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“Dear Dicky,” “Dear Dick,” “Dear Friend,” “Dear Shackleton”: Edmund Burke’s Love for Richard Shackleton

KATHERINE O’DONNELL

This article examines the relationship between Edmund Burke (1729/30–97) and his friend Richard Shackleton (1726–92) based on the evidence of Burke’s letters and poems written to Shackleton from the spring of 1744 to the summer of 1757. The letters to Shackleton provide a remarkable record of Burke’s early intellectual and emotional development, but this essay focuses on how Burke expresses his love for Shackleton, a passionate love that is silenced by Shackleton’s marriage in 1749. Over sixty letters survive addressed to “Dear Dicky,” “Dear Dick,” or “Dear Friend,” written during Burke’s four years at Trinity College in Dublin. We have just nine letters written between Burke’s departure from Trinity in 1748 and his reappearance in London as a published author in 1759. Five of these nine letters are written to Shackleton during Burke’s “darkest period,” “the missing years,” when Burke dropped out of his studies at the Middle Temple to spend his time traveling, writing, and living with Will Burke.¹ Burke was to describe Will as a man he “tenderly loved, highly valued, and continually lived with, in an union not to be expressed, quite since our boyish years.”² The lifelong partnership between these two men deserves a study of its own; that curious phrase “an union not to be expressed” is of course redolent of “that crime not to be named among Christians.” The euphemistic parsing of the “Love that dare not speak its name” has a long pedigree in

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English culture.³ We can be thankful that the record of Burke's earlier love for Dick was preserved almost intact by Shackleton's descendents; it seems there are just a handful of letters missing.⁴ However, none of Shackleton's letters to Burke during this period has survived.

Burke had loved his time at the school of Abraham Shackleton (1696–1771), a Quaker. The school was located at Ballitore in Kildare some thirty miles from Dublin. Throughout his life Ned Burke always remained grateful for the care and education that he received there. Ned formed an intense friendship with Abraham's son Richard who assisted his father at the school. Being a Quaker, Richard was barred from attending university at Trinity College, but Burke resolved to keep him informed on what he was learning, to supply him with the relevant books, and to discuss the ideas and topics of the university syllabus. This intellectual partnership was a central impulse in the correspondence: the two wrote poetry and criticized each other's work, corresponded on learned topics suggested by each, and discussed the business of a debating club, the Academy of Belles Lettres, that they formed with five others which met for "speaching reading writing and arguing, in morality, History, Criticism, Politics, and all the useful branches of Philosophy."⁵

Burke was keen to conduct a correspondence that would be a shared testament to his and Dick's vivid engagement with ideas and literature as much as with each other's emotions. We can see the young Ned adopt a variety of writing styles and postures in the sheer exuberance of writing and in his often uncertain positioning of himself as Dick's correspondent and friend. Trying to find a register for his voice through imitation and ventriloquism, he parodies romance epics, oriental tales, legalese, or gushes of sentimental writing, frequently peppering his text with Latin tags, with Greek aphorisms, with allusions to a range of English and Latin poetry, or with exemplums from *The Spectator*. The desire to share in a vigorous engagement with texts and passionate identification with study is reminiscent of George Rousseau's concept of "homoplatonism," a term that describes the "licit and illicit relations" arising from "same-sex discipleship and tutelage."⁶ Homoplatonism, Rousseau argues, "acknowledges the vital presence of discursive subjectivity (letters, diaries, poetry, Gothic fictions . . . and so on). A plenitude of languages taught and learned; languages found in books and the quasi-secret code-dialects used among those who had formed charged, emotional attachments. If homoplatonism taps into anything vital, it suggests that historical same-sex col-

laborations and adolescent friendships were constructed around the bodies of texts no less than physical bodies.”⁷

As Ned moves through his teens, his exuberant, ambitious writing swings less wildly through the gamut of available models, but the one constant throughout the entire correspondence is Burke's desire for an intimate connection with Shackleton. Sharing his intellectual projects helps Burke to feel connected with Shackleton, but this sharing and close collaboration cannot bear the full weight of Burke's need for a relationship. There is an acute poignancy in Ned's anxiety for connection with Dick. He is regularly, at times almost constantly, found pleading with, cajoling, or wittily enticing Dick to respond; his occasional despondency and thinly glazed anxiety make a resonant counterpoint to the busy brilliance that is superficially the point of the letters.

One of his earliest letters to “Dear Dicky” contains a love poem to “R:S,” written out in his best handwriting. In the note enclosed with the poem Burke explains that the changes in rhyme and rhythm in the poem were to allow his thoughts and feelings “neither to be cramped with Rhime or a set measurement of verse.”⁸ The address of the poem oscillates between a general assertion of the pleasures of “friendship” and an intimate address to “thee,” (Dick), twice rhymed in partnership with “me.” The effusion and the excess of emotion in Burke's ambiguously charged poem, at once a panegyric to and lament on “friendship,” runs contrary to the eighteenth century's revision of Greek and Roman classical understandings of friendship. The homosocial world of eighteenth-century Europe was much taken with the morality and ethics of male friendship needed to ensure the mutual benefits and contribution to the general order and social good as exemplified in Plato's *Republic* and *Lysias* and in Marcus Tullius Cicero's *De Amicitia*. In Burke's poem to R:S, reason, mutuality, and social order are not so much absent but antithetical to the friendship experienced by Burke:

This bold design I well have weigh'd
 In reason's nicest scale
 But, Oh' can Reason ever sway
 When friendship must prevail!

If Fate from thee, retards me here
 Oh! How can I express,
 The fatal cause of all my fear,
 The loss of such a happiness.

