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# Becoming a Yale Man: Intimacy among Yale Students in the Nineteenth Century

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Becoming a Yale Man:  
Intimacy among Yale Students in the Nineteenth Century

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April 9, 2007

In a time when Yale is frequently referred to as the “gay Ivy,” a term coined by Julie V. Iovine in her now-infamous 1987 Wall Street Journal Article entitled “‘Lipsticks and Lords’: Yale’s New Look,” it is tempting for some to conclude that homosexuality has always been a part of Yale’s history.<sup>1</sup> However, I believe such a conclusion distorts our understanding of the ties that brought students closer together in the past. In the nineteenth century, being a man worthy of the Yale title weighed heavily on the minds of the students. They believed that a Yale man grounded his identity in the relationships he formed with other Yale men. As a result, the esteem of their classmates and the nature of the friendships they developed with their peers became paramount. With such a strong emphasis on these friendships, a great degree of intimacy between the men developed, to the point that as students of the twenty-first century, it can be difficult to distinguish between those same-sex relationships that were mere friendships and those that were motivated by a deeper desire. However, even the boys who demonstrated their affection in physical ways understood their intimacy with other students as part of their college experience. They did not see themselves in the same category as those distant sodomites in other parts of the country, rumors of whom were gradually appearing in newspapers. They believed that their heightened intimacy with other men was a part of the attuned relational, emotional, and psychological sensitivity that made them Yale students in the first place.

In this essay, I hope to demonstrate that relationships between men were largely the product of the environment in which they occurred. Specifically at Yale College, the atmosphere on campus was such that intense intimacy between men was not an anomaly or a perversion, but rather a culmination of the deep bonds forged among all students. Behavior that in another time and place would have aroused suspicion was perfectly acceptable on the campus grounds. The elite background of the students, the fact that the school was predominantly Christian, the nature

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<sup>1</sup> Julie V. Iovine, “‘Lipsticks and Lords’: Yale’s New Look,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 1987, p. 32.

of the college as an all-boys institution, the pressure on the students to succeed, and even the simple fact that it was the nineteenth century – all these factors created an environment where intimacy between youthful men could flourish. After surveying the historical secondary literature on friendships between men, we will examine the diaries kept by Albert Dodd (class of 1838) and Edward Sheffield (class of 1859) during their time at Yale. Though very different in temperament, both men rooted themselves in their close relationships with other Yale students.

Historians of sexuality and gender in the United States confirm the importance of context and location in understanding intimacy between men. The first category to consider is of course temporal – the time period in which they lived largely determined how men interpreted their own actions and feelings toward one another. In the nineteenth century, the idea of friendship between men encompassed much more than it does today. The relative lack of privacy common to nineteenth-century American culture encouraged intimacy and physical contact among males. From the earliest years of childhood, men shared beds and continued to do so throughout their lives, due to financial or other circumstances, without homoerotic desire or the suspicion of homoerotic intent.<sup>2</sup> As a boy reached his youth and left home, he lost his brothers as bed-mates but gained new ones from outside the family. At colleges, academies, and boarding schools, students often shared a mattress. Because of this high level of physical contact, it was perfectly normal for close friends to engage in cuddling, kissing, and hugging as expressions of friendship.<sup>3</sup> Physical intimacy between men was familiar to Americans from all backgrounds and in all walks of life. In *Moby Dick*, by the American author Herman Melville, Ishmael shares his

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Yacovone, “Abolitionists and the ‘Language of Fraternal Love’” in *Meanings for Manhood*, ed. Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, 94 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, “Coming to Terms: Conceptualizing Men’s Erotic and Affectional Relations with men in the United States, 1820-1892” in *A Queer World*, ed. Martin Duberman, 217 (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

bed with Queequeg. Abraham Lincoln himself shared a bed with a close friend of his, Joshua Fry Speed, with whom he lived for four years in the late 1830s.<sup>4</sup> What today would be considered erotic behavior between two men, such as embracing during sleep, hand-holding, or kissing, was in the nineteenth century fairly commonplace.

The literature of the nineteenth century gives evidence of how deeply close male friendships were inscribed in American popular culture. Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaimed, “A man whose heart was filled with a warm, ever-enduring not to be shaken by anything Friendship was one to be set on one side apart from other men, and almost to be worshipped as a saint.”<sup>5</sup> Theodore Winthrop, who graduated from Yale College in 1848, published the novel *John Brent* in 1862. The story describes the close friendship between John Brent and Richard Wade, the narrator, who explains that their “love is in part the expression of a flight from civilization, from the encumbrances of a social world where it can have no place.”<sup>6</sup> Such language illustrates the carefree and liberating nature of these relationships. They were based on trust and mutual reliance. They also did not interfere with later intimate relationships with women. Quite the contrary – these intense male friendships were viewed as “training grounds” for marriages later in life. One form of love naturally led to the other, an exciting though difficult transition that Winthrop portrayed throughout his book.<sup>7</sup>

After time period, the second category to consider in order to better understand these intimate relationships is the class status of the men involved. Even when the homosocial desire remained the same, class and societal status determined a man’s perception of the nature of his sexual and relational activity. Activities that would have been unthinkable among men of the

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Katz, “Coming to Terms,” 218.

<sup>6</sup> Robert K. Martin, “Knights-Errant and Gothic Seducers” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey Jr., 174 (Markham, Ontario: Nal Books, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

lower classes were common and even praiseworthy among elite educated males of the middle and upper classes. Referring to lower-class effeminate men derogatorily known as “mollies,” historian George Haggerty writes, “What is the difference between these mollies and the heroic friends that they mimic?...The difference is a difference of class, and it would be wrong to ignore it.”<sup>8</sup> Trial accounts from the period show that what would have been regarded as a close friendship among the elites was among the lower classes potentially monstrous.<sup>9</sup> Wealthier men could get away with drawing closer together because the culture of the educated middle class provided a variety of historical models and a rich spiritual language to support romantic friendships between members of the same sex.<sup>10</sup> References to ancient and mythological male couples – such as Achilles and Patroclus from the *Iliad*, Orestes and Pylades from Greek mythology, or David and Jonathan from the Bible – provided a framework for their emotional and affectionate bonds with other men.

These friendships, based as they were on intimacy and verging on romance, consisted of sharing one’s innermost thoughts and emotions. Evidence of such ardent communication can readily be found in the diaries and personal correspondence of the era. The relationship between Daniel Webster and James Harvey Bingham at Dartmouth College serves as one example. Webster called James “the only friend of my heart, the partner of my joys, griefs, and affections, the only participator of my most secret thoughts.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the friendship between James Blake and Wyck Vanderhoef, engineers who met in 1848 while in their twenties, also carried romantic overtones. On their last night together before a long period of separation, Blake wrote, “We retired early...our hearts were full of that true friendship which could not find utterance by

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<sup>8</sup> George E. Haggerty, *Men in Love: Masculinity and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Rotundo, “Romantic Friendship: Male Intimacy and Middle-Class Youth in the Northern United States, 1800-1900,” *Journal of Social History* 23 (1989): 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

words, we laid our heads upon each other's bosom and wept. It may be unmanly to weep, but I care not, the spirit was touched."<sup>12</sup> It is telling to note that Blake found crying more threatening to his masculinity than exchanging affectionate physical gestures with another man.

