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Friendship

Alasdair MacIntyre perceptively observed about Jane Austen: “When Jane Austen speaks of ‘happiness,’ she does so as an Aristotelian.”[1] And as it is a well known fact that Aristotle held friendship as a crucial condition for happiness (“For without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods.” [2]) it follows that we are bound to explore whether she does not perchance, speak of friendship also in an Aristotelian manner. My aim in this chapter is to show that she does.

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Vineri, 16 Septembrie 2011 11:31

There are many literary critics who have observed that there is “a similarity between Jane Austen’s thinking about matrimony and Aristotle’s thinking about friendship.”[3] But, much as I agree with the fact that in her novels “friendship is the core of marriage” as Allan Bloom puts it, [4] and therefore her idea of marriage can be discussed in connection with the Aristotelian friendship, on the other hand, I find it necessary to draw attention to the other kinds of friendship which she describes, especially in her novel Emma, which have nothing to do with matrimony. It is true, however, that the most successful friendships in her stories usually develop between a man and a woman and they do end up with their union in marriage. [5]

In my opinion, as I have already suggested, Emma is a book about friendship. Of course, Jane Austen explores the concept of friendship in all of her six novels, more or less, but it is only in this one that she really focuses almost exclusively on this matter, by placing her heroine, Emma Woodhouse in the position of forming different types of relations, which may appear at first as good friendships, but are proven but superficial connections in the end.

In truth, Emma seems to have been written in accord and as a pledge for Aristotle’s remark that “it is possible to fail in many ways, while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason one is easy and the other difficult – to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult).”[6] David Gallop wittily observes: “Jane Austen’s heroines and heroes, no less than her fools and knaves, illustrate the many ways of ‘missing the target’.” [7] Emma is no exception to this generalization, because she has to “miss the target” many times in order to learn that she is wrong in believing that she is always right.

But before I proceed with the subject of friendship as such, I would also like to linger for a moment on a short digression on what regards the setting of the novel, as it represents another similarity to Aristotelian thought. Emma actually is Jane Austen’s single book which has its plot set just in a small village, where everyone knows everyone else, and every particular action which is accomplished is bound to be discussed by the general gossip, while drinking their five o’clock tea, that same day. And although this may seem hilarious to us now, the consciousness of having one’s character so universally known, made people behave more decently. Jane Austen makes it clear, in more than one novel that, however devoid of intimacy and perhaps monotonous they may appear, she prefers by far and trusts these small communities more than the large towns, which stand for her as the place where people lose their identities and are free to behave as they like, because they escape the censure of society. [8]

In this respect, Jane Austen echoes Aristotle's interest in the polis and his theory according to which such cities "provide the context for the best life for the best human beings. "When men are friends, they have no need for justice, while when they are just, they need friendship as well," Aristotle says." [9] According to him, it is possible, and quite probable for people to become friends in small communities.

As Alasdair MacIntyre observes with good reason, "The restricted households of Highbury and Mansfield Park have to serve as surrogates for the Greek city-state and the medieval kingdom." [10] Jane Austen has chosen well the setting for her book about friendship, because a polis is the best context in which multifarious relations between people may develop: not too small and not too large, enough members as to have variation, but not so many as to become lost in a crowd.

In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle seeks to explain happiness as based on the virtues. That is, according to his philosophy, only by leading a virtuous life can one attain happiness. [11]

He reserves two whole books for this virtue which implies all the other virtues [12] and which is called friendship. Aristotle says that friendship comes into being when two or more people share their love for something – he insists, however, on the fact that one person cannot have too many friends. [13]

And as only what is pleasant, useful or good is lovable, [14] thus friendship can also be for the sake of pleasure, of utility, or respectively, of virtue (which stands for what is good).

Of all three, Aristotle says that the one which is most likely to last is the friendship based on love for virtue, because "virtue is an enduring thing," [15] and so it is durable, while pleasure and utility are inconstant, often changing along with time. Also, while friendship for the sake of virtue has its first objective in seeking the wellbeing of the other and so it can be described as an altruistic relation, friendship for the sake of pleasure or of utility is concerned primarily with the personal comfort and interest, and can be described by the term egoistic. [16]

Aristotle concludes that "Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in virtue; for these wish well each other qua good, and they are good in themselves." [17] But there are two other points on which Aristotle lingers, and these are "the time and familiarity which a friendship requires."

