Friends and Lovers

‘If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends.’

The Spice Girls

The year is 1559 during the brief reign of Mary Queen of France, also known as Queen of Scots. The scene is a festival in the renaissance town of Bar-le-Duc. Two pairs of eyes meet across the crowd, a meeting which one of them later described thus:

We were seeking each other before we set eyes on each other, and at our first meeting, we discovered ourselves to be so seized by each other, so known to each other and so bound together that from then on none was so close as each was to the other.

A question: was this the start of an affair or a friendship?

Move forward, just over a hundred years, across the channel to springtime in Deptford, South East London. A man and a woman are in the grips of love, attested to by their prolific letters now in the British Library. Their relationship began the year turbulently, though Margaret is beginning to feel less anxious again for all John’s intensity. She writes:

What mean you to make me weep and break my heart by your love to me? Take me and all I have, give me but your love, my dear friend. Tuesday is longed for by me and nights and days move a tedious pace till I am near you.

A question: is it lovers or friends that will be reunited?

Now to the present day, and a crematorium in North London, at the end of a relationship. At the funeral, the man who survives recalls:

I was barely coherent, shaking violently through the music, trembling, wobbly-voiced, as I read the Maupassant, taking
deep breaths to fight off tears: ‘We must feel. That is everything. We must feel as a brute beast filled with nerves feels, and knows that it has felt and knows that each feeling shakes it like an earthquake. But we must not say that we have been so shaken. At the most we can let it be known to few people who will respect the confidence.’

The question again: does the man remember his lover or his friend?

The passion described in each case might suggest that these couples were lovers. They were, in fact, all friends. The first is Michel de Montaigne, the essayist and author of one of the best philosophical pieces of writing on friendship, prompted by his relationship with Etienne La Boëtie. This excerpt, from that essay, usually published with the title ‘On friendship’, describes their first meeting. The second comes from a letter of Margaret Godolphin, a maid of honour at the court of Charles II, who had a ‘seraphic’ friendship with John Evelyn, a friend of Samuel Pepys. The third comes from a book by the actor Simon Callow, entitled *Love Is Where It Falls: An Account of a Passionate Friendship*, a memoir of his relationship with the theatrical literary agent Peggy Ramsay.

And of what passion, for the fervent obsession within which each of these friendships flourished is arresting precisely because none of them were sexual. Montaigne and La Boëtie were both men and though same-sex relationships were a marginal concern of his, Montaigne thought them ‘rightly abhorrent to our manners’. Of the second couple, one might easily come to the conclusion that they used Restoration religiosity as a cover for what would have been an affair, had Evelyn not been married. But that would be to misunderstand them: sex was never on the cards. It turns out that they enjoyed an intense friendship of a sort that had a long tradition up to the seventeenth century and is now largely forgotten. For Simon Callow and Peggy Ramsay the question of whether they would have a sexual relationship or not was relatively easily answered by numerous contingencies from Callow