often hollow. After the pious protestations of the secretary of Antonio Pérez I quoted earlier, he then coldly sets about adding up how much he is likely to make through his master's influence. Hardly more convincing are the protestations of affection for his dearest friends with which his master himself recommends various rich merchants to the Earl of Essex.<sup>21</sup>

These proprieties are the conventional niceties that all too often were no more than pretence. 'You may boldly write for his favour in this matter' a lawyer in Elizabethan London was well able to write. 'You paid well for it.'<sup>22</sup>

Such cynicism was probably always likely to have been justified but there is something wider at work here also. A broad hint of this is given in the *Health to the Gentlemanly Profession of Servingmen* which I quoted from earlier. The decay in the conventions of service, its author tells us, was something that he could still describe. The Lisle letters support that judgement; in them we see the conventions of personal service still very much alive in the 1530s. Why then the change? According to the anonymous author of this work the change was brought about by the decline in the openhanded 'housekeeping' of the great house. It was also due he tells us to the replacement of gentlemen retainers by servants drawn from outside the gentry, a change which was referred to also by Walter Darell in his conduct book for servingmen published in 1572. The gentleman servingman was being replaced by the gentry with 'the rich farmer's son', as Walter Darell puts it, a man who will 'drudge in their business'.<sup>23</sup>

Behind these complaints lies the sixteenth-century decline in the hordes of retainers in the great houses of an earlier and different England and the conventions of personal service associated with them, a change these tracts closely document. Such great households were by no means extinct in Elizabeth's reign. Lord Burghley was still able to say that it was his disease to have too many servants although there was little he could do about it, and early in the following century we still see the Earl of Northampton taking into his household the sons of his gentry supporters. But servingmen like

these were increasingly an anachronism. The able and hardworking secretaries of the Earl of Essex or Lord Burghley, men such as Michael Hicke (who was the son of a mercer), were altogether more suited to their times.<sup>24</sup>

As a social form the personal service of early Tudor England was in decay by the end of the sixteenth century but as a cultural form it was not; here the language of 'friendship', as a set of assumptions and expectations, was still very much alive. There was though now a disparity between the two in precisely those elements that protected the intimacy it involved from a charge of sodomy and it was this that provided a convenient inlet to charges of the kind that were laid at the prison door of the Earl of Southampton and the hapless Piers Edmonds.

William Reynolds's account or the picture Christopher Marlowe gives in *Edward II* are in fact more accurate pictures of the ties of friendship in the late sixteenth century than the conventional ideal the Elizabethans were still apt to present and it was this fact that made these descriptions so frighteningly effective.

## VI. THE WEAPON

To take William Reynolds's allegations as evidence of a covert sexual relationship is to follow a phantom, cunningly made. But they do put in a different light many of the charges of homosexuality we see in Early Modern England. We cannot say whether there was a sexual relationship between Piers Edmonds and the Earl of Southampton and the malice of their accuser should make us cautious; but to leave the matter there is to miss the nature of such accusations. They did not need such a sexual relationship. They turned rather on a sharp-eyed recognition that the public signs of a male friendship – open to all the world to see – could be read in a different and sodomitical light from the one intended. But although we cannot say whether there was a sexual relationship between the Earl of Southampton and the man who served under him in Ireland as corporal general of the horse, we can see within the accusation a familiar social outline. It is not alone in that. It is true also of a good many others: of Charles I's bishop John Atherton and Atherton's proctor who were accused of sodomy in 1640 at the onset of the ruin of the Caroline church; of the Casiodoro de Reina I mentioned earlier and the servant who shared his bed, with whom he was accused of sodomy in a tale spread by his enemies in the émigré community; of the popish Earl of Castlehaven who in 1631, in a prosecution full of anticatholic prejudice, was accused of sodomy with his servants; and indeed of the famous accusations made against James I and his companions such as Robert Carr or the Duke of Buckingham.

