

Friendship, Virtue, and Democratic Practice

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Course Description

How are you a friend – to yourself and to others – and how does friendship shape identity, society, and politics? This course brings the everydayness of friendship to imaginative and critical inquiry, examining the meaning of friendship, what it demands of us, and what kind of politics might emerge through practices of friendship. It seeks to illuminate the value of friendship for philosophical and political thinking while also pursuing friendship at the level of pedagogy and discipline.

Bridging the instructors' fields of religious studies and political science, the course examines how classical authors and contemporary feminists have thought about the virtues and practices of friendship, and how contemporary political theorists characterize the politics that emerge from friendship. Readings will include theorists of virtue such as Aristotle; feminist theorists of friendship and accountability such as Sara Ahmed and Ann Russo; and contemporary political theorists of identity and race such as Danielle Allen. Writing projects will pursue practices of friendship through collaboration and the call and response of letter writing.

Promises and Practices

In this course, we are committed to creating and supporting a classroom community that is inclusive, equitable, and conducive to learning for all students, as well as sensitive to the specific, unique, and unpredictable challenges we will each and all encounter this semester. To this end, we are designing course activities and assignments meant to help you gain and demonstrate understanding of key course content in ways that are flexible and personally meaningful. Our class meetings will include time for group check-ins, and the syllabus includes structured occasions for one on one and small group conferences with the professors.

If you are unable to attend class or complete an assignment by the due date, we ask that whenever possible you let us know ahead of time and work with us to determine when you will complete the work (from class or assigned). In this situation, there will be no grade penalty for late work. If it is not possible to ask ahead of time, we ask that you maintain communication with us as much as possible so that we can work together to determine a good course of action. We encourage those of you who need more than a one-week extension to talk with your dean and us to arrive at a practical and workable plan for completing the work.

We are committed to fostering a learning community marked by imagination, creativity, honesty, openness, earnest inquiry, and playful speculation. Through the structures of reading, writing, revision, and discussion that this course offers, we also seek to help you develop certain habits of mind that we consider essential to the liberal arts: to learn to listen and to speak, to read and to write, and to think with creativity and focus. We also hope that we can collaborate and learn from one another as we bring this community of learning into being, making space for silence as well as voice, for dissent as well as agreement, for personal transformation as well as political deliberation.

Given the subject matter of this course, many of our discussions in class will involve sensitive issues. You may find some of this material upsetting. Again, our hope is that together we can foster an environment of respect and openness conducive to everyone's full and honest participation. Whatever success or pleasure the course might occasion depends in large part on what all of us bring and contribute.

Course Goals

To develop the habits of mind described above as well as to bring the aspirations listed into being, this course will consist in a number of activities:

Energetic and involved discussion. We will learn theories and practices of friendship by speaking about them. To learn the difficult concepts and arguments, you need to practice putting them into your own words, explaining them to others, and listening to others' explanations. Excellent discussion requires preparation: review of previous class discussions, taking notes in advance of class meetings, and being present and alert as much as possible during every class meeting. Through our discussions you will develop the essential speaking and listening skills necessary for developing and using the theories and applications of the theories we study.

Disciplined and careful reading. The readings for this course will require time, energy, and concentration. This course seeks to develop you as thoughtful, patient, imaginative, and critical readers capable of identifying multiple possible readings, examining assumptions, and ready to interpret different kinds of arguments.

Frequent and varied writing. This course begins from the premise that reading and writing are deeply intertwined; because writing develops understanding, this course asks that you write in response to all of the assigned readings. This writing will come in the form of weekly letter writing (described below) as well as three essays spaced across the semester.

We have created this course with the hopes of helping all of you develop as effective speakers and listeners, intelligent readers and writers, and critical thinkers -- all this and taking friendship

as our content and our form. Friendship requires more than one; without your distinctive contributions the course would amount to very little. We welcome your suggestions and criticisms and we hope that we can make this course together into something worthwhile for each and all of us.

Books

The following books are available for purchase from the Bryn Mawr College bookstore. You can also access electronic copies of these books from our course Moodle page.

Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers* (Chicago, 2004)

adrienne maree brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us* (AK Press, 2020)

Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* (Europa Editions, 2012)

Toni Morrison, *Sula* (Vintage, 2004)

All other readings will be available on Moodle.

Activities

***Attendance and Participation* (20%)**

By enrolling in this course, you agree to join your classmates and your professors in taking responsibility for the quality of class discussions. Your contributions to the discussion should reflect a careful reading of assigned materials, and should aim to respond thoughtfully to the text(s) and to others' comments and questions.

