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Rereading *I libri della famiglia*: Leon Battista Alberti on Marriage, *Amicizia* and Conjugal Friendship*

Amyrose McCue Gill

*Puossi l'amor tra moglie e marito riputar grandissimo...
a quella unione la quale si dice essere vera amicizia.
Non mi stendo in raccontare quanta utilità si tragga da questa coniugale amicizia.*¹
--Leon Battista Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*

Over the past half-century, sources as diverse as paintings, wills, *novelle*, tax and dowry records, treatises, trial documents and *zibaldoni* have been used productively to build a historical model of early modern marriage that emphasizes the politics and economics of marriage alliances as well as the patriarchal line, employing the language and attributes of kinship to look beyond affective bonds and subjective experience in search of broader social implications.² This model indicates that middle- and upper-class marriages, especially in Renaissance Florence, were carefully controlled by families with little concern for individual desires; that daughters (as potential brides, wives and widows) were successfully subjugated by the patriarchal structures of the family; that the betrothal of young girls to much older men resulted in emotional coolness and a decided lack of intimate contact between spouses.³

* Though all errors herein remain my own, thanks are due Steven Botterill, Maureen C. Miller, and especially Albert R. Ascoli and Deanna Shemek for their comments on the dissertation chapter from which this article emerged. I am also grateful to the attendees and participants in the "Friendship in the Renaissance" panels presented at the March 2009 Renaissance Society of America conference, many of whom – in particular Dale Kent, Reinier Leushuis and Marc Schachter – asked provocative questions about *I libri della famiglia* and shared shrewd insights regarding fifteenth-century friendship. To William J. Kennedy, for inviting me to speak, as well as to those in attendance at the April 2009 Cornell Renaissance Colloquium, my thanks for fruitful conversation and constructive suggestions regarding an earlier version of this article. Finally, I am indebted to John M. Najemy, who not only contributed keen observations at this event, but also commented in detail on a later draft.

¹ (Alberti 1994, 93 [2004, 98: "We may consider the love of husband and wife greatest of all.... This is a union, indeed, which one may well call true friendship. I will not lengthen my discourse by describing all the advantages stemming from this conjugal friendship"]).

² The seminal work published in the 1960s and 1970s by Philippe Ariès, Georges Duby and Lawrence Stone on France and England directed the scholarly attention of many historians towards kinship relations, providing the framework for subsequent discussions of the medieval and Renaissance family, including the highly influential work of Christiane Klapisch-Zuber as well as studies by Samuel K. Cohn, Diane Owen Hughes and Anthony Molho in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, as indicated in the introduction to *Marriage in Italy, 1350-1600* (Dean and Lowe 1998), a growing interest in female agency, individual choice and spousal companionship was focusing a different kind of scholarly attention on the conjugal state. This historiographical trend was initiated by Gene Brucker and David Herlihy, among others, and it continues to the present day.

³ These particular aspects of the "darker side" of Florentine marriage and female experience are exposed and explored in Cohn (1996); Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber (1978); Klapich-Zuber (1985).

One of the texts most commonly used to illustrate this model of Renaissance marriage is *I libri della famiglia*, a four-book dialogue on the family which was composed by the Florentine humanist Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) during the 1430s.⁴ In particular, the best known of the four books (*Liber tertius familie: Economicus*, or *The Third Book of the Family: Household Management*) has long been read as “a direct transcription of contemporary merchant capitalist ideology” and thus as an important source for the study of women, marriage and the family in fifteenth-century mercantile Florence – one which paints a vivid picture of the relationship between Giannozzo, a successful Alberti patriarch *da imitare*, and his suitably malleable (and nameless) young wife. As Carla Freccero indicates, however, Alberti’s text cannot be read transparently: on the contrary it is “nostalgic,” “anxious,” and “defensive” – “a text engaged in the fiction of the domestic,” not in any putative historical reality (1991, 196 n. 10). By employing the genre of dialogue rather than a more prescriptive form such as the treatise, Alberti consciously disallows single-minded readings of his text, which ends without ever presenting a single cohesive understanding of the problems it explores (Najemy 2008, 135-152; also 2002, 51-78).⁵ Instead of coming to clear conclusions, *I libri* requires its interlocutors and its readers to grapple continuously with questions that have no definite answers: What is the best kind of love? Is friendship or kinship the most powerful human bond? Are friends to be trusted or treated with caution? What is marriage and what is its relationship to love? To the family? To household management? To friendship? Conclusive answers to these questions never appear. Rather than building towards consensus or a final authorial verdict, *I libri* leaves interlocutors unconvinced and issues unresolved, especially with regards to two of the dialogue’s most pressing *topoi*: marriage and friendship.