The diary of F.S. Ryman, a minor writer born in 1858 in Pennsylvania, provides further evidence of the willingness of close friends to physically express their affection for each other. An entry from August 1886 reads, "I confess I like the oriental custom of men embracing and kissing each other if they are indeed dear friends. When we went to bed Rob put his arms around me and lay his head down by my right shoulder in the most loving way."<sup>13</sup> However, Ryman attempted to justify their behavior, explaining:

Now in all this I am certain there was no sexual sentiment on the part of either of us...I am certain that the thought of the least demonstration of unmanly and abnormal passion would have been as revolting to him as it is and ever has been to me, and yet I do love him and I loved to hug and kiss him.<sup>14</sup>

Ryman explicitly separated the physical realm of affection from the forbidden world of lust. He believed that it was possible for two men to touch each other intimately without any implication of "abnormal passion." That said, the very fact that he felt the need to explain his behavior suggests that though these relationships were typically unmotivated by lust, an erotic element was never wholly absent. Such close friends often referred to being physically drawn to each other, admired their companion's beauty, and talked of being "excited" at the mere thought of their dear friend. Americans of the nineteenth century generally had no qualms over celebrating male aesthetic beauty. Men frequently drew comparisons between their handsome friends and Greek heroes of legendary good looks. In May 1886, Ryman wrote in his diary, "While walking down to Lewiston I saw one of the prettiest boys I ever saw in my life....I would like to see that

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<sup>12</sup> Rotundo, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Duberman, "Intimacy Without Orgasm" in *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, 63 (New York: Penguin Group, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

boy when he is about 19. I'll bet he will be a veritable Apollo in form and face." Though Ryman was not usually attracted to men, he felt perfectly at ease praising the masculine beauty of a young man, exclaiming that it "did thrill [him] through and through."<sup>15</sup>

In his essay entitled "Writhing Bedfellows," Martin Duberman points to two Southern young men known as Jeff and Jim who, writing to each other in the 1820s, show a casual attitude toward homoerotic play. The letters contain lighthearted references to the two boys in bed "poking and punching" each other with their "fleshen poles."<sup>16</sup> What is surprising about these letters is that their tone betrays no evidence of guilt or unease over these actions. In fact, Jeff's tone is breezy, nonchalant, and unapologetic. It may have been the erotic nature of these letters in an otherwise sexually repressive public sphere that induced their writers to take on this tone of naughty playfulness. The sense of fun behind these expressions may have been enhanced by the thought that, in public, sexual allusions were forbidden. The sexual overtones in these letters may have forged deeper bonds, those of a shared indecorous secret, between youthful male friends.<sup>17</sup> These accounts all suggest that "friendship" may not be a strong enough word to fully capture the passion behind the relationships. A more appropriate word may be "love," with all its sexual and emotional connotations.

The third important contextual consideration is the nature of the love itself. It is critical not to confuse the flirtatious attitudes of these boys with the distant and dark world of sodomy. The feelings associated with sodomy were believed to be completely separate from the pure, true love between two male friends. Bodily love and spiritual love were thought of then as inhabiting distinct realms. The difference between homosexual intercourse and boyhood romances between

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<sup>15</sup> Duberman, "Intimacy without Orgasm," 62.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Duberman, "'Writhing Bedfellows' in Antebellum South Carolina: Historical Interpretation and the Politics of Evidence" in *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, 12 (New York: Penguin Group, 1991).

<sup>17</sup> Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 91.



friends was that the erotic realm of sodomy was believed to be devoid of love. Since love and lust were segregated, many nineteenth-century men could speak of their intense love for their male friends without anyone realizing that their relationships included any hint of sensuality. Even the terminology of the time distinguished between the sensual realm of lust and the spiritual realm of companionship. “To make love to” meant to court, not to copulate. A “lover” was the object of romantic pursuit, not a partner in sex. “To sleep with” referred merely to a sleeping arrangement, not a carnal consummation. A man who wished to kiss or embrace an intimate male friend in bed did not have to worry about giving way to homosexual impulses because he would not have assumed that he had them, which is why friendships were allowed to carry romantic overtones.<sup>18</sup>

The main point of concern was not what or whom you loved, but *how* you loved. The object of love was less important than the nature of the feeling itself. Male companions of this era stressed depth and validity of feeling. The integrity of their emotions and the durability of their relationship, whether one was a true friend, was more important than if that friend was a man or a woman. The ideal friendship was wholly spiritual, with natural outpourings of physical expression. As Ryman wrote in his diary, “Christ kissed and embraced those whom he loved I believe and why shall I fear to do the same?”<sup>19</sup> When a man did want to draw closer to his friend physically, it was seen as a culmination of their intimacy, rather than an objective in and of itself.

Another critical distinction is that these romantic friendships between middle- and upper-class men emphasized equality, mutuality, and reciprocity in love, whereas erotic relations focused primarily on one man’s subordination to the other. Close friendship was a merging of identities and was thus only possible between men of the same social rank, similar in terms of

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<sup>18</sup> Katz, *Love Stories*, 39-40.

<sup>19</sup> Duberman, “Intimacy Without Orgasm,” 59.

age and privilege. This characterization of male-male friendship accords well with the relationships at Yale College, almost all of which were between men of the elite. As historian David Halperin expresses, “A true friend is part of oneself, indistinguishable from oneself. True friends have a single mind, a single heart in two bodies.”<sup>20</sup> For modern readers, it is difficult to avoid reading into such passionate expressions of male love a suggestion of homoeroticism. We are tempted to accuse these men of suppressing latent homosexuality, saying that in today’s terms, they would be called “closeted.” However, in the words of Halperin, “Precisely by removing any hint of subordination on the part of one friend to the other and, thus, any suggestion of hierarchy, the emphasis on the fusion of two souls into one actually distances such a love from erotic passion.”<sup>21</sup> Understood in this light, strong friendships between men actually increased their masculinity. By admiring the masculine qualities in each other, men of equal status in a way acknowledged their own unique nature as males. As long as one was not subject to the other, both friends retained their identity as strong, confident individuals. Their intimacy and passion reaffirmed and celebrated what it meant to be a man.

Nonetheless, friendship could serve as a mask for more erotic desires, and there were those whose close relationships continued to be subject to suspicion. Alan Bray’s astute observations of male friendships in Elizabethan England appropriately apply to nineteenth-century America as well. As he notes, though the image of the masculine friend was far removed from the specter of the sodomite, there still lurked a similarity between the two, for the forbidden intimacy of homosexuality disturbingly echoed the acceptable closeness of orderly male friendships. This set up an uncomfortable paradox between the ease with which men spoke of

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<sup>20</sup> David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 118.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

their physical intimacy and the fear that their relationship had crossed an unacknowledged and yet universally accepted line.<sup>22</sup>

As time passed, friendships between men of all classes became more and more vulnerable to criticism, as sodomy transformed from a temptation common to all men to a crime endemic only to a segregated and perverse group. Men who engaged in sodomy were regularly lumped together and relegated to a sphere of their own. After 1780, increasing numbers of men appeared who declared they were only interested in men and that they had been born that way. The 1840s were the first time that sodomites began to be identified as a group. One of the earliest known references in the United States to a group of men identified collectively as sodomites occurred in a series of articles from *The Whip* in 1842. It gave a list of names of those “who follow that unhallowed practice of Sodomy.” Here, sodomy no longer signified the temporary, aberrant act of a single individual – it named a sinister, sinful collectivity, one that was possibly getting larger every day. *The Whip* captured a sense of the pervading anxiety over the sodomites’ attempts at seduction when it noted, “Fear seizes the mind of the moral man when he is thus accosted and his first impulse is to escape.”<sup>23</sup>

Many of these men were no longer perceived as men at all but were instead equated with outcast women. Sodomy and effeminacy became inextricably linked. Oddly enough, in the late 1600s, the sodomite or “rake” had been considered an *overly* masculine type of man. It was rather the “fop,” wearing elaborate clothes and displaying soft mannerisms, who was called effeminate, though ironically the fop’s sexual preferences tended exclusively toward women. By

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<sup>22</sup> Alan Bray, “Homosexuality and the signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England” *History Workshop Journal* 29 (1990): 8.

<sup>23</sup> Helen Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 230.

the 1720s, however, the public view had shifted so that all sodomites were perceived as womanly, no matter what behavior or mannerisms they exhibited.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, men began to worry that their physical intimacy marked them as sexually deviant. The medical-sounding term “homosexual” first appeared in a German pamphlet in 1869.<sup>25</sup> The barrier between homoerotic actions and intimate companionships had always been remarkably fragile, but this phenomenon became problematic only when so-called “homosexuals” were believed to be medically different from other men. Close male friendships were suddenly no longer judged according to context, on a case by case basis, taking into account the customs of the area, the class status and education of the men involved, and the nature of the friendship. Instead, all men who insisted on maintaining deep intimacy with each other were lumped together under the ugly heading of “sodomites.” Many men in the nineteenth century found the gutter language of sodomy insufficient to describe the noble love they felt for other men. John Addington Symonds, writing in 1891, lamented that “the accomplished languages of Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century [supplied] no terms for this persistent feature of human psychology without importing some implication of disgust, disgrace, vituperation.”<sup>26</sup>

Homosexuality became associated not with an act, but with a personal identity. As a result, the idea of kissing or holding another man or sharing a bed became frightening. The tender affection and intimate talk of the first half of the century faded. The start of the twentieth century witnessed the slow disappearance of the male-male friendship, “a friendship expressed in fond words, filled with pledges, hinting at the possibility of physical affection, and serving the needs of young men at a perilous time of transition.”<sup>27</sup> Tender relationships between young men

