Brotherly Love: Freemasonry and Male Friendship in Enlightenment France

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Author: Kenneth Loiselle
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This well-documented book is the result of intensive archival research in masonic sources at the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Grand Orient’s recently available ‘Russian Archives’, as well as numerous municipal and departmental repositories. These sources provide a rich set of mostly unpublished letters, manuscript rituals, and speeches, which make it possible for Loiselle to show not only that Freemasonry ‘was a sanctuary of friendship’ but also how Freemasons in the century of the Enlightenment, which he contends was also an ‘Age of Sentiment’, experienced brotherly love beyond the temple walls, and found in male friendship the moral resources they needed to face the trials and tribulations of their personal life as they navigated an era of social tensions and political revolution.

This book revisits the entire 18th-century masonic project through the perspective of male friendship, and is both a fruitful exercise in historical anthropology and an example of a Darntonian ‘social history of ideas’. It also provides a precious contribution to the study of masculine sociability. Following the interpretative framework of anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers, Loiselle distinguishes between two forms of friendship within Old Regime Freemasonry: ‘ritualized’ and ‘unritualized’. The former was one contracted through the initiation process, through which the candidate voluntarily abandoned the outside world of the ‘profane’ and awakened to brotherly life when he was received in the temple of chosen friends. The latter, on the other hand, was developed over the course of interaction outside the lodge in daily life or through letter writing.

The author does not underestimate the importance of Greco-Roman antiquity (notably Cicero) on Chevalier Andrew Ramsay, whose famous ‘Discourse’ of 1737 represented one of the foundational documents of the chivalrous and Christian form of French and European Masonry. Loiselle brings Ramsay’s speech into dialogue with his other writings, notably the Essai philosophique sur le gouvernement civil (ed. 1721) where Ramsay, as a loyal disciple of the Bishop Fénelon, asserted that ‘by sociable I do not mean living together and seeing one another in certain places and at certain moments: the most ferocious beasts are capable of such sociability. Men can see each other daily without entering into a true commerce of society; one can live separate from men and nevertheless be sociable. By society, I mean a mutual exchange of friendship’.

Loiselle sees male friendship at the core of the masonic project to create, borrowing from Lewis Mumford’s
vocabulary, a ‘utopia of reconstruction’ that sought to remedy the moral ills of French society as opposed to an isolationist ‘utopia of escape’. Breaking with self-love, calculating ruse and jealousy – all of which corrupted pseudo-friendly relations in the profane world – Freemasons patiently built their temple of brotherly love by renouncing their ‘metals,’ or pretensions and prejudices rooted in civil society. Drawing on the work of Victor Turner, Loiselle demonstrates that brethren symbolically purified candidates from the undesirable psychological elements that made friendship so unstable and fleeting in society through the ritual process of initiation. Throughout the century, lodge titles reminded both brethren and the wider French public that the masonic temple gathered friends who were ‘chosen’, ‘perfect’, and indeed ‘celestial’, as opposed to those self-interested false friendships that took form in the profane world.

French Freemasonry welcomed ‘adoption Freemasonry’ from the 1730s onward, where men and women gathered inside the lodge. Loiselle wonders how it was possible for Freemasons to define their friendship community as an exclusively masculine one when the adoption phenomenon was so widespread. Similar to the observations of Arlette Farge and Dominique Godineau, Loiselle finds that adoption Freemasonry constituted ‘mixity without equality’, meaning that men inside lodges did not consider adoption rituals to be ‘true’ Masonry, but instead envisioned activities with women (such as banquets and musical concerts in gardens) as an enjoyable auxiliary to masonic activity. The female presence also made it possible for brethren to silence gossip of masonic homosexuality and initiatory trials turning into sodomy, accusations that tainted masonic friendship from the 1730s until the middle of the century.