We will misunderstand these accusations if, beguiled by them, we uncritically assume the existence of the sexual relationship which they appear to point to, for the material from which they could be constructed

was rather open and public to all. What such accusations have in common is rather the outline of a relationship which at other times an Elizabethan might have called friendship.<sup>25</sup>

This is not to say that they were always inventions. Homosexual relationships did indeed occur within social contexts which an Elizabethan would have called friendship, between masters and servants included. But accusations like those of William Reynolds are not evidence of it; and the ease with which he was able to make his out of the most everyday of materials should make us wary. We see in them rather the unwelcome difficulty the Elizabethans had in drawing a dividing line between those gestures of closeness among men that they desired so much and those they feared.<sup>26</sup>

But to call someone a sodomite was to do more than invite public censure on what was thought of as a private vice. Its effect involved incomparably more than that. Let me give an illustration. In his autobiography Simonds D'Ewes gives a description of Francis Bacon, once lord chancellor to James I, in his disgrace and it contains an accusation which the reader may well now find familiar.

For whereas presently upon his censure at this time his ambition was moderated, his pride humbled, and the means of his former injustice and corruption removed; yet would he not relinquish the practice of his most horrible and secret sin of sodomy, keeping still one Godrick a very effeminate faced youth to be his catamite and bedfellow, although he had discharged the most of his other household servants: which was the more to be admired [wondered at] because men generally after his fall began to discourse of that his unnatural crime which he had practised many years; deserting the bed of his lady, which he accounted as the italians and turks do, a poor and mean pleasure in respect of the other; and it was thought by some that he should have been tried at the bar of justice for it, and have satisfied the law most severe against that horrible villainy with the price of his blood; which caused some bold and forward man to write these verses following in a whole sheet of paper, and to cast it down in some part of York House in the Strand, where Viscount St Alban yet lay.

Within this sty a \*hog doth  
lie that must be hanged  
for sodomy.

\* Alluding both to his  
surname of Bacon and to that  
swinish abominable sin.

But he never came to any public trial for this crime; nor did ever that I could hear forbear his old custom of making his servants his bedfellows so to avoid the scandal was raised of him, though he lived many years after this his fall in his lodgings in Gray's Inn in Holborn, in great want and penury.<sup>27</sup>

Much of this plays over again the issues discussed in this paper. There is the same social context for the charge of sodomy, here between a master and his servant. There is the same inconsistency between the description of his 'secret' sin and the evident fact that many others (including the author) were aware of it. There is also the same insidious detail: his old custom was that he made his servants his bedfellows, and it worked to the same end. Simonds D'Ewes in fact lacks any direct evidence of the sodomy he is accusing Francis Bacon of; but in the impropriety of this detail – for this was a menial servant, no gentleman companion – lay the germ of a charge of sodomy and the suggestion that the common bed of a master and his servant might suggest something much darker.

But this description is part of a larger description and only an incident in it. Its context in the manuscript is a broad indictment of the 'injustice and corruption' Simonds D'Ewes mentions here, of the bribes that caused his downfall and of the support given him in his corruption. But there was a problem in this. What distinguished this corruption from the normal workings of friendship? What distinguished, in effect, the bribes of the one from the flow of gifts and the ready use of influence of the other? It is here that this small description has its effect, for if successful it necessarily changed the frame of reference in which the whole was to be viewed. If this man was a sodomite then was he not likely in all his doings to be the enemy of God's good order, in society as well as in nature? That was the transubstantiation it brought about. It could turn what seemed like gifts into bribes and what seemed like patronage into the support of infamy; it revealed what they really were. If successful it turned all to ruin, and it could work its alchemy by a manipulation of the signs of friendship which it found so ready to hand.

## VII. THE SHADOW IN THE GARDEN

Perhaps there is always a potential ambiguity about intimacy between men. It may be so. But in Early Modern England such intimacy was peculiarly ambivalent, for the protecting conventions that ensured that it was seen in an acceptable frame of reference were often absent by the end of the sixteenth century. It was a disturbing fact that the Elizabethans preferred not to acknowledge but when it suited them it provided a weapon that lay close to hand; and it left this intimacy more open and less secure in its meaning than the formal Elizabethan essays on friendship would have us believe.