(lines 9–16)

It is not reason that guides Burke's meditation on this friendship but the sensual pleasures that his friend might afford him, if only they were together. The word "pleasure" is mentioned no less than six times in the poem, yet pleasure is never actually enjoyed but remains tantalizingly out of reach. Even when pleasure is recorded as an actual memory, it is not a simple celebration of the consummation of pleasure but an anxious record of being with Dick and still unable to "Possess / That Pleasure" (lines 26–7).

The closest that Ned gets to being with Dick is in imagining himself like a female turtle dove:

in the grove
Foresaken by her Mate,
The once companion of her love,
In mournful Coos Laments her fate.

(lines 17–20)

Being with Dick remains "this pleasing Dream / This soft Delusion of Ideal bliss, / Yes I could dwell for ever on the theme" (lines 41–3). Until these lines the poem has rhymed conventionally, and we might expect that "bliss" be rhymed with "miss" or even "kiss." However, the fourth line of the verse breaks the steady rhyme pattern: "For ever on yr. subject dwell" (line 44). The repetition of "dwell" highlights the metaphorical suspension of Burke's verbal performance in the poem; he is intellectually and emotionally engaged, dwelling on his theme, but not materially present with Dick even as a memory or possibility. He is stuck, impelled by desire to hover between impossibility and dream, a passive "Traveller" with "half his Journey gone" (line 49). His love object is a "subject," never an agent but a literary theme.

Perhaps the best way to interpret this poem is to follow the insightful model of George Haggerty's reading of Thomas Gray's (1716–71) elegiac poetry that demonstrates how "feeling can function culturally to constitute the subject of male-male desire within a melancholic framework of prohibition and loss."⁹ Haggerty focuses specifically on Gray's "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West" to show how his "elegiac loss" is "actual physical longing and frustrated physical desire," and that is precisely what we have in Burke's poem to R:S.¹⁰ Throughout the poem the "Distance of the Way" between the two young men is less actual, external, physical space than internalized, metaphysical rules, "rules severe," about stopping and staying that check Burke's body (lines 1, 3):

What tho' the Distance of the Way
 Divides my Friend & me,
 And rules severe this Body stay,
 My soul is all with thee.

Or shall I stay, or shall I go
 And join my Breast with thine,
 And ev'ry mean restraint forego
 For pleasures half Divine?

(lines 1–8)¹¹

The pleasures remain “half Divine,” envisaged on the space of the page but unrealized in time.

The poem culminates with the uneasy assertion that it is precisely because it is “Too sure that pleasure ne'er will cloy / But ever will abide” (lines 57–8). Is Burke saying that his pleasure with Dick is too sure to cloy and will live forever, or is he (also) saying that his belief in his abiding pleasure in Dick is “Too sure,” overly confident? Is he unsure of this pleasure? The piety of the final four lines runs against the grain of “the pleasure fraught” of the rest of the poem:

That friendship's wholly made of Joy,
 Which harbours virtue for its guide
 “For love of soul doth love of body pass
 As much as purest Gold surmounts the meanest brass”
 Spencer.

(lines 27, 59–62)

The lines are unconvincing in their lack of bristling energy, and the closing pat quotation from Spenser reads like a failed attempt to recast Burke's own lines as a conventional treatment of un-carnal male friendship. Burke ends this poem with a note telling Shackleton that the poem was written to “incite you to answer me in the like,” but Shackleton does not reply, either in form or content, and even in the very earliest days of their correspondence Burke is left fretting to hear from his best-loved friend.

Burke himself is abjectly contrite if his own replies are delayed due to exams or family illness, but rather than excusing his delay, he generally takes the opportunity to assert how dear Dick's friendship is to him. Even when his delay in writing is due to his mother's near-fatal illness, his filial grief is fused with anxiety

about assuring Dick of his friendship. Writing to Dick, whom he will see in just a few days, he mistakenly gives his address as Dick's own at Ballitore:

Dear Dick

You may excuse indeed my long Silence if you know the Cause of it, since nothing but the most dangerous illness my Mother ever had could prevent my writing to remove the distrust you seem to have express'd in a late Letter of my friendship—In all my life I never found so heavy a grief—nor really did I well know what it was before . . . for 3 days together we expected her death every moment, and really I was so low and weak myself for some time after that I could not sit down to write.

(12 July 1746, 1:67)

Ned sometimes fears Dick may think he is falling short as a friend. From time to time he asks that Dick correct him in his failings; he constantly sends him his poetry to critique, but he also seeks admonition for any other faults that might be obstacles to their friendship, seeing such admonition and correction as a sign of intimacy: "you have compared me for my rambling disposition to the Sun as the Simile was about the Sun, it was probably a compliment, if so, I thank you for it; if it was rather a reproof, why I thank you too, it may possibly do me more good" (28 September 1752, 1:112). He even takes delight when Dick expresses some pique, using the opportunity to excuse himself as being too anxious for Dick's approval: "tho it might not result from a Pride of being thought superior to you (as it did not) it might from the Pride of having such a one as you to back my opinion. [Do] not think that I take at all ill that you advise me for my good, just the Contrary you could not do me a greater pleasure, and I beg you to continue it from time as you see convenient" (15 March 1745, 1:48).