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<sup>24</sup> Randolph Trumbach, “Gender and the Homosexual Role in Modern Western Culture: The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries Compared” in *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?*, ed. Dennis Altman, 160 (London: GMP Publishers, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Rotundo, 19.

lost much of the innocence and liberty they had enjoyed during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

As we explore the lives of Yale students in the nineteenth century, it is thus important to remember that the nature of a man's relationship with other men was dependent on context, on their background, and on their personality. Though there were commonalities among these relationships, each intimate connection was unique to the pair of friends that experienced it. Historian Charles Rosenberg writes, "No analytical strategy which assumes that the behavior of groups can be explained by considering them as undifferentiated individuals writ large can prove intellectually satisfactory." Any discussion of sexuality, in order to be illuminating, must be based on the "assumption that all individuals have peculiar needs and 'choose' particular configurations of roles appropriate to these needs."<sup>29</sup> For some students, strong physical attachments were a way to deal with the pressures of campus life. For others, they provided a context to discuss and explore their spiritual longings. Indeed, for a few, becoming chummy with a fellow student was a strategic method for climbing the social ladder at Yale. Though an examination of romantic friendships as a whole in the nineteenth century is valuable, we cannot forget that relationships at Yale were unique. The motivation to form relationships, as well as the nature of those relationships, were both determined by the atmosphere pervading the campus.

Especially during the turbulent time of youth, separated from his family and in a state of flux, a young man naturally sought other male youths for companionship and security. They formed a friendship that would fill some of the emotional space recently vacated by home and family. These intimate attachments prepared a male youth for manhood as they offered the comfort found during boyhood. At a place like Yale College, students could easily become

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<sup>28</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 130.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Rosenberg, "Sexuality, Class and Role in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century America" *American Quarterly* 25 (May 1973): 132.

overwhelmed by the competitive atmosphere and strict schedules. Under President Woolsey, the names of winners of scholastic prizes were published in the college catalogue. In 1848, Woolsey began to list the class rank of graduating seniors in the commencement program. In 1869, all classes were divided on the basis of academic standing, separating the sheep from the goats among the pupils so that each could be handled accordingly. This undoubtedly contributed to the pressures of hierarchy and competition. The cycle of teaching and testing quickly became drudgework. Though recitations were made more difficult under Woolsey, the quality of the teaching continued to be “atrocious.”<sup>30</sup> One student, Franklin B. Dexter, recalled that President Woolsey’s classroom had a “chilly atmosphere of repression.”<sup>31</sup>

The life of the student consisted of a hard schedule of chapel, recitation, and meals, though the strict regulation of students went far beyond religion and classes. The administration attempted to control every aspect of the students’ behavior through the so-called “parental system” of discipline. The attitude of the administration was “firm, never harsh or menacing,” but also never permitting the student to question authority. As Brooks Mather Kelley describes:

the timing of classes, chapel, and study periods throughout the day so that extended periods of recreation were impossible; the lack of organized athletics; the tensions produced by the still strict Puritan morality; the emotions developed by rising sectional rivalry – all combined to make this a particularly difficult period at Yale.<sup>32</sup>

With its frequent prize debate competitions and monthly nominations for the best compositions in each department, the school fostered a dauntingly competitive atmosphere among the students. The men were seated according to class rank, placing those with the highest scores in the front of the room and those with the lowest in the back. Examinations were conducted orally, in front of the entire class, with students being called upon at random for testing, so that if they did not

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<sup>30</sup> Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 180.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

come prepared, their peers would witness their failure and possibly offer their own malicious commentary.<sup>33</sup>

One Yale student named Gideon Welch, writing to his grandfather in 1866, stated, “Nearly all of my time during the term will have to be spent in reviewing all I have been over in Sophomore Year.”<sup>34</sup> After witnessing a classmate’s academic ineptitude, Welch noted, “He has no stability or resolution about him so that his college course is about a failure as I expect his after life will be.”<sup>35</sup> Welch did not mention a friend until the end of his sophomore year, yet even this reference focused solely on the capacity of his friend, Clarence, as a student. He wrote, “Clarence is a very good man to room with...very attentive to his studies and will succeed in whatever he undertakes.”<sup>36</sup> It was common for a Yale man to compare himself to his peers, view his accomplishments in light of theirs, and display deep concern about finishing in the top of his class. In this hierarchical social world, there was even a push to surround one’s self with the most accomplished friends. In describing his neighbors, Welch proudly asserted, “I have the company of some of the best men in our class,” as if this added to his own prestige.<sup>37</sup> Though I gather that Welch was an unusually studious young man while at the university, his anxiety over succeeding was no doubt typical for most boys on campus. Yet, despite his academic diligence and competitiveness, even Welch expressed longing for a close friend and confidante, remarking, “I had begun to feel lonesome and as if I wanted someone to talk to.”<sup>38</sup> Like many Yale men, Welch’s college life proved to be a balancing act of scholarly rigor and social bonding.

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<sup>33</sup> Gideon H. Welch, *Letters from Gideon Welch to his Grandfather*, Yale Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection; Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, March 18, 1866.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, September 28, 1866.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, July 22, 1866.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, November 11, 1866.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, November 18, 1866.

The students ultimately turned to one another for the warmth and support that was denied them by the administration. The diaries of Albert Dodd and Edward Sheffield demonstrate that, for these boys, the opinions and attitudes of their classmates were forefront in their reflections. They frequently filled their days with visits to and from friends and spent much of their time alone pondering and rehashing their interactions with their fellow students. Dodd and Sheffield exhibited varying degrees of introspection, but neither of them at any point in his diary acknowledged that there was anything abnormal about his feelings toward other men. Of the numerous internal struggles they faced, not one of them was over being sexually different or unusual. They both worried endlessly about their relationships with other men, but there is never any indication that they felt their love was in any way unnatural. It is important to note not only what the boys felt about each other, but also what they did not feel or bother to write down. For this reason, the diaries tell us as much by what they contain as by what they do not.

In his diary begun in 1837, Albert Dodd frequently described the passion he felt toward two of his male classmates, John Heath and Anthony Halsey. Referring to Heath, Dodd wrote, “I regard, I esteem, I *love* him more than all the rest,” adding, “John, dear John I love you, indeed I love you. But you are not here, you cannot hear me confess this to you, a confession which perhaps you would care not for.”<sup>39</sup> Though close friendships were common and acceptable among upper-class boys, Dodd recognized that there was something different about his affection, something that would require confessing and that might displease his friend. He was left to sort out his unspoken feelings in his journal. Still, this intensity of emotion did not lead him to conclude that he was different from the other boys, or that he had anything in common with the sodomites who were emerging for the first time as a distinct group. Dodd wrote as if he had been

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<sup>39</sup> Albert Dodd, *Diary*, February 4, 1837, *Albert Dodd Papers*; Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.



the first boy ever to experience such passion and spends much of his reflective time trying to explain it to himself, almost as if he was studying the relationship from a distance. He ruminated, “It is not friendship merely which I feel for him, or it is friendship of the strongest kind. It is a heart-felt, a manly, a pure, deep, and fervent love.”<sup>40</sup> This phrase captures some of Dodd’s confusion as he tread the dangerous line between pure, noble love and sensual longing. Dodd was careful, at least on paper, to keep his love untainted by physical desires, but it was telling to note that it is the “manly” character of the relationship that he was drawn to in the first place.