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[18] Aristotle does not admit a friendship to be “perfect” after a short while, or in the case that the parties implied “have not eaten the salt together,”

[19] which is another way of saying they have to live together in order to get to know the ways of one another and to struggle through hardships side by side – “there is nothing so characteristic of friends as living together”

[20] he says. Indeed, there is no better way to discover the true character of a person.

We may never find out whether Jane Austen was acquainted with the philosophy of Aristotle, but surely, at least in what concerns the concept of friendship, there are some evident similarities, as I am going to discuss further on.

First of all it should be mentioned that the heroine who is doomed to illustrate the many ways of going astray in friendship through her own negative example, is Jane Austen's single main character who is actually blessed with beauty, cleverness and wealth, but all the same succeeds in becoming insufferable at certain moments, due to her heavy fault of being vain and obstinate.[21] But indeed, no Fanny Price, or Elinor Dashwood, or Anne Eliot would have been of any help in describing what Jane Austen seeks to describe in Emma, for they would never have gotten into the trouble Emma Woodhouse gets into. It had to be a character with a serious weakness, who made such mistakes.

In Emma, several kinds of friendship are portrayed, according to what relations and connections the heroine makes. I am going to discuss them methodically, keeping in mind the above-mentioned Aristotelian division.

Thus, I proceed with the type of friendship Emma shares with Frank Churchill. Although it may seem strange to choose this first, there is however a good reason for doing it. Friendship based on pleasure is often regarded as true friendship or “perfect friendship” as Aristotle calls it. This happens because the parties involved value the pleasure they get from this friendship far above the truth and they usually refuse to see each other's faults. This is the way Emma feels at first about Mr. Churchill, who flatters her. Although she is being warned by her in-earnest-true friend, Mr. Knightly about Frank Churchill's rather obvious faults, she chooses to ignore them and even fancy herself in love with this superficial character – who was actually using her as a blind to conceal his engagement to Jane Fairfax. It is a mercy that she is however reasonable enough to realize later that she really is not in love.

It should be noted that, at least in Jane Austen's novels, friendship based on pleasure in most

cases fences the development of another true, perfect friendship. This is what happens to Emma, who is wholly preoccupied for a while with Frank Churchill, forgetting even the rules of polite behavior in society – when she offends poor Miss Bates, and Mr. Knightly draws her attention on her lack of respect. From this point of view, her friendship with Mr. Knightly is endangered. Like Emma, another heroine who remains blind to the faults of a man she admires is Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*. She does not see the ridiculousness of the situation, when she takes for granted the calumnious things Mr. Wickham says about Mr. Darcy, given the fact that she and Wickham were perfect strangers at the time he tells his story. But Wickham was full of charm and it was a pleasure to talk to him. Thus, she fails to acknowledge the qualities of Mr. Darcy and judges him on false grounds, risking to loose a good friend and husband. The same occurs to Marianne Dashwood from *Sense and Sensibility* who is so madly in love with Willoughby that she cannot concede that he is any other way than perfect. In reality, he proves himself to be irresponsible – even when he flirts with Marianne and exposes her to gossip he has by no means the ways of a gentleman. But he was charming too, and pleasant, so Marianne does not see anybody else but him. Therefore she remains for a long period untouched by the loyalty of Captain Brandon.

All these are happy cases, because each of the heroines has her moment of “awakening” as C. S. Lewis calls it. “All three heroines painfully, though with varying degrees of pain, discover that they have been making mistakes both about themselves and about the world in which they live. [...] All realize that the cause of the deception lay within.”[22] They realize, in other words that they had made their emotions, their pleasure and their desire the foundation ground on which they built a wrong kind of friendship. As long as the reference point lies within, is relative to one’s pleasure, the friendship has in fact no solid basis, because pleasure is bound to change. Only when the reference point becomes in a way exterior – in the sense that it becomes universally attainable – and unalterable is the friendship perfect. And both Aristotle and Jane Austen consider the virtues as universal and unalterable values.