Burke understands their correspondence as the outward manifestation of a quite particular, even exclusive friendship. In a carefully wrought letter from 2 November 1745 Burke, with mortified dignity, assumes that Dick's silence means another male correspondent has supplanted him in Dick's affections, and he releases Dick to this new, more engrossing interest (1:56). It never seems to cross Ned's mind that the twenty-two-year-old Dick has been courting a woman. Dick fell in love with Elizabeth Fuller (1726–54) in the summer and autumn of 1745, and it is

most likely that it was this romance that caused him to fall off in his correspondence with Burke. Dick writes back quickly, and on 12 November 1745 Edmund replies promptly, though in a stilted and somewhat prissy manner that thinly disguises his obvious hurt: "Silent, Solitary, and pensive, I sit down to answer your Letter, and tho I am not so much Master of my temper as to say I shall be quite Cheerfull, yet I hope the remembrance of the many gay tho innocent hours we have passd together which the present Occasion recalls will inspire me with Sentiments proper to keep me from being dull or tedious to you."

He lectures Dick on the inconstant character of a friend who has let down Dick and on the folly of loving people who strike us as novel: "You are yourself (pardon the freedom of a friend) a little touch'd with this foible, as I have experienc'd." Ned's jealousy glints and winks throughout this letter as does his palpable need to be primary in Dick's affections: "Thus far I have I believe accounted for your falling out with your friends—but as I have said something concerning friendship and given one of the Causes of it perhaps I may some time else say something more of it for I have not time now. Pray if you have any hints on that or any other head let me be favourd with them in your next. You remember the preliminaries. Pray let me have a place in your affection, You are never out of mine" (1:56–7).

During this winter of 1745 and long into the spring and early summer of 1746, Dick is very upset, even grief stricken, but does not reveal why. On 7 December Burke writes, "Why may not I be a partaker of your Sorrows? I am sure if you had any Secrets they are with none safer, I am very desirous of knowing . . . how they ended, this will be a Satisfaction to me and perhaps an ease to your self, the accounts you gave me in town were very short and unsatisfactory, and really I did not beleive you would Leave us so soon."

Burke believes that Dick has made "Enemies . . . [who] love malice for its deformity" (1:58). But even by the following February, he is still unclear as to the cause of Dick's grief: "but pardon me if I am so Curious and impertinent as not to be satisfied with what you have already acquainted me, I cannot thoroughly Sympathize with you, I cannot make your Case my own 'till I am inform'd of its Cause . . . Conceal not the Villains name who is the Cause of your afflictions that I may always hate the Idea of the wretch who dares betray the Secrets of his friend."

He concludes the letter with a moral for Dick that is very revealing of his own fears about intimacy and his *modus operandi*

in keeping his feelings secret: “we live in a world where every one is on the Catch, and the only way to be Safe is to be Silent, Silent in any affair of Consequence, and I think it would not be a bad rule for every man to keep within what he thinks of others, of himself, and of his own Affairs” (15 February 1746, 1:61–2).

Burke again assumes that another man is the cause of Dick’s afflictions. It seems that Dick does not reveal to Ned that his proposal of marriage to Fuller has received, to quote from Shackleton’s memoirs, a “*kind of refusal,*” throwing him into a state of “doubt and dread . . . that the divine blessing would not crown our union.” Shackleton “sought solitary places to weep in, and pour out my tears to the Lord.” Shackleton writes, “Many wondered that I took the disappointment so to heart.”¹² Maybe Ned Burke was one of those who did not understand, although given the evidence of his utter bewilderment it seems more probable that Shackleton did not confide in him at all; despite his constant worrying at the matter, Ned never guessed that Dick was thwarted in his love for a woman. Even by May, Edmund is still clamoring for Dick’s affection and is confused as to why his friend is so melancholy:

but I see you think me unworthy your notice—I am sorry for’t—but to be serious I cant conceive what can be the reason that our Correspondence is become so slack of late—if our friendship was to be judged by it, I beleive very few would have any great opinion of it—I answer for myself—there is not the le<ast de>cay of it on my side—absence and time only r<ivet> my affections more strongly. I could wish to see things establish’d on their former foundations. I shall not be backward in performing my part towards it, if I have done nothing to make you averse to it.

He signs his letter “yours unalterably” (ca. 15 May 1746, 1:63–4).

By the end of the year Ned was rejoicing again in the expression of a fervent, passionate friendship with Dick:

The prospect I have (Dear Dick) of seeing you so soon keeps me from being able to write you much . . . for while I should be writing my thoughts would be entirely taken up with the pleasure of your approaching presence and I should cry out—What the Devil do I write and puzzle me to express myself wretchedly on what I shall have my friend

so soon to help me out and mature my imperfect and abortive conceptions. So I shall now only tell you that I shall set out early on monday morning (God willing) towards you . . . I heartily long <to> see you if you have an equal desire we shall meet half way—for you know the power of equal forces meeting in the same direction.

(27 December 1746, 1:76–7).

He signs this letter: “once more farewell yours assuredly RS” with a prolonged flourish. Arthur P. I. Samuels suggests that perhaps he may have intended to write “RS’s EB,” or maybe it is an unconscious slip encapsulating his joy at their reunion: a cryptogram symbolic of his feelings of being at one, “equal forces meeting in the same direction,” with Dick.¹³

In the spring the two young men were still very intimate; a letter from Burke in February 1747 contemplates their emotions on leaving each other to return to Ballitore or Dublin:

Dear Dick

. . . be assured that whatever sensations you had at parting were fully answer'd by mine—however I cant call what I then felt and do in part feel now, directly grief. It was rather A kind of melting tenderness tinged with sorrow, which took me wholly up while I was alone in thinking on the company I had so lately Left a contemplation too delightfull to let me taste anything like grief—and why should we grieve? . . . our parting (if I may make such a comparison) is like the sensation a good man feels at the hour of his death, he is conscious that he has us'd his time to the best advantage and now must thro the condition of human nature depart—he feels indeed a little sorrow at quitting his friends, but its very much allay'd by considering he shall see em all again.