One of the highlights of this book is the impressively detailed case study of the friendship network that bound the criminal intendant in Epernay, Philippe Valentin Bertin du Rocheret, to his brethren from the Parisian Bussi-Aumont lodge, one of the first masonic establishments in the kingdom. Historian Pierre Chevallier first introduced us to this individual over 50 years ago, and Loiselle reevaluates Rocheret’s masonic experience through both a new perspective and unexplored sources. Although a police raid forced Bussi-Aumont to cease all activity in late 1737, Rocheret continued to interact with the former members of Bussi-Aumont over the next two decades, and in fact made additional masonic contacts through them. Loiselle draws deftly from Rocheret’s correspondence journal to identify almost 500 letters and 57 personal visits that occurred between Rocheret and his Bussi-Aumont contacts. Unlike the majority of lodges later in the century, Bussi-Aumont brethren were widely dispersed – from Avignon to Lunéville – but this did not prevent Rocheret from expressing a commitment that went well beyond masonic and epistolary conventions. What is rather striking was the highly affective vocabulary these men used to express their emotional attachment to one another. On Christmas Eve 1748, for example, the Chevalier de Béla informs Rocheret that he hopes to travel soon to ‘Epernay or Aÿ (where Rocheret lived in Champagne) to see and embrace you, to swear to you that I love you, that I adore you, to swear to you an eternal steadfastness. … What I feel for you is what a passionate lover feels for his mistress in her absence’. But Loiselle is careful to note that these ties went beyond such expressions of emotion, and also included the concrete rendering of services. Rocheret supplied his brethren with wine, and even put his masonic ties above his professional responsibilities. Despite being a magistrate, Rocheret helped his friend, the marquis de Tavannes, to escape abroad to avoid facing the full extent of the law after having been found guilty of kidnapping (rapt de séduction) his beloved cousin. The marquis is able to successful flee the kingdom by mobilizing his powerful masonic network.

The last two chapters examine how the representations and practices of masonic friendship evolved from the 1760s to the Revolution. Loiselle draws from 160 speeches (mostly from Parisian lodges) that were delivered between 1766 and 1789 to point to both continuity and change within the masonic message. Although literary references to antiquity persisted during this period, Loiselle also finds that men’s understandings of male friendship were strongly marked by the cult of sensibility where the model of the honnête homme was gradually giving way to the ideal of the homme sensible. If the lodge kept on conceiving and experiencing itself as a school for moral improvement, enthusiasm and sentimental effusion became more and more apparent within speeches, where a Rousseauean ‘union of hearts’ was celebrated. However, the pre-revolutionary period was also a period of conflict within lodges where a number of quarrels – some quite physical – led to the expulsion of members. Drawing from copious internal records from both the
holdings of the Grand Orient and the Bibliothèque Nationale, Loiselle persuasively argues that the majority of these disputes were the result of the potential incompatibility between the two forms of friendship he has traced within Old Regime Freemasonry: the collective ‘ritualized’ friendship of the lodge and those more exclusive ‘unritualized’ friendships between specific Freemasons. When they were a source of tension, the latter were denounced as ‘cabals,’ ‘factions’ or ‘conspirators’.

In the final chapter, Loiselle turns his attention to the legacy and resilience of masonic friendship in the Revolution. On the one hand, he parts ways with previous historians who have seen the revolutionary idiom of fraternité as being of masonic provenance, and instead highlights the differences between this secular, inclusive and politically charged notion with the exclusive and ecumenically Christian foundations of masonic friendship. On the other hand, he sees a much closer point of contact between revolutionary political culture and Old Regime Freemasonry in the classical republican preoccupation with moral regeneration. The second half of the chapter then moves from ideology to practice, and assesses masonic friendship for individuals and lodges. Some brethren were destabilized, as shown by the analysis of the correspondence of deputy of the Third Estate of Lyon, printer Jean-André Périsse-Duluc, with the silk merchant Jean-Baptiste Willermoz, a key figure in Lyonnais Freemasonry. Personally isolated and a little lost in Versailles, Périsse-Duluc invested sentimentally in this friendly epistolary link to the point of finding, according to Loiselle, a sort of ‘emotional refuge’, as William Reddy has put it. The correspondence, however, also shows the limits of brotherly friendship when faced with the political challenges of the time. Périsse-Duluc complains, for instance, about the indifference of another deputy of Lyon and member of the same lodge, Jean-Jacques Millanois, who ignores him. In the final part of the chapter, Loiselle focuses on the experience of Bordeaux during the Terror. Loiselle highlights that those lodges that were able to remain open up to this point were eventually forced to close their doors by representatives-on-mission like Garnier de Saintes who saw masonic friendship as an exclusive – and therefore dangerous – phenomenon for the new political order. In privileging the friendship of peers, the masonic lodge was considered a relic of the Old Regime and thus lost its legitimacy.

Elegantly written, and steeped in archival research and interdisciplinary reflection that effortlessly moves from the ethnographically microhistorical to serial quantitative analysis, this admirable book is a pleasant read and manages to situate convincingly the masonic project within the broader cultural and social framework of the Old Regime. Beyond its important contribution to masonic studies, it also provides a stimulating reflection on masculine sociability in the 18th century. It also attests, in a vein similar to Maurice Daumas’ Des trésors d’amitié: de la Renaissance aux Lumières (1) and the Summer School organized the same year by the German Historical Institute in Paris on ‘Friendship: A Social and Political Link in France and Germany, 12th-19th centuries’, to the transatlantic vitality of the history of friendship.

Notes


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