***Weekly Letter Exchange* (20%)**

Students will be divided into pairs for the duration of the semester. Before our Tuesday class discussion, one student in each pair will write a letter (~250-500 words) to the other that raises questions, poses problems, explores examples, or otherwise delves into the texts and ideas encountered in that week's assigned materials. This letter should be sent before class on Tuesday. The second student in each pair will read the letter and write a letter in response (~250-500 words); this response should be sent by the beginning of class on Thursday.

The purpose of these letters is to explore, together, the ideas encountered in class and their stakes. Our hope is that, over the course of the semester, these exchanges will deepen, folding in questions and insights from earlier in the semester and strengthening the intellectual bonds within our class.

At the end of the semester, you will compile these letter exchanges into a single document and submit them to Prof. Farneth and Prof. Schlosser at the end of classes. These will be discussed in conferences with Professors Farneth and Schlosser scheduled during the exam period.

Three Essays (20% each)

Each student will write a 5 - 6 page (double-spaced) essay in response to the prompts included below. Final versions of the first two essays are due prior to the conferences designated on the course schedule; these will be evaluated during conferences with Professors Farneth and Schlosser. Each student will meet with either Farneth or Schlosser once during the course of the semester. The final essay should be submitted at the end of finals period.

During conferences about essays, students will be asked to evaluate their own work according to [these criteria](#).

Essay 1: Friendship, Freedom, and Politics

Gumbs in “Most Affectionately Yours,” writes “The destined promised lands that friendships, counterposed to slaveships, allow us to envision are priceless today.” Tara Bynum, in her response, adds: “Not only is friendship possible (and a necessity); it has to be a kind of freedom because the best friendships do free us to be ourselves in spite of.”

In Letter 47, Seneca writes to Lucilius: “There is no reason to look for a friend only in the forum and senate house: if you pay careful attention you may find them at home as well.”

In this first section of the course, we have considered friendship from the perspectives of Seneca, Wheatley, Gumbs and Bynum, Allen, and Aristotle. For each of them, friendship stands in relationship to freedom and politics. Beginning with one of the above quotations, develop your own position on the possibilities or impossibilities of political friendship, in conversation with at least three of the authors from the course. Pay special attention to the differences and disagreements among the different thinkers and writers you discuss.

Essay 2: Conversation as a Practice of Friendship

Choose one of the conversations that we’ve studied in this section of the course -- a conversation or series of conversations between Sula and Nel, between Poppy and Zoe, between Boggs and her comrades, between Baldwin and Hansberry. Analyze the conversation in light of the virtues and practices of friendship. Are these conversants treating each other as friends? And with what implications for their own formation as friends, political friends, and citizens?

Final Essay

For your final essay, please read over all of the letters that you have written and received over the course of the semester. Consider the themes and questions that run through them. Then, write an essay in which you reflect on the themes and questions that have emerged in your letter exchange over the course of the semester. What have you learned about friendship, virtue, and democratic practice? What has intrigued you, puzzled you, or attracted your attention? How have your questions, commitments, and practices shifted through the process of thinking and writing about these things in conversation with another person? Criteria for evaluation of the final reflective essay will be discussed in class.

Course Policies

Accommodations

We encourage any students who think they may need accommodations in this course because of the impact of a learning difference to meet with us early in the semester. Students who attend Bryn Mawr should also contact Access Services as soon as possible, to verify their eligibility for reasonable accommodations. Haverford students should contact Keely Milbourne at the Office of Access and Disabilities Services, kmilbourne1@haverford.edu or 610-896-1324.

AI

We ask that you complete your work without using AI tools to develop your thinking or revise your writing. Other than spell checking, the only exception to the rule is if your instructor gives explicit instructions and parameters for the use of AI tools. If you submit work that appears to have been written using AI sources, we will ask you to meet with us to discuss your thinking and writing process. If, after this conversation, we conclude it's likelier than not that you did not personally complete an assignment you submitted under your name, we will refer you to the Honor Board in accordance with normal procedures.

Both Bryn Mawr and Haverford seek to develop essential skills of inquiry, analysis, argument, and imagination. These skills require practice and reflection without the assistance of AI. While AI can be a useful tool, we believe that a liberal arts education requires learning how to think, research, write, and revise independently and our courses focus on helping students develop these skills themselves.

If you have questions about AI use and/or proper attribution of other people's work, please talk to Professors Farneth or Schlosser.