(ca. 3 February 1747, 1:78–9)

But the autumn of 1747 is the beginning of an irrevocable shift in the intensity of the connection that the two share. The shift is instigated when Dick sends Ned a draft of his poem entitled “Julia and Belinda” praising the beauties of two women: Belinda was Fuller; Julia seems to have been Jane Duckett from “a prominent Quaker family living near Ballitore” (1:96n2). Burke begins the letter by declaring himself “so loaded . . . with letters and compliments that I find it very difficult to answer either, and they were

unmerited as they were extraordinary.” It seems that Dick had been unusually affectionate and effusive, possibly to divert attention away from the fact that he had not told Ned about his interest in these, or any, women. Ned is touched that Dick has written to him so lovingly and understands the emotion that Dick feels for him to be on a par with Dick’s emotion for Belinda/Elizabeth: “I do really believe you to be my friend if any one is, for I see you can no more forbear praising me than Belinda . . . I am not such a master of the expressive part of friendship, but believe me, dear friend, I am by no means behindhand in the affectionate. This is sincere.” Then he gets to the issue of Dick’s love poem:

I don’t know whether I shall congratulate or lament with you on your falling in love, for I see (’tis vain for you to deny it) you are over head and ears, and what is more extraordinary, with two. The judgment and sagacity with which you have drawn the character of the ladies shew that you perfectly know them, so that any advice from me on that score were quite needless. Belinda, I am glad, has triumphed; however, you seem to quit Julia with regret. How happy if you could have both to serve different ends of matrimony! . . . Now we are on love, &c. Do your parents forward this affair? Are they ignorant of it? Or are you purposely together? I believe my friend will soon lose Dick Shackleton, and then we shall in some measure lose Dick Shackleton, who will look with contempt on us bachelors.

(17 October 1747, 1:96–7)

Burke’s queasiness at the idea of being in love with women leaves him feeling inept as to what to say. The idea of married men as a separate tribe who “look with contempt” on men like himself would continue to trouble Burke. Here, he regards himself as not so much an unmarried man but as a congenital bachelor.

Burke’s next letter is addressed not to “Dear Dick” but to “My dear Friend”; in the letter he asks, “How does the country agree with you? do you ever think of us? when we never forget you. If we could be as united in place as we are in mind we should be happy—but this world, an enemy to every thing good, keeps us asunder” (21 November 1747, 1:99–100). It is not long before Ned writes his first letter addressed to “Dear Shackleton.” It is a stilted letter written from Joseph Cotter’s publishing house where *The Reformer*, a weekly newspaper that Burke edited for three months,

is being published. Burke writes, "I doubt whether I should have wrote now as not yet being at perfect leisure . . . had not you in a manner forced me by your many expressions of kindness in your letter and the poem on your Mistresses which it was impossible for me to read and forbear telling you how much I am obliged to you for such an excellent entertainment, I confess tho' I had an excellent opinion (founded on experience) of my friend's capacity, I could not believe so much of it, we shall call you the Anacreon of our Society."

Anacreon was a Greek poet famous for his poems in celebration of love and wine and also his elegiac epitaphs. Burke's letter reads like an elegiac epitaph that has more of loss than the longing of the early love lament poem. Burke ends the letter with a demonstration of how busy he is and the inescapable ring of heartache: "The hurry in the shop prevents me from saying more than that I ever will be one of the sincerest of your friends. Edmd. Burke. I can't say when I can go to you" (2 February 1747/1748, 1:101-2).

Four days later Burke begins and quickly finishes a long poem entitled "To Doctor Hutcheson."¹⁴ The poem begins with a panegyric to the recently deceased moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), but fewer than twenty lines of the 250-line poem focus on Hutcheson. There is a curious shift where Burke turns from a routine address of praise to Hutcheson to ask,

Say then since thou canst tell
 What strange despotick Laws,
 What unseen & mysterious Cause
 Rules these that love, & love, alas! too well.

(lines 17-20)

Burke continues with a description of love as a masculine, divine, and violent force that lays low even the most powerful men:

The greatest King, the wisest Sage
 Has fall'n a Victim to his Rage,
 And his Divinity been forc'd t'adore,
 The strongest man, who without Spear or Shield
 With slaughtered hosts has dy'd th' ensanguin'd Field
 Has kneel'd obsequious & confest his Power.

(lines 25-30)

The rest of the poem recounts the betrayal of Samson by his lover Delilah, in the pay of the Philistines who throughout the poem are tagged the “uncircumcis’d Crew” (line 227). The first Dublin performance of George Frideric Handel’s *Samson* was given just two days before Burke began writing these verses, but the editors of the poem suggest that Burke may have wished to “respond, with a poem about love, to the arrival of his friend Shackleton’s poem on his ‘Mistresses.’”¹⁵ Burke’s depiction of love, however, is entirely at odds with Shackleton’s conventional poem on male fulfillment in heterosexual romance. Burke’s Samson reveals to Delilah that his unique strength is invested in his long flowing locks; Delilah is delighted to hear this confession that cutting Samson’s hair will deprive him of the “Vigour” in his “Veins,” and Samson so misreads her delight that he immediately falls on her to make love to her (lines 192, 189–200). Burke’s depiction of the lovemaking is wonderfully perverse, presenting it partly as an assault on Delilah and also as a masochistic self-poisoning by Samson:

Swift then to his Ruin triumphant he flew
 And joyfully seiz’d on the Prize,
 While fir’d with her Beauties he greedily drew
 Large Draughts of Love’s poisonous Joys.
 Till with th’ intoxicating Potion drunk
 He sought her snowy Breast,
 And wearied Nature gently sunk
 To Sleep’s embalmed Rest.