As we shall see, it is for good reason and with productive results that most scholarship to date has focused on the third book of *I Libri* as the principal source for Alberti’s thoughts on marriage, while it is of course fourth and final book – entitled *De amicitia (Concerning Friendship)* – that contains Alberti’s most extended statement on friendship. In focusing simultaneously upon the interrelated themes of marriage and friendship in *I libri*, however, this essay seeks to examine Alberti’s dialogue as a whole. It is over the course of entire dialogue (in nooks and crannies not only found in the final two books) that marriage and friendship repeatedly come together and draw apart, emerging and receding against a backdrop of broad concern for the successful family as a social, economic and affective unit. On the one hand, the repeated linking of these two central themes in *I libri* is surprising: the notion that friendship exists only among good men – never women – can be traced back to the writings of Cicero and Plato, and dominated late medieval and early modern Christian treatises, in which real and ideal friendships are often situated in same-sex monastic communities.⁶ On the other hand, concepts of friendship have regularly been associated with the conjugal state, if at times uneasily, in the writings of both secular and sacred authors beginning with Aristotle and

⁴ On Alberti’s life and work, see Boschetto (2000). On the earliest manuscripts and printed editions of *I libri della famiglia*, see Grayson (1998). On Alberti’s library and works likely to have influenced his dialogue on the family, see Cardini (2005).

⁵ On the Renaissance dialogue as genre, see Cox (1992); Snyder (1989).

⁶ See, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux, Aelred of Rievaulx, and William of St. Thierry (1983); on Bernard’s reputation in the Middle Ages and beyond, see Botterill (1994).

Augustine (Aristotle 1984, Books VIII-IX; Augustine 2001, 1-64; Cicero 2006; Plato 2001; Pomeroy 1994). A wide range of this ancient and medieval literature deeply influenced Renaissance representations of marriage, which were concerned with implications both worldly and divine, and which raised many questions about the positive potential for (and the risks associated with) exploiting the conceptual resonances between these two human bonds.

Like many of his predecessors, Alberti found friendship to be a particularly useful way of thinking about several kinds of social relations, including marriage.⁷ In the context of fifteenth-century Italy, the bond between friends captures the political and economic elements of the legal and social contract required by the institution of marriage without sacrificing the emotional and erotic overtones of intimate interpersonal relationships such as those between husbands and wives. It is precisely this multivalence – *amicitia* as social contract and *amicitia* as mutual love⁸ – which makes friendship a flexible conceptual tool for current studies of Renaissance marriage, and which explains its presence in so much fifteenth-century writing on the conjugal state.⁹ Before undertaking a rereading of Alberti's dialogue with an eye to how friendship comes to illuminate *I libri's* conception(s) of the conjugal state, however, a short summary of this complex text is in order. Within the context of the dialogue, the ostensible impetus for speaking about family affairs is the familiar and familial education of the two youngest Alberti boys, (Leon) Battista and his "younger" brother Carlo (Carlo was in fact the older of the two), who await, with the rest of the family at hand, their father Lorenzo's death in May of 1421 (Watkins 2004, 9).¹⁰

The first book of the dialogue, *Liber primus familie: De officio senum erga iuvenes et minorum erga maiores et de educandis liberis* (The First Book of the Family: Concerning the Duties of the Old towards the Young and of the Young towards Their

⁷ Scholars today apparently concur, since recent studies of early modern friendship abound. It is worth noting, however, that male-female friendship – whether outside or, especially, within the context of marriage – still remains largely neglected. Important exceptions include several articles in Lochman (2011) – in particular Furey (2011). See also James (2008, 4-18); Leushuis (2003). For general discussions of medieval and Renaissance friendship, see Haseldine (1999); Hyatte (1994); Kelly and Rosemann (2004); Langer (1994). On male friendship, see Bray (2003); Kent (2009); Najemy (1993); Rocke (1996); Schachter (2008). On female friendship, see Faderman (1981); see also the invaluable bibliography on friendship and friendship theory provided in Anderson (2010).

⁸ Stephen Campbell's recent study of Isabella d'Este's *studiolo* draws attention to mutual love as figured in the image of the Anteros, "the lover, aider, and abettor of Eros," around the turn of the Cinquecento. By uncovering the identity of this mythological character, who had falsely, Campbell argues, been equated with Anti-Eros, "the opponent of Eros who...makes war against luxury and sensuality," Campbell emphasizes the link between mutual love and friendship in the iconographical program of the *studiolo* (2006, 70).

⁹ Fifteenth-century instances of the foregrounding of friendship as the ideal spousal bond appear in Barbaro (1987); Bernardino da Siena (1989, "Predica XIX"); Cherubino (1888). On Cherubino, see McCue Gill (2009b). The letters of Laura Cereta (1469-1499) and Isabella d'Este (1474-1529) addressed to and about their husbands reflect a like interest in marriages which function as friendships. On Cereta, see McCue Gill (2009a).