The ambiguity drew though on a tension in Elizabethan England we are not now accustomed to. The intimacy between men in Europe and North America today is protected to a large extent by the notion of a quite distinct homosexual minority for whom alone homosexual desire is a possibility. This was a shield Elizabethan England did not have and we might well wonder if this cultural difference is the reason why later historians have been so blind to the fearsome weapon its absence provided.

I am inclined to think that it is but whether or not this is so I would suggest that the study in this paper of the Elizabethan sin of Sodom places it outside a discrete history of sexuality; its shadow was never far from the flower-strewn world of Elizabethan friendship and it could never wholly be distinguished from it. A hard fact which those of power and influence in Elizabethan England preferred not to see; but they were willing, still, to make use of it.

## GUIDE TO REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Bray, *Homosexuality*: Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, 1982 and 1988. (The page references are the same to each edition.)

Ungerer, *Spaniard*: Gustav Ungerer, *A Spaniard in Elizabethan England. The Correspondence of Antonio Pérez's Exile*, vol. 1, 1974, vol. 2, 1976.

## NOTES

1 A shorter version of this paper was given at the conference *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?* at the Free University of Amsterdam in December 1987 and at the seminar on *Society, Belief and Culture in the Early Modern World* at the Institute of Historical Research and I am grateful to the participants there for their lively discussions of it. The faults which determinedly remain are my own but their comments have greatly influenced its final form. Jeremy Clarke, Anna Davin, and others also kindly read the first draft of the paper. I owe a particular debt also to Michel Rey, from my discussions with whom over many years I have learnt so much of the history of friendship.

The illustration is taken from Robert Vaughan's engraving *The English Gentleman*.

2 The major statements of this approach are in the writings of Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks. These are best approached through Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1. An Introduction*, 1979 and Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality*, Chichester, 1986. My *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* is in this tradition. Not all historians have accepted this approach; its most intelligent (and readable) critic is John Boswell, whose *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Chicago, 1980 is closer to the standpoint of the sociobiology of E. O. Wilson. A good starting point is also the recent collection of essays in Kent Gerard and Gert Hekma (eds), *The Pursuit of Sodomy. Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe*, New York, 1989. This was published originally as *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 16, nos 1/2, 1988.

3 Thomas Shepard, *The Works of Thomas Shepard*, vol. 1, Boston, 1853, p. 28, included in the collection of documents in Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*, New York, 1983, pp. 82–84. 'Sodomy' and 'buggery' were overlapping (and equally vague). The first was the scholarly word, the second the vulgar, which Shepard is here using for emphasis. John Rainolds, *Th' Overthrow of Stage-Playes*, np, 1599, pp. 10 and 32. Bray, *Homosexuality*, p. 16. Arthur G. Kinder, *Casiodoro de Reina. Spanish Reformer of the Sixteenth Century*, 1975, pp. 28, 29, 105, 107, 109. Quotations (here and elsewhere in this paper) are given according to the rules in Bray, *Homosexuality*, p. 115; documents not in English are given in translation.

4 Public Record Office, State Papers, 12/151/100–102. 103–104', 109–109', 113–113', 118–119' and British Museum, Cotton Mss, Titus CVI/5ff. 'Nature' here is the order of creation: that in 'men's natural corruption' in the quotation from Rainolds is the nature given us by Adam's Fall. Edward Coke, *Twelfth Part of the Reports*, 1656, p. 37. James VI (and I), *Βασιλικὸν δῶρον*, 1887, pp. 37–38 (Buggery was usually excluded from a general pardon: J. A. Sharpe, *Crime in Seventeenth-Century England. A County Study*, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 147 and 257). The explanation given in this section of the nature of the 'sodomite' in Elizabethan England is set out more fully in Bray, *Homosexuality*, pp. 13–32. There is a criticism of the apparently functionalist form I gave to my analysis in chapter 4 of Bray, *Homosexuality*, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York,

1985, pp. 83ff. There is also a careful criticism of my handling of Richard Barnfield's writings in Jonathan Goldberg, 'Colin to Hobbinol: Spenser's Familiar Letters', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 1, 1989, pp. 107–26. Each of these anticipated in some ways the development in my thinking apparent in this paper, and I would warmly commend them.