Emma is very clear in describing her mistake regarding her relation to Mr. Frank Churchill:

I have very little to say for my own conduct – I was tempted by his attentions, and allowed myself to appear pleased. – An old story, probably – a common case – and no more than has happened to hundreds of my sex before; and yet it may not be the more excusable in one who sets up as I do for Understanding. Many circumstances assisted the temptation. He was the son of Mr. Weston – he was continually here – I always found him very pleasant – and in short, for (with a sigh) let me swell out the causes ever so ingeniously, they all centre in this at last – my vanity was flattered, and I allowed his attentions. (E 322-3)

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Aristotle's second kind of friendship, which however Jane Austen does not seem to condemn as much as she does the one based on pleasure, is the friendship based on utility. In *Emma* the accent does not fall on this kind of friendship, although the fact that Miss Emma Woodhouse first introduced Harriet Smith at Hartfield because she needed a walking companion, since she had been deprived of the company of Miss Taylor – now Mrs. Weston, her former governess, who had been married lately – is certainly emphasized:

As a walking companion, Emma had very early foreseen how useful she might find her. In that respect Mrs. Weston's loss had been important. [...] She had ventured once alone to Randalls, but it was not pleasant; and a Harriet Smith, therefore, one whom she could summon at any time to a walk, would be a valuable addition to her privileges. But in every respect as she saw more of her, she approved her, and was confirmed in all her kind designs. (E 20-1)

Thus, the friendship between Emma and Harriet begins on grounds of utility, but ends up in another kind of friendship. I will delay for a moment the explanation, on account of another case which should be mentioned under this topic of utility. The case implied is concerned in fact with the marriage of Charlotte Lucas (a friend of Elizabeth Bennet) and Mr. Collins, a couple in *Pride and Prejudice*. Their union took place exclusively on financial grounds from Charlotte's part, and out of the pressing obligation of finding a wife from Mr. Collins' part – Lady Catherine, his patroness as a clergyman had demanded him to get married and he most willingly obliged her in everything. And though from a certain light this may seem extremely mercantile, we may be astonished to find that Jane Austen seemed rather full of understanding towards their situation. Elizabeth says about Charlotte:

My friend has an excellent understanding – though I am not certain that I consider her marrying Mr. Collins as the wisest thing she ever did. She seems perfectly happy, however, and in a prudential light, it is certainly a very good match for her. (PP 121)

Elizabeth concedes here, at least, that whatever her own choice would be in such a case as Charlotte's – the implication is that she would rather choose to remain an old maid than marry a man whom she does not love – there is however a chance for happiness for her friend. This is more than she can say for her own sister, on the other hand, who in contrast to Charlotte, had married exclusively because of her wild passions:

How Wickham and Lydia were to be supported in tolerable independence, she could not imagine. But how little of permanent happiness could belong to a couple who were only brought

together because their passions were stronger than their virtue, she could easily conjecture. (PP 209)

As Garbitelli and Kries observe, "Lydia endangers her family's reputation and status, whereas Charlotte had at least helped her family grow in fortune." [23]

There is another type of friendship which Aristotle distinguishes, and from this category belongs also the friendship between Emma and Harriet Smith. It is the unequal kind of friendship, namely, where one of the partners is inferior in rank, condition or, most importantly, in virtue, than the other. Mr. Knightly comments on Emma's new friend:

But Harriet Smith – I have not half done about Harriet Smith. I think her the very worst sort of companion that Emma could possibly have. She knows nothing herself, and looks upon Emma as knowing every thing. She is a flatterer in all her ways; and so much the worse, because undesigned. Her ignorance is hourly flattery. How can Emma imagine she has any thing to learn herself, while Harriet is presenting such delightful inferiority? (E 30)