(lines 201–8)

The poem ends with the moral:

Such is the Power of Love
 Which not alone can move
 The weak enfeebled mind,
 But furious in it’s Course
 With more than human Force
 The noblest Soul fast in its Chains can bind.

(lines 244–9)

Burke had expressed unease at heterosexual relations and even fear of heterosexual love in his earliest letters: “Dear Dick to tell my own imperfections is, I am quite dumb in mixt company for there the Discourse is more confin’d seldom extending farther

than news, the weather and Dress which as Mr Addison justly remarks in the Spectator is wonderful considering as <the>re are a greater number of persons by, that more Ideas should not start up among em to furnish Topicks for conversation but this I am endeavouring to wean myself from" (5 July 1744, 1:24–5).

In an early letter to Dick he relates meeting a man from Ballitore called Josy Delany and tells Dick that he asked him: "whether Dublin air agreed with him? . . . Very indifferently repliys Josy, why so Josy? here he answerd nothing for a good while, at Las out it came—sure I'm marryd! . . . Thus we parted he look'd very thin and melancholy so it seems his affairs are but in a bad Situation" (11 June 1744, 1:16). The implication that marrying women is bad for one's health is given more substance in another letter in which the young Burke recounts the suicide of a law clerk who killed himself because his beloved loved another man; the young Ned contrasts heterosexual love, a diabolical snare, with his own "Pure and sincere" affection for Dick:

This accident has alterd my Sentiments concerning Love, so that I am now not only convinced that there is such a thing as love, but that it may very probably be the source of as many misfortunes as are usually ascribed to it this may I think be a sufficient example to shew what Lengths an unrestrained Passion tho virtuous in itseff may carry a man and with how much craft and sutlety our great Enemy endeavours by all means to work our Destruction, how he lays a bait in every thing, and how much need we have to care Lest he make too sure of us, as is the case of that unfortunate youth.

Admist this gloomy Prospect of unhappy Love Let me stile myself with a Pure and sincere affection Dear Dick's assured Friend EB.

(7 July 1744, 1:28)

It was less than two months after Burke's poem "To Doctor Hutcheson" (which was really on Samson and Delilah) that Richard Shackleton and Elizabeth Fuller were married, and Burke wrote a poem of some fifty lines entitled "To Richard Shackelton, on his Marriage."¹⁶ Burke's epithalamium is his last poem dedicated to R:S and marks a strong contrast to the first poem in his honor. Burke undercuts his celebration of Shackleton's marriage in a number of ways, whether unconsciously or consciously hardly matters; Burke is evidently disturbed by his friend's marriage.

The epithalamium opens with a scenario of betrayed love, “When hearts are barter’d for less precious gold,” linked by a simile to a simultaneous scene of a lying poet: “And like the heart, the venal song is sold” (lines 1–2). Both the “Bridal torch” and the “Poet’s fire” are kindled by “one base desire” (lines 3–4). Burke follows this disturbing opening scene by describing true love bound in marriage as a “rare, but happy, union” but does not assert that Shackleton and Elizabeth share this scarce state (line 8). Instead Burke inserts an image of himself, the poet-friend: “When nought but friendship guides the Poet’s song, / How sweet the verse! The happy love how strong!” (lines 9–10). Friendship and sweet verse, it seems, may redeem the base desire of the venal bride, at least on paper, but Burke expresses doubt that it is “nought but friendship” that guides his song. In a further contortion Burke can supply the requisite sweet verse only “if the Muse” will indulge his design and favor him as love has favored Shackleton’s plan; but *has* love favored Shackleton, or is the “Bridal torch and Poet’s fire” kindled by “one base desire”? And what is this “one base desire”? The only obvious answer is that this base desire is for lucre or lust. Suggesting that a Quaker marriage of a devout schoolteacher is generated by a desire for material gain is hardly plausible; might then the base desire shared by “the Bridal torch and Poet’s fire” be lust? Is this the desire that renders Burke unable to assert that it is “nought but friendship” that guides his song? The celebration of the marriage is held in abeyance; we cannot be sure if either the love merits celebration or the poet is up to the task.

If we regard the first two verses as at best equivocal about celebrating the marriage, the third and longest verse explicitly explores doubt about the worthiness of Shackleton’s “Bridal torch” in language that is charged with sexual innuendo. The poet asks why the groves of Arcadia do not echo with wedding joy and tell Shackleton’s bride

what complaints they heard,
While yet his growing flame’s success he fear’d,
And all his pains o’erpaid with transport now,
Since love triumphs, and he enjoys his vow?
(lines 17–20)¹⁷

The sexual imagery (“growing flame,” “pains o’erpaid with transport”) culminates in the question mark as “love triumphs,” and Shackleton “enjoys his vow.” Why indeed “don’t the vocal groves

ring forth their joy" (line 15)? The manuscript provides a further puzzle in revealing that Burke forgot to write "bride" in these lines and had to add her later.