5 John K. Gruenfelder, 'The Electoral Patronage of Sir Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, 1614–1640', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1977, p. 557. British Museum, Harl. Mss, 285/173 (in John Bruce (ed.), *Correspondence of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leycester*, 1844, p. 33).

6 Public Record Office, State Papers, 14/65/78 ('unrespectively': disrespectfully). Lambeth Palace Library, 653/318 (in Ungerer, *Spaniard*, vol. 1, p. 219; he rightly corrects the transcription by James Spedding which I followed in Bray, *Homosexuality*, 1982, p. 49.) James Bliss (ed.), *The Works of William Laud*, vol. 3, Oxford, 1853, p. 170 (I have followed Prynne's translation in William Prynne, *A Breviate of the Life of William Laud*, 1644, p. 6); compare Charles Carlton, *Archbishop William Laud*, 1987, p. 152. Longleat House, Portland Papers, 2/44 (in Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Marquis of Bath*, vol. 2, Dublin, 1907, p. 71); compare Roger Lockyer, *Buckingham. The Life and Political Career of George Villiers, First Duke of Buckingham 1592–1628*, 1981, p. 22.

7 Edwin Greenlaw and others (eds), *The Works of Edmund Spenser. A Variorum Edition*, vol. 1, Baltimore, 1943, p. 7. James Maidment and W. H. Logan (eds), *The Dramatic Works of Sir William Davenant*, vol. 1, Edinburgh, 1872, pp. 119–120. Linda Levy Peck, *Northampton. Patronage and Policy at the Court of James I*, 1982, p. 30. Edward Arber (ed.), *A Harmony of the Essays etc of Francis Bacon*, 1871, pp. 32–33. Peck, *Northampton*, 1982, p. 36.

8 Ungerer, *Spaniard* and Antonio Pérez, *Ant. Perezii ad Comitem Essexivm . . . Epistolarvm. Centuria Vna in Cartas de Antonio Perez*, Paris, nd; the reference here is to Epistola 75 in the latter. S. L. Adams, 'The Gentry of North Wales and the Earl of Leicester's Expedition to the Netherlands, 1585–86', *The Welsh History Review*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1974–5, p. 147. Ungerer, *Spaniard*, vol. 1, p. 417 ('protection': patrociniūm).

9 British Museum, Lansdowne Mss, 12/217–217\* and 23/179–179\*; 107/168–168\*; 61/170 (see also 31/40); 12/217–217\* (see also 12/117–117\*); 21/26; 36/212–213 (generally see also 25/135 and 107/170–170\*). Discussed in Alan G. R. Smith, *Servant of the Cecils. The Life of Sir Michael Hicckes, 1543–1612*, 1977, pp. 22, 70, 92–96.

10 James Spedding, *The Letters and the Life of Francis Bacon*, vol. 4, 1868, pp. 139–140 and 144–145 and vol. 7, 1874, pp. 286–287, 428–431 and 542. Bacon helped him in his career and in the scandal that followed his conversion to catholicism; Matthew did the same for Bacon in his disgrace and acted both as a critic and translator of his writings. Kinder, *Casiodoro de Reina*, 1975, pp. 25–26 and 95–97; see also William McFadden, *The Life and Works of Antonio del Corro (1527–1591)*, PhD thesis, The Queen's University of Belfast, 1953, pp. 165ff and 392.

11 R. W. Bond (ed.), *The Complete Works of John Lyly*, vol. 1, Oxford, 1902, p. 199. Arber (ed.), *Essays of Francis Bacon*, 1871, pp. 38–39. This is not to contrast literary with other sources. The same point could be made, in varying degrees, with all the images of friendship.