¹⁰ Alberti's membership in the great and ancient Alberti family was fraught with insecurity because of his illegitimacy and his father's early death. Indeed, the dialogue is full of references to the whims of both fortune and family and is replete with not-so-subtle hints of Alberti's double (and contradictory) goal: simultaneously to praise and to reprimand the Alberti men for their treatment of kin (namely Leon Battista himself). Alberti is also concerned with demonstrating his worth as a fully-fledged member of the family: *I libri* are a contribution designed to testify conclusively to his erudition and personal honor.

Elders and Concerning the Education of Children), opens with words from the dying Lorenzo to Adovardo, a senior family man with a wife and four children, who expounds upon the power of paternal love and is questioned closely about the education of youth by Lionardo, a young but learned bachelor (Watkins 2004, 9). The second book, *De re uxoria* (Concerning Wifely Things), pairs the scholar Lionardo with the even younger Battista (Leon Battista's *alter ego*) in what begins as a discussion comparing erotic love (*innamoramento*), honorable love (*amicizia*) and the love of kin (*amore paterno e fraterno*) (1994, 100), and then becomes a conversation regarding the importance of marriage, the choosing of a wife and the conception and rearing of children. The third book is based on a version of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (composed ca. 362 BCE)¹¹ and is narrated by the elderly Giannozzo, an eminently experienced – if uneducated – paragon of practicality. In this most-quoted section of the dialogue, Giannozzo enumerates the four domestic needs of the *paterfamilias* (family, riches, honor and friendship) and explains how these needs must be met and maintained through the appropriate division of labor within the household, as well as through the careful cultivation of people and resources outside it. The final book (composed several years after the first three) begins with a servant's snide comments about marriage, friendship and learning before yielding the floor to Piero Alberti, another family elder who illustrates Aristotle's three kinds of friendship (in decreasing order of value from good to pleasurable and, finally, utilitarian; see Aristotle 1994, VIII.i-iv) by describing his personal friendships with, respectively, the Duke of Milan, the King of Naples and the Pope. The remainder of the book is dedicated to the practicalities of acquiring and maintaining friends, dissolving friendships when necessary, and dealing with dreaded enmity.

Marriage as a Burden

The subject of marriage is first broached in Book I of *I libri della famiglia*, when the mature married man Adovardo expresses his desire that the young bachelor Lionardo take a wife. Though himself unmarried, Lionardo defines the conjugal relationship as the foundation of society: “la società [è] costituita da essa primeva natura, la procreazione de' successori eredi, l'accrescimento e amplificazione della famiglia” (1994, 36 [2004, 52: Society tak[es] its origin from this primeval institution, the procreation of a line of hereditary succession, the growth and increase of the family]). In essence, Lionardo claims, marriage does precisely what Adovardo hopes it will do, namely abundantly increase the family. Even so, Lionardo remains unmoved by his elder's pleas that he marry until the last few lines of the first book, when Adovardo reminds the youth that he must take a wife in order that he and the other Alberti youth might have both “compagna e figliuoli....così di figliuoli simili a te riempiessi e aggrandissi la famiglia Alberta” (1994,

¹¹ For a bilingual text of the *Oeconomicus* as well as extensive commentary on the treatise and its social context see Pomeroy (1994). Pomeroy argues that although Alberti was familiar with Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (indeed, he owned a Latin translation of the text), Book III of *I libri della famiglia* was based, instead, on an early adaptation of Xenophon's text, the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica*, which Alberti owned in Leonardo Bruni's Latin translation. For a detailed description of the transmission history of the *Oeconomicus*, see *ibid.*, 68-90. For a brief discussion of the importance of Xenophon to Book III of *I libri*, see Freccero (1991).

84; A female companion and children....so that you fill and enlarge the Alberti family with children like you; translation mine). Although Lionardo seems at last to acquiesce to Adovardo's parental demands, his response is not particularly genteel, and we learn by the if-statement at the end of his speech – and the smiles that follow it – that he in fact remains unconvinced:

Ma tutta l'astuzia grande è stata tua, che biasimandomi l'avere figliuoli, tu hai condottomi ch'io ho gittato e perduto ogni mia antica scusa al non tôr moglie, né ora m'è rimasto con che più potere schifare questa molestia. Sono contento, Adovardo, poiché sî me hai convinto, a te stia licenza e arbitrio ove ti parerà d'amogliarmi. Ma sappi che a te starà debito rendermi opera. S'io a te ho levato dell'animo quelle malinconie quali dicevi essere a' padri, tu così inverso di me procurerai non mi caricare di guai e di continua recadia, la qual cosa dubito non mi sarà facile né ben licito fuggire, s'io per contentarti seguirò el tuo consiglio in farmi marito (1994, 84-85)