Mr. Knightly's words seem to echo Aristotle's remark that "Most people seem, owing to ambition, to wish to be loved rather than to love; which is why most men love flattery; for the flatterer is a friend in an inferior position, or pretends to be such and to love more than he is loved; and being loved seems to be akin to being honoured, and this is what most people aim at." [24] However, here Mr. Knightly is mistaken: the friendship between Emma and Harriet does not come out so badly in the end – he himself admits that Harriet is "artless, amiable, has good notions and very seriously good principles" (E 359) – although there is a time when Emma treats Harriet as an unequal when she tries to rule her personal life (she convinces Harriet to refuse the proposal of marriage from Mr. Robert Martin, whom the latter actually loved). Emma considers herself as superior and thus, she almost makes it her duty to direct Harriet's actions in the way she thinks fit. She resembles in this, the way Mrs. Elton treats Jane Fairfax as her puppet. Only, unlike Jane Fairfax, Harriet rather enjoys being the puppet, because she has a weak will. [25]

Allan Bloom summarizes: "Classical friendship is taught by Aristotle to be essentially a relationship between persons who are alike. The friend is a kind of true mirror in which one can see oneself." [26] Jane Austen seems to share this view, and moreover, through analogy, she even implies – in *Sense and Sensibility* – that a friendship between two persons who are radically different, or have very little in common, is impossible, and anyway, neither of the

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parties has anything to gain from the relation. In fact, this was the principle on which Mr. Knightly had judged the friendship between Emma and Harriet as unfit, and he would most probably have been right, had not Harriet been a girl with a true desire of accomplishing herself and with a candid, open nature. On the opposite side, and utterly unlike Harriet, we find Miss Lucy Steele from *Sense and Sensibility*. The following quote is in itself illustrative:

Lucy was naturally clever; her remarks were often just and amusing; and as a companion for half an hour Elinor frequently found her agreeable; but her powers had received no aid from education, she was ignorant and illiterate, and her deficiency of all mental improvement, her want of information in the most common particulars, could not be concealed from Miss Dashwood, in spite of her constant endeavour to appear to advantage. Elinor saw, and pitied her for the neglect of abilities which education might have rendered so respectable; but she saw, with less tenderness of feeling, the thorough want of delicacy, of rectitude, and integrity of mind, which her attentions, her assiduities, her flatteries at the Park betrayed; and she could have no lasting satisfaction in the company of a person who joined insincerity with ignorance, whose want of instruction prevented their meeting in conversation on terms of equality, and whose conduct towards others made every shew of attention and deference towards herself perfectly valueless. (SS 124)

Elinor Dashwood is one of Jane Austen's wisest characters, who can judge for herself which kind of relationships would give her benefit and make her improve, and which would harm her. The passage from above shows how she has rightly perceived the drawbacks of Lucy Steele, which impede any intimacy between them. Emma Woodhouse, on the other hand, is one of Jane Austen's most immature characters, who flatters herself that she understands everything right, and in fact she gets it almost all wrong. That is the reason why she "misses the target" so many times. Anyway, the fact that she misses indicates that she at least aims. She aims to find a true friend and companion who would meet her on the same level of intelligence and would have the same interest as herself for what is good and just. And she has such a friend too, in Mr. Knightly, but she fails to recognize this fact up to a certain moment. He is so present in her life that she takes him for granted and not until the moment she believes she is going to lose him, does she rightly value his friendship. However, she has a good intuition, and, as Anne Crippen Ruderman observes, "we are shown how Mr. Knightly is always the standard of right behavior for her, however much she often pretends to disagree with him." (e.g. 37, 112-115, 283-284) [27]

Emma and Mr. Knightly share a long time friendship, which is neither based on pleasure – in the sense of passion – nor on utility. They are both merely interested in virtue, and that is why they love each other. Again, in the words of Anne Crippen Ruderman, actually "Mr. Knightly's project of education – his concern with Emma's virtue, and her concern with his – is the truest foundation for their friendship and love." [28] Unlike Miss Taylor, who had taught