Much of the space in Dodd’s diary is filled with expressions of longing and anxieties over the possibility of unrequited love. He asked himself why he could not admit to Heath “of the fire that was burning at my heart,” and then answered that he feared his feelings “would not meet with an equally warm welcome.”<sup>41</sup> It was not Dodd’s gender that would elicit Heath’s disapproval, but rather his character. Dodd wrote, “I possess not the requisite qualifications to obtain the deep love which John, or anyone else, might possess.”<sup>42</sup> He added, “O God, to have one’s love slighted, neglected, treated with coldness, when it might rightly claim at least a little regard in return. It is hard, hard.”<sup>43</sup> The phrase *might rightly claim* reveals that though his feelings were for another man, he still expected that a flourishing relationship was possible. He yearned that his love would not be in vain, for he wrote that, despite his shortcomings, “I can love, God knows that I can love, and why should this ever burning flame have been implanted in my heart, if no fuel was ever to be given it without being doomed to see that all its ardour could not kindle a like affection in the hearts of others?”<sup>44</sup> The degree of suffering illustrated in these passages reveals the intensity of his friendship with Heath. Indeed, the approval of his closest

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<sup>40</sup> Dodd, February 4, 1837.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, February 14, 1837.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, February 4, 1837.

friends was a fundamental part of Dodd's experience, determining much of his emotional stability, during his time at the Connecticut college he attended before transferring to Yale. He wrote, "I am peculiarly sensitive to the disesteem of those with whom I am intimate."<sup>45</sup>

Dodd never placed the blame for his suffering on the fact that his love was for a man; he suffered similarly over his unrequited love for a girl named Julia. He wrote, "My prayer, if the prayer of such a sinner may aught avail, is that she may be happy, and that her conscience may never reproach her that she has shown aught of fickleness or deceit to one who loved her well."<sup>46</sup> He believed his love for a member of either gender was equally attainable in theory but that his own inadequacies obstructed him from attaining it. In his diary, Dodd momentarily hinted that his love for men and his love for women might have been incompatible. After admitting his love for John Heath, Dodd immediately asked, "I wonder if I really loved Julia. Why should I doubt it, though the passion is so nearly forgotten?"<sup>47</sup> Dodd began to draw connections between his love for men and his love for women, which led him to wonder which of the two was more genuine.

It is equally revealing to note what Dodd did not say and what he felt compelled to omit. He wrote of the "things that trouble me particularly," first among them "that ---- which has long troubled me; and also ----," leaving solid lines in the spaces where his unmentionable troubles would have been written. He quickly added, "Besides there is M.O. [an abbreviation for some mysterious activity] – I dare not write even here these things – which it is my prayer may soon be settled."<sup>48</sup> He was conscious that there was something blameworthy about his feelings, and his words "I dare not" betray a hint of fear of his hidden feelings being somehow discovered.

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<sup>45</sup> Dodd, February 5, 1837.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, February 2, 1837.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, February 7, 1837.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, February 5, 1837.

Whatever was weighing on his heart, Dodd felt it was necessary to struggle with it in silence. A few days later, he continued to worry about “my ---- I dare not write it in full; or it may be that my thoughts run upon ---- as much as any other thing.”<sup>49</sup> Dodd believed that these inflictions were unique to his situation and that few others would understand or even be able to tolerate the mention of what was ailing him.

Shortly thereafter, a page has been torn from the diary right at the point where Dodd began to equate his love for women with his love for men. He wrote, “It seems that the nature of my affection for A.H. and J.F.H. [Anthony Halsey and John Heath] was really the same as that which I had for Julia. Yet one was for a female, the other for...” at which point the following page has been removed.<sup>50</sup> He later wrote, “John, here, in my private volume, whose pages shall be surveyed by no eyes, here in this receptacle of my passing thoughts, here do I repeat my secret avowal of deep, devoted attachment, my friend, companion, ΒΦΚ [this may signify membership in a certain college society], sole inhabitant of my heart.”<sup>51</sup> After this, two pages have been cut out of the diary. It is impossible to guess exactly what was written on these missing pages, but it is revealing to note that the *only* pages removed from the diary are the ones that immediately follow deep, candid expressions of love for another man, leading the reader to guess that Dodd was even more explicit about his feelings on the missing pages. Dodd’s caution and reserve in describing his feelings and temptations indicate that he acknowledged there was something peculiar about his passions. At the same time, his tone throughout the diary is notably free of remorse when it comes to the nature of his longing, as if he suspected that his feelings may have been inappropriate, but nonetheless did not feel compelled to end them.

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<sup>49</sup> Dodd, February 7, 1837.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, February 14, 1837.

In his relationship with Anthony Halsey, on the other hand, Dodd's longing easily and freely crossed over into the physical realm. In March 1837, Dodd wrote that one of his first impressions of Halsey was that he was "so handsome."<sup>52</sup> Their relationship consisted of a strong physical connection right from the start. Dodd wrote, "Tony, how I long to see you, to embrace you, to press you to my bosom, my own dear Tony!"<sup>53</sup> In fact, it was the physical nature of their relationship that in Dodd's eyes marked it as intimate. He mused, "Yes, very intimate we became, and though we did not room together, yet we were with each other much of the time. How completely I loved him, how I doted on him! We often walked out into the fields together arm in arm."<sup>54</sup> The act of walking arm in arm demonstrated to Dodd the fullness and depth of their love. This physical closeness continued during their times of bed-sharing, about which Dodd exclaimed, "How sweet to sleep with him, to hold his beloved form in my embrace, to have his arms about my neck, to imprint upon his face sweet kisses!"<sup>55</sup>

Though their intimacy was displayed in physical interaction, it would be wrong to categorize these moments as carnal or lustful; Dodd introduced a spiritual element to their bodily closeness with his references to Halsey's "beloved form." Dodd also bared his soul to him during their long hours of intimate talk. He continued mingling the spiritual with the physical as he wrote, "If I could only know him again as I did then, behold his youth, beauty, and innocence of aught of evil, how sweet it would be!"<sup>56</sup> His mind was on moral questions of right and wrong, and he linked Halsey's beauty with something spiritually pure and good. Though their interaction was in many ways physical, we see that for Dodd, it still satisfied a spiritual yearning, an emotional need for companionship.

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<sup>52</sup> Dodd, March 27, 1837.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, March 24, 1837.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, March 27, 1837.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, March 24, 1837.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*.

He experienced the same degree of physical closeness with another boy named Jake Smith in April of the same year. In his diary, he wrote that during a trip to New York, he “went up in the City Hotel with Jake and slept with him. He is a fine, handsome fellow, and he interests me much; light curly hair, light complexion, blue eyes, handsome oval countenance, and a slight graceful form, and altogether I have begun to love him.”<sup>57</sup> The memory of sleeping together flows into Dodd’s observations of Jake’s “graceful form.” His description of Jake’s physical appearance in turn leads to Dodd’s expression of love. This passage then links both the act of sleeping with another man and love itself to physical attraction, once again revealing that for Dodd, these spheres were indistinguishable.

Mirroring the academic and social rankings of college life, Dodd ranked his close companions as if they were in competition for his love. He carefully differentiated between his ordinary friends and the few individuals on whom he bestowed his admiration. Referring to John Heath, he wrote, “I love him more than all the rest.” Shortly thereafter, he mentioned, “The person of whom I think most is John Heath. That is undisputed in my mind, and therefore do I conclude that he is the one most dear to my memory.”<sup>58</sup> In March, however, referring to Halsey, Dodd exclaimed, “How I love him! He lately seems to have occupied my thoughts more than J.H. and I feel as if I loved him more ardently and intensely than John.”<sup>59</sup> In September, now at Yale College, Dodd noted of Jake, “I love him more than anyone else that I know of. That’s a fact.”<sup>60</sup>

It was important for Dodd to recognize that these were not ordinary attachments of friendships. These were people who alone occupied a special, separate place in his heart. He

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<sup>57</sup> Dodd, April 24, 1837.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, February 7, 1837.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, March 21, 1837.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, September 9, 1837.

described, “All I know is that there are three persons in this world whom I have loved, and those are, Julia, John, and Anthony. Dear beloved trio.” He showered his affection on a small, select group of individuals and was careful to reserve the highest praise for them alone. Even within his beloved trio, Dodd could not resist the urge to single out his favorite: “But I leave the others, and turn my thoughts to the latter. Tony. What a sweet, lovely fellow he is! I do love him!”<sup>61</sup> His adulation of Anthony knew no bounds, and the adjectives of praise simply pile up in Dodd’s diary: “Thou sweet, lovely, dear, beloved, beautiful, adored Anthony!”<sup>62</sup> His later profession of love for Jabez Sidney Smith, a freshman at Yale, was equally excessive, as if he had been about to burst with emotion: “How much I think all the time continually always of Jabez. I believe *I love him.*”<sup>63</sup>

The other surprising aspect of these passages is their emotional passivity. Unlike the stories of the sodomites who actively sought out other men, Dodd’s accounts read more like observations of emotions over which he had no control, rather than willful desires to pursue unsuspecting victims. Referring to Jabez Smith, Dodd observed, “It is strange how I ‘fell in love with him’ (if I must use the expression, and I can think of no other to express my meaning so well),” almost as if he was as surprised as anyone that his heart had settled on Smith. He adds, “I am conscious that I love him very much and more perhaps than I do any other one.”<sup>64</sup> This sentence captures the two themes of Dodd’s descriptions of love: his passivity in the face of his own emotions – *I am conscious that I love him* – and his elevation of certain loved ones above others. These phrases – *I am conscious that I love him, I believe I love him, I feel as if I loved him, therefore do I conclude that he is the one most dear to my memory* – read more like an

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<sup>61</sup> Dodd, March 24, 1837.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, March 27, 1837.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, September 3, 1837.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, October 10, 1837.

outsider commenting on Dodd's feelings. Half of Dodd's expressions of love for his friends are outright exclamations of passion – *how I love him!* – while the other half seem to be more guarded and considered – *I believe I love him*. There is a childlike innocence in all his observations of love and praise for his closest companions, as if he were discovering his own love for the first time. By taking a step back, Dodd could better evaluate and cope with the difficult situations his feelings put him in.