Burke tells us that the "vocal groves" stand silent, "nor will bestow one lay / . . . to grace this happy day" (lines 21–2). He asks if the "sullen shade" (line 23) is unable to harbor joy, and, harking back to his first poem for R:S in which he compared himself to a female dove "in the grove / Foresaken by her mate" (lines 17–8), he asks if the groves are "but for lover's sorrows made?" (line 24). Burke takes himself out of the grove of "lover's sorrows" and looks to the "bride's bright eye" for a "happier omen . . . that cannot lie" (lines 25–6). The manuscript reveals Burke's unease in looking for the happier omen; he had described it as cannot "lye." The changes in spelling underscore the double entendre of lying in the sense of lying down or lying with. Even this apparently more open celebration is still ambivalent, looking forward to "growing time, still growing in delight, / Of rounds of future years all mark'd with white!" (lines 27–8). These lines bear an uneasy relationship to the earlier phrases of the cryptic "growing flame" and "sullen shade." The fertility of sex and childbirth ("growing time . . . rounds of future years") are linked with the ghosts of death and mourning ("sullen shade," "all mark'd with white"); it was common for women to die in childbirth at this time. The portent of this fate is underscored rather than banished by the lines that follow: "Thro' whose bright circles, free from envious chance, / Concord of love shall lead an endless dance" (lines 29–30). To be led on an "endless dance" implies that there is never a satisfactory resolution to the pursuit: "Concord of love," then, is to remain forever on the unattainable horizon, and who is alive who can escape the "envious chance" of fate? At the end of this third verse, Burke disturbingly links Dick to Adam and describes Elizabeth as "Another Eve . . . / May'st thou be father of as long a line!" (lines 38–9). The undergraduate humor of the wish is the most direct congratulation that Burke can muster, and the poem is haunted by the temptation of Adam by his Eve and his subsequent fall from grace: the banishment from Paradise, the suffering on earth, and the first of Adam's line, Cain, murdering his own brother. There is another odd slip from the past to the present tense in Burke's change from "Another Eve & Paradise was thine" (line 38). Does Burke think that Richard already has fallen from the state of grace and left paradise? Burke's ambivalence finds a further outing in his equivocal "As if" in the lines: "Your heart so fix'd on hers, and her's on you, / As if the world afforded but

the two" (lines 40–1). He has a bleak, even despairing wish that in "this age" their "constancy may prove / There yet remains on earth a pow'r call'd love" (lines 42–3).

Even the last verse forbears to celebrate Richard and Elizabeth, instead focusing on the bond between Burke and Shackleton and its origins. The "steady truth" that Burke commemorates in the poem is the young men's "friendship growing from our earliest youth" (lines 46–7). The poem, "To Richard Shackleton, on his Marriage," ends with Burke commemorating Abraham Shackleton:

To whose kind care my better birth I owe
 Who to fair science did my youth intice,
 Won from the paths of Ignorance and Vice.
(lines 49–51)

Celebrating Abraham's "kind care," Burke returns to the time of his youth, before heterosexual love and marriage had strained his friendship with Dick.

We have very few letters remaining in the correspondence from Burke to Shackleton after this date. We have no idea what Burke did from the summer of 1748 until he turns up to read law at the Middle Temple in London in 1750. His whereabouts and actions for the next seven years are largely unknown, and what we do know—that he lives, travels, and writes poetry with Will Burke and suffers nervous breakdowns—comes largely from the few intermittent letters that Burke addresses to his "Dear Friend." Burke's life is richly documented from the year 1758 when he begins to become known as a literary figure before he enters on his dramatic political career. A letter dated 10 August 1757 addressed to "Dear Shackleton" signals the beginning of this move out of obscurity, and he strikes a tone of cordial affection that is the hallmark for his future letters to Shackleton. This tone is jarred somewhat by Burke's awkwardness in conveying congratulations on Shackleton's "Domestick Satisfaction" and best wishes for Mrs. Shackleton: "My Brother Dick is now with me, and joins very sincerely in the Sentiments I have for you, your father and your mother, and shall I add for Mrs Shackleton? for I will not suppose myself a Stranger to one who is so nearly related to you." In previous letters Burke had referred to her only as "your spouse" (1:109–1); naming her, however awkwardly, is still an improvement in his own efforts to relate to her, even if it comes through an assertion of his own intimacy with her husband. Fol-

lowing immediately on his contorted recognition of Mrs. Shackleton, Burke makes a comment that reads almost as an aside, and we hear the remarkable news: "I am now a married man myself, and therefore claim some respect from the married fraternity, at least for your own Sakes you will not pretend to consider me as the worse man. I do not know whether it ever falls in your way to see Doctor Sleigh" (1:123–4). He says nothing further about his marriage or wife. His claim to just "some respect from the married fraternity" is conveyed with a concise cynicism that this brotherhood has a need to keep up appearances and maintain its own status by conveying social regard for marriage and looking down on unmarried men. With the letter Burke encloses a copy of his book on *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and inscribes a dedication to Shackleton in Latin, the study of which formed such an integral part of their youth: "*Accipe et haec manuum tibi quae monumenta meorum / Sint—et longum testentur amorem,*" which translates as "Accept this handiwork (lit. these hands) to / for you and as a memory of me—and may it be a testament to a long love." A year later, Shackleton had still not read the book (1:123n4).

As Burke's public career blossomed in later decades, the friendship between the two men was eventually put on a cordial, though distant, footing, and Dick was replaced by Will Burke as the most intense object of Edmund Burke's affections.¹⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us that scholars for years have tried to ignore the language of friendship with the following rule: "Passionate language of same-sex attraction was extremely common during whatever period is under discussion—and therefore must have been completely meaningless." Doubtless there will be those who will wish to dismiss Burke's letters and poems to Dick as "meaningless" in a panic to avoid naming Burke as homosexual.¹⁹ Indeed, biographies written on Burke from the late nineteenth to the midtwentieth century creak with such homophobic fulmination. President Woodrow Wilson's comment is typical: Burke did have "some queer companions . . . questionable fellows, whose life he shared, perhaps with a certain Bohemian relish, without sharing their morals or their works." Or as Sir Philip Magnus puts it, "William Burke was a sinister and disreputable figure who later found it necessary to leave the country. Edmund was intimately and mysteriously associated with him until the end of his life."²⁰