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Emma good principles, but “submitted her own will to Emma, doing her bidding” (E 30), and doing her thus more harm than good, Mr. Knightly cannot see her acting wrongly, “without blaming her and lecturing her” (E 325) even with the risk of offending or upsetting her. He justly tells her: “You hear nothing but the truth from me.” (E 325) In a true Aristotelian fashion he thinks first about Emma’s wellbeing. He even ignores his own feelings for her, when he wishes for her benefit that she should fall in love with a man who does not return her affections because he thinks “it would do her good.” (E 32) Indeed, it is in many instances that Mr. Knightly makes it his responsibility to scold Emma in order to protect the virtues he knows she possesses – he is enraged with the way she dictates Harriet’s life, displeased with her admiration for the unworthy Frank Churchill and furious with the way she offends poor Miss Bates and he always tells her so, without ceremony. He loves Emma, but he loves the truth more, and that is what makes Mr. Knightly the perfect friend. In this respect, Anne Crippen Ruderman is absolutely right when she interprets this kind of friendship as “an education in virtue.” [29]

True, Mr. Knightly cannot be described by the epithet gallant, but he is faithful to and acts in accordance with what he says about duty, that it is “the one thing which a man can always do, if he chuses.” (E 112) As a good pedagogue would, he lives according to his own principles.

Another case where this “education in virtue” occurs is the one of Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney of Northanger Abbey. Here, Mr. Tilney is the moralizer of young and naïve Catherine. He falls in love with her because of her innocence and sincerity, while she admires him extremely for his knowledge and good breeding. Mr. Tilney, as Anne Crippen Ruderman observes, is also very careful about doing his duty, when he asks Catherine to marry him before he confesses to her that his father is not willing to allow the marriage, thus sparing her to be guilty of opposing his father and also not asking her to agree to a secret engagement. He is totally in opposition to Frank Churchill, who does not take the responsibility of making his engagement to Jane Fairfax known, but rather waits for his old relative to die so he can be sure of inheriting the fortune.[30]

In both novels, Jane Austen “shows us how a concern with virtue is the ground for the deepest attachment to others and thus, in some way, of the deepest feeling.”[31]

Perhaps Emma’s love for Mr. Knightly has its root in the gratitude she bears him for his constant care. But gratitude is also the feeling which precedes the love of Elizabeth Bennet for Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and Jane Austen seems to consider it a good basis for a profound affection.

Besides these two examples of friendship, where one of the parties involved appears to be more of a pedagogue in virtue than the other, the relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy should be mentioned, because it stands apart through the fact that both parties act as pedagogues, as well as pupils. In fact, this seems to be the most representative example of Aristotelian "perfect friendship" in Jane Austen's novels, although it is in *Emma* that she focuses on the theme of friendship. But all the same, the way in which Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy pursue the same ideal of virtue, thus expecting from marriage much more than mere pleasure or utility, without altogether excluding these, and the way they ultimately help each other to overcome their weaknesses – Darcy, his vanity, and Elizabeth, her inclination to prejudice – makes their union in matrimony a truly Aristotelian relationship. Allan Bloom somewhat ironically wonders about their life after they are married: "It is as though Elizabeth and Darcy were to spend the rest of their lives alone together in endless conversation, sharing their intelligence and wit with each other." [32] However, this is exactly how Aristotle describes at the end of Book IX the picture of friendship. [33]

Therefore, Allan Bloom's observation has also been of aid to my purpose of underlining certain similarities between the Aristotelian concept of friendship and the way Jane Austen portrays friendship in her novels.

Nota Karamazov.ro: Urmatorul capitol din eseu va fi publicat saptamana viitoare, vineri

Sumar:

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[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 240.

[2] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a3-4.

[3] Mary Beth Garbitelli and Douglas Kries, "Virtue and Romance: Allan Bloom on Jane Austen and Aristotelian Ethics" (*Modern Age* 52 (2010): 25-36), 29.