Dodd's acceptance of these situations also stemmed from a spiritual maturity that far surpassed his eighteen years. He resigned himself to the fact that "I must have my portion of this world's evils, great as is the share, though I suppose every one thinks the same, that he has most woe and misfortune of all others. But what is, is, and cannot be helped; and 'whatever is, is right.'"<sup>65</sup> Though he repeatedly recorded that he failed to attend church, Dodd still exhibited a strong spiritual awareness in the pages of his diary that framed and molded his relationships. His intense self-reflection led him momentarily to consider suicide. After referring to one of his unnamable troubles, Dodd reflected, "O, would that I could for a time forget all these sources of care, both great and small; that I could drink one draught from the Lethean waters...But there is one such draught only: it is that of death. Would I be willing to escape from thought in the cold embraces of an eternal sleep?" He answers, "It is an awful thought. I'll think of it no longer now. Away, fiend, tempt me not; Avaunt, ye blue devils."<sup>66</sup> The spiritual element present in these lines resulted in much of Dodd's deep self-analysis, which in turn made him realize a certain emptiness apart from his loved ones. In fact, in the next line in his diary, he turns to musings on John Heath, almost as if his life's purpose and his intimate friendships were intertwined.

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<sup>65</sup> Dodd, February 5, 1837.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, February 7, 1837.

At Yale, Dodd read the Greek Anthology and other classic texts and began to use his knowledge of ancient sexual life to come to terms with his own longings. As we have seen, this was a common strategy for this period's upper-class, college-educated white men. In December 1837, he wrote a poem about the Greek myth of Ganymede, a handsome youth who became cupbearer to the gods and Zeus' lover.<sup>67</sup> The legend of Ganymede offered a model of love between men and captured the longing pursuit of manly love that Dodd so fervently recorded in his journal. The connection with the love of the ancients, rather than with the sodomites of New York (or even of the Bible), reveal Dodd's belief that his feelings toward men were part of a "noble love," rather than a sinful lust. Though he did not explicitly say so, his poem suggests that his passions were part of a heroic tradition reaching back to the ancients.

The endearing innocence behind Dodd's words implies that he did not believe his feelings to be transgressions. They were rather outpourings of a strong affinity among the students on the college campus. His passionate fondness for other men occurred in the context of a warm social environment that created a strong brotherhood between Yale students. Dodd visited, had long conversations with, and recorded his thoughts about dozens of students each day. His need to specify that he loved John Heath, Anthony Halsey, and Jabez Smith more than the others shows that he felt love of some sort for a number of his fellow students. Yale men were adventurers together on the quest for learning, and they typically learned more of life's lessons from one another than they did from their rigorous classes. Despite the strict rules of the administration, the boys discovered that outside of the classroom there was much to do that was "just plain fun."<sup>68</sup> The junior and senior social societies were sites of mutual sharing, academic motivation, and enlightened conversation, and they operated completely apart from the

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<sup>67</sup> Katz, *Love Stories*, 31.

<sup>68</sup> Kelley, 212.



administration's control. As Dodd describes, "I have passed my time since I have been here, studying a little, and smoking a great deal (more than I ought) and spreeing a little, also reading some. Jabez is here but I see very little of him, much less than I wish I might."<sup>69</sup> Of course, the academic rigor of the college scene was something that could become unbearable, and Dodd readily admits this elsewhere. As we have noted, the companionship and support of a fellow student was sometimes necessary to succeed in the classroom. However, Dodd also presents an alternative view: the studies may have been difficult, but the emphasis was on the social scene at Yale College, the sense of camaraderie that infused the student body and encouraged deep admiration and fondness between the boys.

Albert Dodd's same-sex friendships definitely fall on the more extreme end of the relational spectrum in terms of their intensity and passion. For this reason, it may be tempting to categorize them as homoerotic, but the reader must remember what the diary does *not* say. There is not a single reference to sex, seduction, lust, or even specific body parts other than the face. Admittedly, more explicit descriptions may have appeared on the missing pages, though that seems highly unlikely; such passages would have been inconsistent with the other parts of the diary, all of which are focused solely on emotions and love. We also know that such allusions were not entirely unheard of at the time, as shown previously in this essay by the references to "fleshen poles" appearing in other contemporary letters, so it would not have been unthinkable for Dodd to write them in the privacy of his diary.

It is true that Dodd yearned for something more in his relationships with men. He himself wrote, "Perchance [John] would say, 'Yes, I have much esteem, much regard, much love for you, for you have been an intimate friend, we are bound by one tie, and why would I not have some affection for you?' Would this satisfy *my* ardent feelings?" The answer obviously is no, because

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<sup>69</sup> Dodd, October 10, 1837.

Dodd immediately adds, “Why should it not?”<sup>70</sup> Dodd undoubtedly yearned to surpass the regular bounds of nineteenth-century friendship, yet I do not believe he would have characterized his extreme desires as erotic or sexual. In a way, what Dodd hoped for was *more* intimate than sex – the fusion of two hearts into one – an idea that will become particularly important as we turn to the diary of Edward Chase Sheffield.

The diary of Edward Sheffield, who graduated from Yale in 1859, provides a wealth of insight into the psychology of Yale students at the time. Sheffield kept meticulous notes of his day-to-day events from January to September of 1858. Much of the diary is simply a list of unremarkable activities, such as a visit to his ailing mother, a Latin class, or a stop by the post office, but in the midst of these quotidian descriptions, Sheffield inserted numerous illuminating observations of his relationships with other students and the impact they had on his personal character. He began on January 1 with specific thoughts on his relationships with other Yale men and his masculinity. He wrote that he was “not popular among the class. I look forward to a year of loneliness, of neglect, of trouble and vexation, but I am determined to be a Stoic with respect to these things.” He vowed to quit crying “and this year act the man,” underlining the phrase to emphasize its importance.<sup>71</sup> Like other Yale students, he constantly questioned whether he belonged at the school, writing that he felt he “had not brains enough to warrant my coming here.”<sup>72</sup> He feared he had not spent his time at Yale wisely and had missed a number of opportunities that his fellow students had seized, observing, “The more I associate with my class, the more I discover how much I have been deprived while here, in comparison with others.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Dodd, February 14, 1837.

<sup>71</sup> Edward Chase Sheffield, *Diary*, January 1, 1858, *Yale Miscellaneous Manuscripts Collection*; Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, January 9, 1858.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, January 27, 1858.

Apart from academics, Sheffield also fretted that he would never find his place among his peers at Yale. He wearily predicted, “I expect to drag thro’ this term in study varied by the walk from my gloomy room to recitation; wearily to pass thro’ the crowd, unnoticed and not caring to be; disappointed, sorrowful and ALONE.”<sup>74</sup> Sheffield doubted that he would ever fit into the social framework that constituted campus life. In his diary, he lamented his inability to form new friends, a failure he revealingly connected with a lack of good looks, adding, “I am losing youth, and – as they tell me – attractiveness; friends, the majority of them, I lost long ago.” After comforting himself with the thought that such cares were fleeting, he set his sights on what he perceived to be more lasting goals, writing, “May I have at least – ‘That Friend that’s best; Have God my friend, who passeth all the rest!’”<sup>75</sup> Sheffield’s fears of being isolated from the other men on campus, his worries about his appearance, and his appeals to God, were inseparable; the spiritual and the physical worlds merged during his time at Yale.