12 Prynne, *Breviate of the Life of Laud*, 1644, p. 6; compare p. 29. *The Confessions of the Incomparable Doctor S. Augustine* (translated by Tobie Matthew), np, 1620, p. 108–109. Bond (ed.), *Works of John Lyly*, vol. 1, 1902, p. 280; this is an addition John Lyly made during his paraphrase of Plutarch, (*Plutarch's Moralia*, with translation by F. C. Babbitt, vol. 1, 1927, p. 54–55). One can see the expressions added to the biblical text in Corro's paraphrase of *Romans* 1<sup>26–7</sup> in Antonius Corranus, *Dialogvs Theologicvs*, 1574 (English translation Antonie Corranus, *A Theological Dialogve*, 1575) and in Antonius Corranus, *Dialogvs in Epistolam D Pauli ad Romanos*, Frankfurt, 1587 and Antonius Corranus, *Epistola Beati Pavli Apostoli ad Romanos*, 1581, in which Corro gathered his lectures together for publication.

13 Published by Pérez in *Ant. Perezii ad Comitem Essexivm*, nd, as Epistola 60. The original is given in Ungerer, *Spaniard*, vol. 1, pp. 424–425 (which probably would have circulated in manuscript as a literary exercise).

As often in Pérez's writings there is an obscurity here and more than one reading is possible but the dangerous reading I have given it is certainly one of these possible readings. He was careful to avoid the charge that he was a heretic by the permission he obtained when he visited England to practice catholicism. Ungerer, *Spaniard*, vol. 1, p. 145. Why would he have taken a different attitude to the charge that he was a sodomite? The one was the mere reflection of the other.

The Inquisition's charges of sodomy are set out in *Colección de Documentos Inéditos para la Historia de España*, vol. 12, D. Miguel Salvá and Pedro Sainz de Baranda (eds), *Documentos*

*Relativos á Antonio Pérez*, Madrid, 1848, pp. 224–236, 255–259, 400–401 and G. Marañón, *Antonio Pérez*, Madrid, 1948, vol. 1, pp. 306–309 and vol. 2, Apéndice no. 26. See also vol. 1, pp. 310–311. The independent nature of much of this evidence strongly suggests that in this case it was true.

14 Hatfield House, Cecil Papers, 83/62. The letters from Piers Edmonds at 90/76 and 90/77 contain more information about him. Calendared in Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. the Marquis of Salisbury*, Part 11, 1906, pp. 93–94 and 99. I have emended the ‘called Called’ of the text and omitted the illegible (or deleted) word that follows.

15 Some critics have read the apparently homosexual relationship as an affirmation of humane values, for example Leonora L. Brodwin, ‘Edward II: Marlowe’s Culminating Treatment of Love’, *ELH*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1964, pp. 139–155 or Purvis E. Boyette, ‘Wanton Humour and Wanton Poets: Homosexuality in Marlowe’s Edward II’, *Tulane Studies in English*, vol. 22, 1977, pp. 33–50 or Ronald Huebert, ‘Tobacco and Boys and Marlowe’, *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 92, no. 2, 1984, pp. 206–224. Others have read it as an obscenity, such as Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea. Studies in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare*, Cambridge, 1968, pp. 121–142 or William L. Godshalk, *The Marlovian World Picture*, The Hague, 1974, pp. 59ff. But the assumption is widespread in what has been written of the play that the play *does* deal with an openly homosexual relationship. The importance of L. J. Mill’s early but neglected discussion of the role of friendship in the play has not been fully appreciated: ‘The Meaning of Edward II’, *Modern Philology*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1934–35, pp. 11–31; Mills missed the contemporary social and political meaning of ‘friendship’ but he was on the right lines. Another neglected early clue was the importance of caricature in the writings of Marlowe that T. S. Eliot pointed to in his 1919 essay ‘Christopher Marlowe’ (*Selected Essays*, 1951, pp. 118–125). More recently Simon Shepherd and Jonathan Goldberg have discussed sensitively the language of sodomy in *Edward II* and the Baines note (Simon Shepherd, *Marlowe and the Politics of Elizabethan Theatre*, Brighton, 1986, pp. 197–207 and Jonathan Goldberg, ‘Sodomy and Society: The Case of Christopher Marlowe’, *Southwest Review*, vol. 69, no. 4, 1984, pp. 371–378), and the sexual ambiguity in the play was referred to briefly but perceptively by Anne Barton in a review of Bray, *Homosexuality in London Review of Books*, vol. 5, no. 15 (18–31 August 1983), p. 18.