People's attitudes toward same-sex love, affection, romance, and desire are culturally specific. In other words, social and subjective assumptions about same-sex intimacies vary enormously

across different cultural zones and have varied through historical time periods. The potential of same-sex relations is constructed in different cultures as a feature of wider gender and sexual regulation. We are familiar with the concept that societies' gender and sexual regulations differ in their ramifications through the ages. As a corollary of this we can discern that the behavior of those involved in same-sex relationships might be similar from one region or age to the next, but the social meanings attributed to their actions and the response of those involved can have profoundly different implications. It is only by examining the cultural context that we can begin to understand the social significance of same-sex relationships, both in terms of social response and in terms of the (re)action of the individuals and communities concerned, what Michel Foucault terms the "reverse discourse."²¹ It is societies' identifications of homosexuality that, at least in terms of the response of the individual, actually construct the dialogue through which the homosexual identity is formed.

In seventeenth-century England (and indeed in Europe more generally) expressions of passionate love between men can be found in abundance. The bodily expression of this love seems perversely to have been enabled by that shadowy figure of the sodomite, a man whose predilection for sex with men might seem to be a precursor to the modern male homosexual. Following Foucault and Alan Bray, most historians of this period point to the fact that there were scarcely any prosecutions for sodomy, and those few prosecutions that did take place regard the sodomite as a discursive construct, a symbol of the political traitor, heretic, foreigner, or corruptor of domestic order, rather than as a desiring individual.²² Foucault famously describes the sodomite as "that utterly confused category," and Bray concurs, asserting that "one cannot write a history of 'sodomites.'"²³ There was no name for passionate love and desire between men, such as the love that Shakespeare expressed in his sonnets, other than "friendship." The sexual terminology of the day, such as pederasty and sodomy denoted sin, corruption, and inequality, whereas expressions of love between men generally celebrated this love as leading to a higher self.²⁴

Bray has explored how rites and expressions of such male friendships as the kiss of peace; taking communion together in a Catholic mass; sending personal, passionate letters; sharing food, beds, and raunchy jokes; and co-burial memorials are testimony to the particular kinship of such friendships and how "the language of 'sodomy' could be suspended from the physical intimacy

that pervaded the culture of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England."²⁵ Thus the vague, imprecise abstraction of the sodomite sublime (perversely) legislated the practice of sworn friendships, which were so rich in signification and reference and were constantly reiterated, affirmed, verified, and honored as central to public life. Over the course of the eighteenth century, with the spread of capitalism, the development of urban centers, and the rise of the middle class, there was a shift in the British society that transitioned from this older regime of social order based on what Foucault termed "alliance," which had subordinated all men, women, and boys to higher ranked males, to one founded in sexuality, through which men and women have since embodied their claims to personal and political privacy.²⁶ The traditional formulations of same-sex friendship with their socially recognized kinship and ethical functions were understood as being less significant to familial and heterosexual bonds. Over the course of the century such passionate friendships were understood as potentially inimical to these now socially vital bonds. In the eighteenth century, then, we can see the ground shift under passionate male friendships. The seventeenth century looks strange to us with the license allowed to eroticism between men, but as the eighteenth century progresses we begin to recognize how this passion is increasingly denied a public function or open expression; it becomes not normal and more recognizably queer. Sodomy is seen to transgress social and gender roles, and the perpetrator, his haunts, and practices become more clearly defined by the processes of criminal law: investigation, arrest, arraignment, and punishment. He is later specified by medical pathology and as ever receives the condemnation of the churches.

The argument might be made that Burke developed a traditional understanding of same-sex sworn friendship from his boyhood spent among his mother's family, the Nagles of North Cork who were Catholic, Jacobite, and crypto-aristocratic. Such a traditional understanding of same-sex friendship is out of step with the conception of what love means and how it might be expressed between men in mid-eighteenth-century Britain. We might read Burke as navigating the shifting ground where the male homosocial society of eighteenth-century Britain was increasingly more limited in expressions of love allowed between men. Whatever label we may or may not want to apply to Burke's love, the letters to "Dear Dicky," "Dear Dick," "Dear Friend," and "Dear Shackleton" remain a testament to the young Burke's remarkably perverse reaction to heterosexual intercourse and

marriage and give a moving record of his passion for Shackleton, a passion whose delight, intensity, heartbreak, anxiety, jealousy, and masochism exceeded the decorum of friendship as it was understood in eighteenth-century British culture.

NOTES

This essay has benefited greatly from the careful reading and advice of both Caroline Gonda and Jill Delsigne. My thanks to them.

¹ These resonant phrases in Edmund Burke's biography originally came from the great Burke scholar, Thomas W. Copeland:

The well-recorded period of Burke's youth ends when he takes his B.A. at Trinity in January of 1748. There is a single short letter written in the following month, and after that Burke's whole surviving correspondence for the two last years he remained in Ireland consists of two sentences and part of a third which biographers have quoted from letters now lost. In the spring of 1750, at the age of twenty-one, Burke crossed to London to study law at the Middle Temple. We have six letters—two of them highly uninformative poetic epistles—to tell us of his activities in his first two-and-a-half years in England. Then between the autumn of 1752 and the summer of 1757 comes the darkest period of all. To illuminate those five years there remains a single letter, which happens to be torn and incomplete. These are the missing years indeed.