Apart from his insecurity and incessant self-analysis, two other aspects of Sheffield’s character stand out from his entries: he was a firm Christian believer, and he frequently spent the night with a close friend of his, Asher Wilcox, almost always referred to in the diary merely as “A.” On the morning of Friday, January 22, Sheffield wrote, “When the bell rang for morning prayers A and self got up and proceeded to dress...Whereupon I proposed to go back to bed again, which he, considering a moment, accepted and we both undressed and went back.”<sup>76</sup> Likewise, a week later, Sheffield recorded, “A came back with me to my room and spent the night. We lay awake talking until after 1 o’clock. Enjoyed it much.”<sup>77</sup> In March, Sheffield related how “A spent the night with me; we retired at 11 and talked till 2 o’clock. It was about the most

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<sup>74</sup> Sheffield, January 7, 1858.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, January 22, 1858.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, January 29, 1858.

friendly talk I ever had with him, and at the end I liked him even better than I did before.”<sup>78</sup> The two lay in bed talking until the late night hours on a regular basis, and though Sheffield found their pillow talk extremely enjoyable, it is interesting to note that he almost never described what they discussed for those several hours in the evening, though he usually recounted word for word other important conversations from the day. Their time in bed together was at least mildly flirtatious, for Sheffield informs us, revealingly enough, that Asher frequently awoke him by tickling him with a wisp of paper.<sup>79</sup>

Paradoxically, the relationship between the couple, like the atmosphere of the campus as a whole, was both warmly intimate and frighteningly competitive. There was a constant need among Sheffield and his classmates to prove themselves, to demonstrate their intelligence and establish themselves as leaders of their class. When Asher was voted Chairman of a Yale literary publication, Sheffield lamented that he himself was “no smarter than nor as much so as other people...I must hereafter plod along ambitionless and aimless – content to know that my lot in life is to be an humble one.”<sup>80</sup> He simultaneously admired Asher and envied him tremendously. He was most jealous that the other men at Yale looked up to him. His feelings of inadequacy when compared to Asher resulted in a lower opinion of his own masculinity. He wrote, “Oh poor fool that I was – to imagine that with this eternal curse on my head, I could ever lift it up – ever be a MAN!”<sup>81</sup> In Sheffield’s eyes, Asher had truly made a name for himself while in college and epitomized what it looked like to be a *Yale man*, whereas Sheffield felt he had failed to live up to his role, both as a Yale student and as a man.

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<sup>78</sup> Sheffield, March 19, 1858.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, March 18, 1858.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, February 2, 1858.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*.

Occasionally, Sheffield was at a loss for words when describing his complex feelings for Asher, as indicated by the frequent use of ellipses in his diary. After Asher cared for him while he was sick, Sheffield recorded, “A was very kind and I hope at some time to be able to do something for him...[ellipsis included]”<sup>82</sup> The weekend of April 10 and 11 has, interestingly, been torn out. On Monday, his accounts of the two in bed together are riddled with suspicious ellipses. After describing their newfound intimacy, Sheffield wrote, “I could but bless God for it.....[the extended ellipsis is Sheffield’s own] We lay awake for a long time talking.”<sup>83</sup> The next morning, Sheffield mentioned that he enjoyed the night very much and again included ellipses in his description of the previous evening, writing, “We talked quite late the night before and A professed much friendship for me.....”<sup>84</sup> Before modern readers try neatly to categorize Sheffield as “gay,” it is telling to note that he continued to flirt with and even pursue women. He shares that one afternoon, referring to a friend he calls E, “He and Taylor and self flirted – or rather – fooled with a girl in a pink bonnet down stairs,”<sup>85</sup> and on another day, “A girl brought in a plate of good things and a glass of preserves, which some unknown lady friend had sent to me.”<sup>86</sup>

Even though there was great freedom to draw close to fellow students at the school, Edward and Asher were careful to ensure that they did not become too dependent on each other. After the two boys went for one of their frequent walks, Sheffield reported that in the evening as he returned to his room, he was “not feeling very pleasantly because A would not come; for he declares he comes here altogether too often.”<sup>87</sup> For his part, Sheffield also expressed an uneasiness over the importance of the powerful role Asher played in his life, noting, “Today I

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<sup>82</sup> Sheffield, February 14, 1858.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, April 12, 1858.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, April 13, 1858.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, February 24, 1858.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, March 27, 1858.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, March 13, 1858.

have been thinking over my intimacy with A and have come to the conclusion that I let him into my private feelings too much, thereby giving him an undue power over me.”<sup>88</sup> As a way to assert his independence, Sheffield resolved that “during the coming term, I will have no conversation with any one on matters relating to myself which I would not be willing to hear repeated to any and every man in the class.”<sup>89</sup> Sheffield realized that his intimacy had led to vulnerability. He believed he had to strike a delicate balance between being open and honest with Asher and retaining an upright reputation among his peers. His relationship with Asher was central to his personal happiness and his understanding of his place at Yale. His self-confidence largely flourished from his popularity with Asher and the other boys, yet there was still pressure to give off the impression of independence and self-sufficiency. Sheffield believed that in order to remain a true role model in the eyes of his peers, his personal strength of character could not be sacrificed as his dependency on Asher grew. Yale men had to remain both gregarious and maverick, thoroughly enjoying each other’s company without relying on the presence of the other for their emotional stability.

Because of the tenuous nature of their relationship, the two boys’ feelings alternated between rapturous affection and utter loathing. On June 20, Sheffield complained of Asher:

he has become so exacting, so tenacious of form, so suspicious and irritable, that it stretches my patience, almost beyond endurance. And yet with all this he is so kind, so earnest in his apparent friendship, and so close in his offers (as he is in his demands) of intimacy, that my inclinations are forever at war.<sup>90</sup>

Even as they continued to share a bed, the two boys quarreled almost like lovers. Sheffield felt compelled to please Asher but determinedly demanded that Asher treat him kindly in return. He often felt that the amount of affection in the friendship was unequal and therefore dishonorable to his public image. It was only Asher’s corresponding earnestness that encouraged him to

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<sup>88</sup> Sheffield, April 20, 1858.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, April 20, 1858.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, June 20, 1858.

maintain the relationship. A few days later, when Asher turned down an invitation to visit Edward's room, Sheffield felt betrayed and disgraced. He scrawled into his diary, "I thought myself forever lowered in self respect and wondered I could so have acted and humiliated myself for any man."<sup>91</sup>

Sheffield later noted that it was Asher's actual physical presence that brought him comfort and happiness rather than the mere idea of their friendship. He observed, "There is one thing peculiar about my feelings toward A. When he is with me I like him; but when he is away I almost hate him. I never imagined that altogether I could entertain so many and varied feelings toward one man as I do to him."<sup>92</sup> The intensity of the relationship alarmed Sheffield, as did the magnetic nature of Asher's company. Despite the disappointments, the frustration and the angst, Sheffield concluded that the relationship was well worth the trouble and looked back on their time together with fondness. He reminisced, "I have realized, too, how much I owe to Asher, whose love to me has outlived all the coldness and harshness that he has found in me...I feel now as I never felt before that I am to him, and he to me, much more than a common friend."<sup>93</sup> Sheffield claimed responsibility for their quarrels though at the time of their fights he complained that he had been neglected and ignored. To the end, Sheffield continued to idolize Asher, seeing in him all the qualities that he himself lacked. All their problems, Sheffield concluded, must have sprung from his own selfishness, since Asher's motives had to be pure and his feelings of friendship genuine. Though Sheffield felt disappointed with his own failures and shortcomings, he comforted himself with the fact that at least his dearest friend, Asher Wilcox, embodied all that it meant to be a Yale man.

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<sup>91</sup> Sheffield, June 23, 1858.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, July 6, 1858.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, August 1, 1858.

Sheffield's diary also shows that, since most of the students at the time were Christian, the relationships between some students took on a nearly divine significance. Sheffield's relationship with Asher and his faith were closely connected. He thanked God for their friendship often and regularly included Asher in his prayers. He wrote in his diary, "It was a kind Providence that gave me in him what I so desired – a true and trustful friend."<sup>94</sup> Though he called it a friendship, Sheffield described their affection as if an element of flirtation were involved, recalling how he pursued Asher with livelier and deeper interest, and "then when I found that he evidently and sincerely liked me, how surprised and rejoiced I was – I cannot but feel grateful to that Providence for this greatest of my later blessings."<sup>95</sup> The earnestness and passion of his prayers illustrate the seriousness of both his relationship and his Christian faith. Writing of Asher, Sheffield exclaimed, "Oh that Christ would shine into his heart with the beams of his own glory, and guide him from despair to joy, from darkness into the full light of pardon and love."<sup>96</sup> Though it is clear that the two men felt a strong draw to each other, Sheffield interpreted this longing as spiritual rather than sexual. He claimed that he was most delighted when they prayed together or when he saw Asher reading his Bible.