[4] Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship*. The whole quote is quite illustrative for Jane Austen's view on the relation between friendship and marriage: "The core of the good marriage is the friendship of two people who are attracted to each other and whose virtues are such as both to be admirable and to ensure the fidelity of the partners against temptation and in difficult times." (203)

[5] See Anne Crippen Ruderman, *Love and Marriage in the Novels of Jane Austen*. She comments on this: "The only truly deep friendships between women in the mature novels are those of the pairs of sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and Jane Austen often portrays the kind of natural friendship that can grow out of love between siblings. But even in these cases, as well as in the less striking friendships between a heroine and an older woman (Mrs. Gardiner and Elizabeth Bennet, Lady Russell and Anne Elliot, Mrs. Weston and Emma Woodhouse) the friend does not know about the heroine's most important concerns. The novels do not explore male friendships, either (although there are positive examples such as Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley or Captains Wentworth and Harville), but this is at least partly explained by the fact that the novels never portray men apart from women. The greatest potential for deep and open friendship is always suggested to be in love and marriage." (227)

[6] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b29-34.

[7] David Gallop, "Jane Austen and the Aristotelian Ethic," 102.

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[8] For a further discussion on the communities of reduced size in Jane Austen's novels see: Mary Beth Garbitelli and Douglas Kries, "Virtue and Romance: Allan Bloom on Jane Austen and Aristotelian Ethics." They also give the representative examples of Lydia Bennet and Mr. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, who elope to London "to absent themselves from their families and all political obligations," (26) and of Edmund and Miss Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, when he "argues that the reason Miss Crawford thinks the clergy insignificant is her experience in living in an urban center so large that the private moral lives of the clergy and parishioners are hidden. In smaller political settings the true function of clergy can come to the fore." (27) Thus Garbitelli and Kries conclude: "Austen harbors an Aristotelian distrust of large political arrangements in which anonymity is prevalent." (26)

[9] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a25-27 as cited in Garbitelli and Kries' essay "Virtue and Romance: Allan Bloom on Jane Austen and Aristotelian Ethics."

[10] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 240.

[11] Aristotle says that apart from good fortune which can influence success or failure in life, the "excellent activities [virtues] or their opposites are what determine happiness or the reverse." (1100b10-11)

[12] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155a3-28.

[13] Aristotle asserts: "So for friends too there is a fixed number – perhaps the largest number with whom one can live together (for that, we found, is thought to be most characteristic of friendship); and that one cannot live with many people and divide oneself up among them is plain." (1170b29-1171a21)

[14] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1155b17-1156a5.

[15] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b11-12.

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[16] Aristotle writes that “those who love for the sake of utility love for the sake of what is good to themselves, and those who love for the sake of pleasure do so for the sake of what is pleasant to themselves.” (1156a14-16)

[17] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1156b8-10.

[18] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1156b25-30.

[19] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1156b25-30.

[20] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1157b19-20

[21] Jane Austen reveals even from the beginning of the novel that “the real evils of Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself.” (E 5)

[22] C. S. Lewis, “A Note on Jane Austen,” 27.

[23] Mary Beth Garbitelli and Douglas Kries, “Virtue and Romance: Allan Bloom on Jane Austen and Aristotelian Ethics,” 29.

[24] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1159a13-1159b1.

[25] I have borrowed the image of Harriet Smith seen as a puppet from Gilbert Ryle’s essay “Jane Austen and the Moralists,” 290.

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[26] Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 205.

[27] Anne Crippen Ruderman, *The Pleasures of Virtue*, 50.

[28] Anne Crippen Ruderman, *The Pleasures of Virtue*, 50.

[29] Anne Crippen Ruderman, *The Pleasures of Virtue*, 48.

[30] Anne Crippen Ruderman, *The Pleasures of Virtue*, 25.

[31] Anne Crippen Ruderman, *The Pleasures of Virtue*, 23.

[32] Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 206

[33] Aristotle concludes his discussion about friendship thus: "For friendship is a partnership, and as a man is to himself, so is he to his friend; now in his own case the perception of his existence is desirable, and so therefore is that of his friend's, and the activity of this perception is produced when they live together, so that it is natural that they aim at this. And whatever existence means for each class of men, whatever it is for whose sake they value life, in that they wish to occupy themselves with their friends; and so some drink together, others dice together, others join in athletic exercises and hunting, or in the study of philosophy, each class spending their days together in whatever they love most in life; for since they wish to live with their friends, they do and share in those things as far as they can." (1171b29-1172a18)