The Correspondence of Edmund Burke, vol. 1, April 1744–June 1768, ed. Thomas W. Copeland, 10 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958–78), 1:xvii. Hereafter the *Correspondence* will be cited parenthetically by date, volume, and page number, unless additional information must be included in a note. The curious phrase “highly uninformative” describes sexually charged long poems addressed to Will Burke and Christopher Nugent, the Irish doctor who cured Edmund of his nervous breakdowns and who was subsequently to become his father-in-law. I regard these poems as very revealing of Burke's emotional mental states.

² Edmund Burke to Philip Francis, 9 June 1777, in *Correspondence*, 3:348.

³ By the time that the influential jurist William Blackstone published his *Commentaries on the English Law* (1765–69) sodomy was routinely described in English law “in its very indictments as a crime not fit to be named; ‘*peccatum illud horribile, inter christianos non nominandum*’” (that horrible crime not to be named among Christians). He remarks that the “taciturnity” of this phrase was observed as far back as “the edict of Constantius and Constans: ‘*ubi scelus est id, quod non proficit scire, jubemus insurgere leges, armari jura gladio ultore, ut exquisitis poenis subdantur infames, qui sunt, vel qui futuri sunt, rei*’” (where that crime is found, which is unfit even to know, we command the law to arise armed with an avenging sword that the infamous men who

are, or shall in future be guilty of it, may undergo the most severe punishments) (Book 4, chap. XV, section IV). In the summer of 1894, John Francis Bloxam, a homosexual undergraduate at Oxford, asked Alfred Douglas for a contribution to a new periodical called *The Chameleon*. Douglas contributed two poems. These were quoted at Oscar Wilde's trial for homosexual offenses on 30 April 1895. The last line of the poem "Two Loves," "I am the Love that dare not speak its name," has become a trope for alluding to homosexual love (republished in *The Penguin Book of Homosexual Verse*, ed. Stephen Coote [London: Allen Lane, 1983], pp. 262-4).

⁴For an intriguing record of "this darkest period of all," see H. V. F. Somerset, ed., *A Note-Book of Edmund Burke: Poems, Characters, Essays and Other Sketches in the Hands of Edmund and William Burke* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957).

⁵Burke and Richard Shackleton had discussed plans for a society of their friends in Dublin as early as 24 November 1744, and some sort of club was in existence the following year (16 July 1745). However, the formal inauguration of a debating club, meeting twice weekly and calling itself the Academy of Belles Lettres, took place in George's Lane, Dublin, 21 April 1747. The club met for at least three months (1:90-1n4).

⁶George Rousseau, "'Homoplatic, Homodepressed, Homomorbid': Some Further Genealogies of Same-Sex Attraction in Western Civilization," in *Love, Sex, Intimacy, and Friendship between Men, 1550-1800*, ed. Katherine O'Donnell and Michael O'Rourke (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 12-52, 20.

⁷Rousseau, p. 26.

⁸Written before 24 May 1744, *The Papers of Edmund Burke, 1729-1797* (Adam Matthew Publications, Microfilm, Marlborough, Wiltshire: 1994) Reel 21 27/6. Original in possession of Sheffield Archives, Burke Papers Bk P 27/6 WWM.

⁹George E. Haggerty, "Gray's Tears," in *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 113-35, 114.

¹⁰Haggerty, p. 121.

¹¹For this poem, I have consulted the microform copy (Bk P 27/6 WWM) in the National Library of Ireland, which differs from the version that Copeland prints in his collection.

¹²*Memoirs and Letters of Richard and Elizabeth Shackleton, Late of Balitore, Ireland. Compiled by Their Daughter Mary Leadbeater*, ed. Mary Leadbeater (Dublin and London: Gilpin, 1849), p. 6.

¹³Arthur P. I. Samuels suggests that Edmund might have intended to write "RS's EB," in *The Early Life, Correspondence and Writings of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke LL. D.* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1923), p. 108.

¹⁴Written between 6 and 19 February 1748, in Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 1, *The Early Writings*, ed. T. O. McLoughlin and James T. Boulton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 30-8.

¹⁵Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, 1:30.

¹⁶*The Papers of Edmund Burke, 1729-1797* Reel 21 27/3 WWM, National Library of Ireland, printed in Sir James Prior, *Memoir of the Life and*

Character of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke with Specimens of His Poetry and Letters and an Estimate of His Genius and Talents, Compared with Those of His Contemporaries, 2 vols., 2d edn. (London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1824), 1:29–30. I cite the manuscript, which differs in some respects from Prior's printed text.

¹⁷ Prior prints line 18 as "While yet his growing fame's success he fear'd"; consulting the manuscript, I found "growing flame."

¹⁸ Mary Leadbeater, *The Annals of Ballitore, 1766–1824*, ed. John MacKenna (Kildare: Stephen Scropp Press, 1986), pp. 16–7, 44–6.

¹⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1990), p. 52.

²⁰ Thus runs one of the more popular arguments: Edmund was not queer, though his boyfriend was. See Woodrow Wilson, *Mere Literature and Other Essays* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1896), p. 109; see also Sir Philip Magnus, *Edmund Burke: A Life* (London: John Murray, 1939), p. 9.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. and ed. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 101.

²² *Ibid.* Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982), pp. 13–80.

²³ Foucault, p. 101. Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 275.

²⁴ Nicholas F. Radel disputes this conception of the sodomite to argue that there was a cultural space for a sodomite to speak of his sexual desires provided he was a servant. This desire, of course, further enhanced the understanding of sexual mastery (of the servant) as good husbandry (by the master). See "Can the Sodomite Speak? Sodomy, Satire, Desire, and the Castlehaven Case," in *Love, Sex, Intimacy and Friendship*, pp. 148–67.

²⁵ Bray, *Friend*, p. 272.

²⁶ Foucault, p. 106.