While lying next to his friend in bed, Sheffield prayed that "I would be willing to endure any thing if so I might be influential in bringing [Asher] to a knowledge of Christ."<sup>97</sup> The spiritual wellbeing of Asher was of critical importance to Sheffield. He found purpose for his Yale career in the salvation of his friend, to the point that he exclaimed, "I would even die if by my death he might have life."<sup>98</sup> One of Sheffield's happiest moments was when Asher confessed his acceptance of the Christian faith. In his diary, Sheffield described how at an evening prayer

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<sup>94</sup> Sheffield, February 17, 1858.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, March 28, 1858.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, February 25, 1858.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, March 28, 1858.



meeting, “Asher Wilcox rose, and in his wonted cool and decided manner announced that he too was persuaded that the Christian was the only kind of life worth living for...What had I done that this great joy should come to me!”<sup>99</sup> Shortly thereafter, Sheffield shared, “Before we retired we had prayers together for the first time and I greatly enjoyed it.”<sup>100</sup>

As he and Asher grew more and more close, Sheffield’s faith became increasingly resolute. After Asher cared for Sheffield during a day-long illness, Sheffield concluded, “A has proved himself a good friend to me. I little thought one year ago that such a thing would happen as did today, that HE would be my kind nurse, who then carried himself so coolly and grandly toward me, and whom I regarded with perfect awe.”<sup>101</sup> Sheffield’s praises of Asher were only a breath away from his praises of the Divine, as he reminded himself, “But let me remember that there is only ONE true and steadfast Friend!”<sup>102</sup> In his relationships with Asher and other students, Sheffield hoped to strengthen his relationship with Christ, though the opposite also occurred: his Christian faith tended to solidify the bonds between himself and the other men on campus. Though he recalled that he entered the year with trepidation, and though he admitted that academically, it had been extremely difficult, he concluded, “My loneliness has been lost in a blessed friendship with one I must always respect and esteem, and my trials and disappointments have been so mingled with blessing and so tempered with Christian society that patience of spirit has come to me more easily.”<sup>103</sup> For students like Sheffield, Christian students at the elite educational institution, their faith did not preclude intimacy with other male students. Quite the contrary – it supplied a holy framework for the deep love they felt for one other.

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<sup>99</sup> Sheffield, March 30, 1858.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, April 2, 1858.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, February 17, 1858.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, April 13, 1858.

Yet, while being deeply interested in the wellbeing of Asher's soul, Sheffield was simultaneously drawn to his handsome physical appearance. The following weekend, he wrote, "Then A looked better than I ever saw him. He had pushed up his cap, opened his coat, and his face wore that pleasant expression which it had only at times when he is particularly earnest...I was more attracted by his expression than by what he was saying."<sup>104</sup> For Sheffield, a devout Christian, there was no contradiction in his spiritual longing for and his physical attraction to his friend. They were both part of the heightened awareness of the world around him that made Sheffield unique in the first place.

With this heightened awareness came an acute sensitivity to the spiritual culture and environment of the campus as a whole. In the 1860s, Yale College underwent a Christian revival, the roots of which were seen during Sheffield's years at school. He shared that he was overjoyed "to see love springing up to Christ from long barren hearts, and it makes my own soul go out in love to God, and to all my classmates, and my friend, with more zeal than ever before."<sup>105</sup> We see that Sheffield's passion and concern extended "to all my classmates," though it was concentrated specifically on Asher, "my friend." As Yale historian George Pierson famously stated, Yale was first and foremost "a society of friends," a place where each student took an active interest in the affairs and wellbeing of his peers.<sup>106</sup> Sheffield unwittingly used Pierson's term to describe the intensity with which he cared about the other men at the college. He wrote, "In the society of friends I have found pleasure and comfort; in their conversion I have found answer to my earnest prayer."<sup>107</sup> His emotional sensitivity extended to the entire student body. With the students already sharing one another's joys and griefs, it happened that when two

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<sup>104</sup> Sheffield, February 28, 1858.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, April 1, 1858.

<sup>106</sup> Kelley, 264.

<sup>107</sup> Sheffield, April 13, 1858.

students such as Edward and Asher became particularly close, few of the other Yale men thought to raise an eyebrow. The relationship between the two men drew no ridicule from any of the other students, at least none described by Sheffield in his diary. It was entirely natural for students to draw particularly close, to establish mutually supportive bonds. The relationships the students cultivated with one another were as meaningful and valuable as the lessons they learned in the classroom.

In a fine display of historical irony, in Sheffield's time, the term "coming out" was used to indicate that a nonbeliever had accepted Christ. Referring to another friend, Sheffield wrote in his diary, "He has come out determinedly to live for Christ," and later that evening he was informed "that this afternoon those persons who had lately come out held a prayer-meeting in Hubbard's room."<sup>108</sup> Whereas in the twenty-first century, the term is commonly used to signify that a man or woman has made their entrance into gay society (the term originally comes from the drag balls of the 1920s, where a young male debutante would be formally introduced to, or "come out" into, gay society as a mature gay adult), at Yale in the 1850s, to "come out" signaled an entrance into the close-knit Christian community.<sup>109</sup> This commonality in terms proves nothing in itself, but it does serve as a further clue into how Christian brotherly love and sexual attraction could easily overlap at Yale, an all-male Christian institution.

As we have seen, some scholars suggest that youthful romantic friendships between men served as training grounds for later relationships with women. Sheffield took this one step further, believing that his relationships with other men taught him to achieve deeper intimacy with the Divine. His descriptions of his feelings about his faith and his feelings about his relationships with his peers echo each other in their alternating ecstasy and melancholy. He

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<sup>108</sup> Sheffield, April 2, 1858.

<sup>109</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 7.

lamented, “I try to trust Providence and I *know* that all things are ordered for good, but it is hard to *feel* it so. My life generally considered seems a rather cheerless (not to say hopeless) one.”<sup>110</sup> He exhibited a general acceptance of the world around him and his place in it, as when he reflected after a funeral, “Men die; and the ground their feet have trodden is but the pathway for other feet – the places where they joyed and suffered but the scenes for other’s joys and other’s sufferings.”<sup>111</sup> His maturity, oftentimes expressed poetically, as in the above passage, was no doubt a result of both his lifelong spirituality and the deep relationships he formed with other men on campus. For Sheffield, understanding his connection to God in light of his attachments to other students was an important part of his journey to manhood, a part that took place during his time at Yale.

In the spring of 2004, the Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies at Yale University sponsored an exhibit entitled “The Pink and the Blue: Lesbian and Gay Life at Yale and in Connecticut, 1642-2004,” which was displayed in the Memorabilia Room of Sterling Memorial Library. In the introduction to the exhibit, a statement from Jonathan D. Katz read, “As this exhibition makes clear, it is impossible to conceive of a Yale University absent its lesbian and gay past” and presented the claim that the display was “the first exhibition to examine the specifically lesbian and gay (and bisexual and transgendered) history of a major institution of higher education in the United States.”<sup>112</sup> In the winter of 2006, the Manuscripts and Archives department of Yale Library mounted a similar exhibit entitled “These Stories Too Shall Be Told,” which included excerpts from the diaries of Dodd and Sheffield. Though these

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<sup>110</sup> Sheffield, April 21, 1858.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, March 15, 1858.

<sup>112</sup> Jonathan D. Katz, “The Pink and the Blue: Lesbian and Gay Life at Yale and in Connecticut, 1642-2004,” Yale University, <http://www.yale.edu/lesbiangay/Pages/Archive/PNBIntro.html> (accessed April 6, 2007).

exhibits offered an excellent view into the history of same-sex relationships at Yale and beyond, I believe it is misleading to place descriptions of nineteenth-century Yale students like Dodd and Sheffield alongside pictures of prominent gay men and women of the twentieth century. As gay men and women of the twenty-first century, we are all too often tempted to point to historical examples of love between people of the same gender as resounding proof that “we were there!” Unfortunately, such a tendency risks downplaying the importance of context and environment in evaluating same-sex relationships, resulting in a misinterpretation not only of the remarkable intimacy these men discovered with one another but also of Yale College as a whole.