Attendance

Every class meeting is an important and unique time for learning and exchange. If you have a good reason to miss class or come late, please tell us and we will propose a way of making up what you have missed.

Extensions

If you miss a conference please try to reschedule it as soon as possible. Writing projects submitted late will receive partial credit, with each day lowering the grade by 10%. That said, we understand sometimes you may for various reasons need more time revising your essay. If you foresee any conflicts (religious holidays, travel plans, etc.), come see us ASAP to discuss your options. In the event of illness or emergency, please also try to contact us ASAP.

Integrity

We are committed to adhering to the standards regarding academic honesty contained in the Bryn Mawr and Haverford honor codes and the values of mutual trust, concern, and respect for oneself and for others upon which the bi-co community depends; we invite all of you to continue the conversation with us and with one another about how we can create the best intellectual community possible.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Jan. 21 & 23 Introduction

- 1/21 – “Introduction: Collective Criticism” from *The Ferrante Letters* (~13 pages)
- 1/23 – Selections from Seneca’s letters (~25 pages)

Week 2: Jan. 28 & 30 Writing as a Practice of Friendship

- 1/28 – Phillis Wheatley’s letters to Obour Tanner, Tara Bynum & Alexis Pauline Gumbs exchange, “Most Affectionately Yours”, Tara Bynum, “Phillis Wheatley on Friendship”
- 1/30 – Visit to Haverford College’s Special Collections - meet in Lutnick 232 (no new readings)

Week 3: Feb. 4 & 6 Political Friendship and Race in America

- 2/4 – Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, Prologue and Chs 1 - 2 (~33 pages)
- 2/6 – Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, Chs 3 - 4 (~28 pages)

Week 4: Feb. 11 & 13 Political Friendship and Aristotle’s *Philia*

- 2/11 – Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, Chs 8 - 10 (~60 pages)
- 2/13 – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book 8 (~25 pages)

Week 5: February 18 & 20 Aristotle’s *Philia*

- 2/18 – Aristotle, NE Book 9 (~25 pages)
- 2/20 – Salkever, “Taking Friendship Seriously” (22 pages) & Schlosser, “Letter to Ali” (~6 pages)

* Essay 1 due on Friday 2/21 at 5pm *

Week 6: February 25 & 27 Essay 1 Conferences & *Sula*

- 2/25 – Conferences; No new reading
- 2/27 – Toni Morrison, *Sula*, foreword and pp. 3 - 85 (Part 1)

Week 7: March 4 & 6 *Sula*

- 3/4 – Morrison, *Sula*, pp. 89 - 174 (Part 2)
- 3/6 – No class

Spring Break: March 7 - 14

Week 8: Mar. 18 & Mar. 20 Happiness and Pleasure in Friendship

- 3/18 – Watch Mike Leigh, “Happy Go Lucky” & read Sara Ahmed, “Happiness, Ethics, Possibility” (~25 pages)

3/20 – adrienne maree brown, “Independence and Decentralization,” “Spells and Practices for Emergent Strategy,” & “The Pleasures of Deep, Intentional Friendship” (~30 pages)

Week 9: March 25 & 27 Friendship, Conversation, and Politics

3/25 – Watch Grace Lee, “American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs”

3/27 – Michel de Montaigne, “On Friendship” and “On the Art of Conversation”

Week 10: April 1 & 3 The Radical Friendship of James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry and papers

4/1 – Read Imani Perry, “The Radical Friendship of James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry” & listen to “The Negro in American Culture,” a group discussion with James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Lorraine Hansberry, Emile Capouya, and Alfred Kazin from 1961

4/3 – No class; paper conferences to be scheduled the week of April 8

* Essay #2 due at 4/4 at 5pm *

Week 11: April 8 & April 10 Friendship, Accountability, and Abolition

4/8 Ann Russo, *Feminist Accountability*, chapters 1, 2, 7 (pg)

4/10 adrienne marie brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us* (86 pg)

Week 12: April 15 & 17 Friendship and Feminist Politics

4/15 Jodi Dean, “Four Theses on the Comrade” (~20 pages)

4/17 Francesca Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting*, chapters 5 & 6 (~55 pg)

Week 13: April 22 & 24 My Brilliant Friend

4/22 Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, pp. 1 - 86

4/24 Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, pp. 87 - 209

Week 14: April 29 & May 1 Conclusions

4/29 Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, pp. 209 - end

5/1 Conclusions

* Letter exchanges are due at the end of classes;

* Final conferences with letter-writing pairs and Professors Farneth and Schlosser will be scheduled during finals week; and

* Final reflective essay due at the end of finals week.