16 Fredson Bowers (ed.), *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, vol. 2, Cambridge, 1981, p. 56 etc and, pp. 36–8, 46. Cambridge University Library Mss, Dd. 3.63/35; and see Peck, *Northampton*, 1982, pp. 38–40.

17 Bowers (ed.), *Works of Christopher Marlowe*, 1981, pp. 16–17. The opening is an epitome of the play as a whole. The depiction of the friendship between Edward and Gaveston with which it opens can be read as Edward, after the death of his father, building up a body of clients to secure his position, as we then see Gaveston doing in his turn and as Mortimer later says he will do: ‘Mine enemies will I plague, my friends advance’ (Bowers, p. 88). In this familiar Elizabethan context we are then presented with the conventional expressions of such ‘friendship’. It is this that accounts for the close similarity between the Queen’s description of Edward’s intimacy with Gaveston (Bowers, p. 22) and Thomas Howard’s of James I’s with Robert Carr, which I quote in Section III of this paper. It is also why Gaveston’s protestation of his love for Edward (Bowers, p. 20) is in the same form as that of the secretary of Antonio Pérez which I quote in Section V.

Gaveston’s sexual image (Bowers, p. 15 and Edward’s, p. 40) of which much has been made is part of these conventions; Antonio Pérez uses similarly sexual images in some of his letters to Anthony Bacon (Ungerer, *Spaniard*, vol. 1, pp. 490–493). The link is masculinity, expressed alike in sexual potency as in the bonds that bound men: ‘clients love masculine men’ wrote Antonio Pérez in one of his letters to the Earl of Essex ‘as wives their husbands’ (*Ant. Perezii ad Comitem Essexivm*, nd, Epistola 61, which is also given in Ungerer, *Spaniard*, vol. 1, p. 475).

Ganymede: Bowers, p. 29. Giles Fletcher: Will T. Brooke (ed.), *Christ’s Victory and Triumph*, nd, p. 117. Bray, *Homosexuality*, pp. 16, 53, 66, 126. His Italian tastes are emphasised on, pp. 16 and 35 and his foreign origins on, pp. 21 and 22; on the assumed connection between these and sodomy, see Bray, *Homosexuality*, p. 75–6. Murder: p. 90–3; I accept the arguments for the view that the murder of Edward as given in Holinshed was enacted in full view of the audience but my point holds good even if Marlowe felt he could go no further than to allude to it in the references we see in the text.

18 I. M. *A Health to the Gentlemanly Profession of Seruingmen*, 1598, C1–C1'. Cecil Papers 83/97'; calendared in Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Marquis of Salisbury*, part 11, 1906, pp. 107–108.

19 Ungerer, *Spaniard*, vol. 2, pp. 47–48.

20 Bowers (ed.), *Works of Christopher Marlowe*, 1981, p. 20.

21 Jerónimo López and Laurence des Bouverie: Ungerer, *Spaniard*, vol. 1, pp. 327 and 472–473.

22 J. E. Neale, 'The Elizabethan Political Scene', in *The Age of Catherine de Medici and Essays in Elizabethan History*, 1963, p. 161.

23 I. M. *Seruingmen*, 1598. Muriel St Clare Byrne (ed.), *The Lisle Letters*, vol. 3, Chicago, 1981, pp. 1–35. Walter Darell *A Short Discourse of the Life of Seruingmen*, 1578 (in *Studies in Philology*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1934, p. 124).

24 Neale, *Age of Catherine de Medici*, 1963, p. 153 and Peck, *Northampton*, 1982, p. 59.

25 Bray, *Homosexuality*, pp. 14–15, 72; Kinder, *Casiodoro de Reina*, 1975, pp. 27–37, 58–59, 99–120; Bray, *Homosexuality*, pp. 29–30, 49, 54; Bray, *Homosexuality*, p. 121.

26 Bray, *Homosexuality*, pp. 44–53 and 54–55. I would now be rather more cautious though in my comments on Francis Bacon on p. 49.

27 British Museum, Harleian Mss. 646/59–59'. There is a transcription in Thomas Hearne, *Historia Vitae et Regni Ricardi II*, Oxford, 1729, pp. 385–388 (Appendix).