As we have seen, the emotional universe of the nineteenth century was such that sexuality, or a set of sexual desires, did not serve as a center of identity or conceptual framework that organized a person’s erotic life. The erotic actions that men engaged in, either with men or with women, did not affect their perception of who they were. Such activities rather reflected the results of their individual decisions; whether or not they caused men to be fundamentally different from the rest of society was not the central issue. Though the love between these men may have been similar to many present-day gay relationships in its intensity and passion, their feelings grew from a strong atmosphere of camaraderie and affection that pervaded the entire campus. These were not covert attempts to experience a forbidden eroticism; they were examples of a deep spiritual yearning for companionship shared by most students of the college. It is true that Dodd and Sheffield both worried on occasion that their relationships had become unhealthy, but it was generally the nature and strength of these relationships that concerned them, rather than the fact that their feelings were for a man. It is also true that their intimacy often manifested itself in physical ways, yet such physicality never caused them to question their masculinity. Their intimacy, both emotional and physical, was a culmination of the close relationships

common to many Yale students, rather than a satisfaction of their peculiar sexual desires. They indeed recognized that their relationships were unique, but they believed that this uniqueness was part and parcel of the distinctive honor and obligation of being a Yale man.

During the years Albert Dodd and Edward Sheffield attended Yale, a well-worn fence ran along the corner of Chapel and College Streets. This was a favorite gathering place of students, a spot where “on pleasant days, for an hour or two after dinner and supper, crowds of undergraduates [would] perch themselves, and smoke, chat, laugh and sing together.”<sup>113</sup> Photographs of nineteenth-century Yale men sitting side by side on the fence, sometimes with their arms around one another or leaning against each other for support, decorate the Yale campus of the twenty-first century. When looking at these images, it is easy to think of the boys’ experiences at college, precariously perched between youth and manhood, holding on to one another in acts of support, companionship, and even love. They trod the fine line between friendship and something even closer, and in the process did their part to continue the meaningful tradition of intimacy at Yale.

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<sup>113</sup> Kelley, 227.

## Sources

Last summer, while deciding on a senior essay topic, I was torn between two subjects that interested me greatly: Yale University and gay and lesbian history. My solution, more or less, was to combine them, and I initially phrased my research topic as “the history of homosexuality at Yale.” I believed that such a topic would be catchy, sexy, and possibly even sensationalist. I searched the internet to see if a book or article had already been written about homosexuality specifically at Yale, and the first site I found was the online exhibition of “The Pink and the Blue: Lesbian and Gay Life at Yale and in Connecticut, 1642-2004,” which had been on display at Yale in 2004. The site convinced me that there were indeed a number of primary sources about homosexuality at Yale. It also offered a challenge (“the evidence here can be amplified and analyzed in dozens of undergraduate term papers”), one which I eagerly took up.

When I returned to campus, I talked with Bill Massa, the head of Collection Development at Manuscripts and Archives in the Yale Library, and he was extremely helpful in pointing me to my primary sources: the diaries of Albert Dodd and Edward Sheffield, as well as the letters of Gideon Welch. Welch’s accounts were of critical importance because, as a student not known for his intimacy with other students, he provided a third opinion to place the other two sources in context. Bill Massa also suggested a few secondary works, most valuable of which was *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality* by Jonathan Ned Katz, who had been the curator of “The Pink and the Blue” exhibit. In his book, Katz argues that men in the nineteenth century pioneered the construction of modern sexual love. While trying to find words for their emotions, they also struggled over their ideas and values concerning sexuality, expanding their understanding of what constituted sex itself. The book served as an excellent introduction to intimate relationships between men in the nineteenth century. More importantly, it convinced me that context was crucial in judging same-sex relationships, an idea that became central to my paper. Katz argues that sexuality and the words and ideas used to describe it were products of the time period, and stressed that the emotional and sexual world of the nineteenth century was distinct from our own. The bibliography of Katz’ book also served as a helpful starting point for locating other relevant sources. A chapter in *Love Stories*, as well as an article in *Gay & Lesbian Review* by Sarah Hammond, were particularly helpful in pointing me to important passages in the diaries of Sheffield and Dodd. I often found, however, that I had a slightly different interpretation of these passages when I read them for myself in the diaries, further demonstrating the importance of context in understanding same-sex relationships.

At the same time, I bought a copy of *Yale: A History*, by Brooks Mather Kelley, which provided a broad overview of the history of the university, from its founding as a small Christian college to its rise as a national institution. The book provided a context for the letters and diaries I was coming across in Manuscripts and Archives. It described the academics, social dynamics, and backgrounds of many of the students and teachers, highlighting the particularly contentious issues of the time. The book helped to illuminate the fact that, until the end of the nineteenth century, Yale College operated on a relatively small scale, with only a few hundred students, so that the atmosphere on campus was highly intimate. Each student knew everyone else by name (and would write page-long dedications to every student in his class at the end of the year) and was intensely conscious of the young men around him. The book did not discuss specific relationships between men, but it did allow me to get a general sense of the “feel” of the campus.

Around this time, I began to realize that “The History of Homosexuality at Yale” may have been an inaccurate title, since in my hours of delving through the diaries in MSSA, I had

not found any references to sex (I must admit – when I first approached the diaries, I imagined it was going to be like reading juicy romance novels. I could not have been more wrong!). In order to gain a better understanding of intimacy between men in the nineteenth century, I read numerous articles and essays in compilations of Gay and Lesbian History. I owe much to the efforts of Martin Duberman in compiling some of the most thought-provoking articles into single volumes. *A Queer World, Hidden from History*, and *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past* were especially helpful in offering a wide variety of scholarly works. In *A Queer World*, I once again found Jonathan Ned Katz' contribution, "Coming to Terms," particularly helpful. Katz focuses on the specific historical names for same-sex love, the ideas and judgments surrounding it, and its social configurations. His essay demonstrated that language was extremely important in determining the moral value and judgments made about same-sex relationships, an idea that largely shaped my decision to closely examine the specific words and phrases the Yale students chose in their diaries. In *Hidden from History*, Robert Martin's contribution, "Knights-Errant and Gothic Seducers," helped to demonstrate the role of literature in shaping the public perception of physical intimacy between men. Finally, the article in *About Time* by Duberman himself, "Writhing Bedfellows," taught me not to downplay the importance of erotic overtones in same-sex relationships. His stories demonstrated that the inappropriate and sexual allusions made by youths of the nineteenth century were a fundamental part of their "chumminess."

Professor George Chauncey's book, *Gay New York*, though focusing primarily on the twentieth century, revealed that many of the ideas and customs we commonly associate with homosexuality in fact did not develop until after the period I was studying, teaching me to exercise caution when forming conclusions about the relationships between Yale students. Professor Chauncey's class, "U.S. Lesbian and Gay History," was also valuable in guiding me to two short but profoundly relevant essays, Anthony Rotundo's "Romantic Friendship," and David Halperin's "How to do the History of Male Homosexuality." Rotundo's subject closely mirrored my own. He examines the intimate relationships between boys of the nineteenth century, such as Daniel Webster and James Bingham, James Blake and Wyck Vanderhoef, and even Albert Dodd and John Heath. Rotundo explains that in these friendships, sexual boundaries could be blurred. During youth, young men often used other men as emotional substitutes for women, though most of them eventually did go on to marry. Rotundo's argument is that bed-sharing and romantic friendships were extremely common in nineteenth-century America and provided a basis for relationships later in life.

Halperin's essay struck me as one of the most insightful and nuanced analyses I had read on the subject of male friendships. In his crystal-clear prose, he separates the modern concept of "homosexuality" into four historical categories: effeminacy, pederasty, friendship or male love, and inversion. His thoughts on friendship made me realize the importance of equality and reciprocity in evaluating male intimacy and helped me to approach the primary sources with a more nuanced outlook. George Haggerty's book, *Men in Love*, drew my attention to implications of class and education in shaping the feelings of men on their mutual dependency. He also argues that the idea of "love" better captures these relationships than "friendship," an idea I found particularly illuminating for the men of Yale College. Randolph Trumbach's essay, "Gender and the Homosexual Role in Modern Western Culture," in its insightful analysis of the different stigmas surrounding sodomy over the past few centuries, allowed me to contrast relationships between "sodomites" with the romantic friendships of Yale men. In the end, my research came full circle, returning to "The Pink and the Blue" in order to critique it, though it was the exhibit that inspired me to tackle my topic in the first place, and for that I am extremely grateful.



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