(But all the cunning was yours, for you spoke to me against having children, and led me to throw away and give up all my old excuses for not taking a wife. I am left with no excuse to avoid this nuisance. I am willing, Adovardo, since you have thus convinced me, that you should have the freedom and discretion to choose me a wife wherever you think wise. Do realize, however, that you owe me a labor in return for what I have done. If I have lifted from your mind the troubles you said beset a father, you likewise should arrange for me to be free of anxiety and continual strife. These, if I follow your advice and get married, I am afraid will not be easy to escape.) (2004, 91)

Having stressed the importance of marriage as the foundation of both family and society earlier in Book I, here Lionardo instead emphasizes the inescapable nature (“non mi sarà facile né ben licito fuggire”) and weight (“caricare”) of marriage, its woes (“guai”) and the unending torment (“continua recadia”) of an individual husband.

Lionardo's words against marriage are not particularly well-informed, however: he is rebuked several times throughout Book I for speaking without experience. Immediately before making his final plea in favour of marriage to the reluctant youth, for instance, Adovardo states that Lionardo's arguments will be more convincing when they have experience to back them up: “Più mi piacerà se io vederò che tu dia modo di tutte queste cose come con suttilissimi argomenti così ancora per lunga pruova poterne ragionare” (1994, 84).¹² Towards the end of Alberti's dialogue, however, an experienced man does appear on the scene who also has much, and little of it good, to say about marriage.

¹² “I shall like this still better if I see you supporting your view of all these things not only with most subtle arguments but also with the wisdom of experience” (2004, 90). Adovardo's previous rebuke is also linked to his desire for Lionardo to marry: “A me sarebbe molto caro tu, come in parte so io, per pruova sapessi

At the beginning of Book IV, the lowly Buto (an Alberti family servant), paints his own marriage in a negative light by exclaiming, in his simple but colorful language,

Giurovi, me la donna mia più molto amava prima vergine che poi sposata e coniunta; e in ora non buona per noi coniunti che noi fummo, persino che ella fu meco in vita, mai m'occorse una sola mezza ora in quale mi fosse lecito sederli presso senza udirla gridarmi e accanirmi garrendo. Forse que' vostri savii, quali scrissero quelle belle cose dell'amicizia, poco si curavano in quella parte amicarsi femmine, o forse così a tutti stimorono essere noto che con femmina si può non mai contrarre certa amicizia. E quanto io, oggidì più che allora savio, non ne gli biasimerei, ché certo quel fastidio loro, hau! pur troppo è grande, che mai si possono atutare. E non che un moggio di sale, ma e venti, così mi aiuti Dio, ivi non punto sarebbero assai. So io, la donna mia quanto più mangiava sale più era da ogni parte sciocca (1994, 279)

(I swear to you that my wife loved me much more when she was a virgin than when she was married and joined to me. After the accursed moment when we were joined together, for as long as she lived I was never able to sit near her for half an hour without hearing her nag and shout at me. Perhaps those learned men of yours who wrote those beautiful things about friendship did not care to have women as friends, or perhaps they thought everyone knew you cannot have true friendship with a woman. Personally, I should not blame them, for I am wiser now [since their particular nuisance, hau! is unfortunately large, so that they can never calm themselves]. As for that measure of salt or common sense, twenty times as much would not be sufficient, God help me! I know what I am saying; the more salt my wife ate, the more stupid she became.) (1971, 258)

Momentarily leaving aside both the radical change in Buto's new wife – or, perhaps more accurately, in her opinion of him – and his virulent attack against friendship with women, let us first examine this passage with respect to the intriguing phrase “certo quel fastidio loro” and ask why it should make Buto exclaim “hau!” merely to mention it? Although he only uses the word *fastidio* once, there appear to be several *fastidi* in Buto's account of his marriage. The first is his nagging wife, who simply will not leave him in peace even for half an hour: “Mai m'occorse una sola mezza ora in quale mi fosse lecito

ragionarne. Ben mi duole di voi non pochi giovani Alberti, e' quali vi trovate senza eredi, senza avere quanto potresti accresciuta la famiglia e fattola molto popolosa” (1994, 34 [2004, 50: I should be most pleased if you, like me, could partly base your thinking about it on experience. It grieves me to see so many of you younger Albertis without an heir, not having done what you could to increase the family and make it numerous]).

sederli presso senza udirla gridarmi e accanirmi garrendo.” The second *fastidio* refers to an entirely new nuisance: “E quanto io, oggidì più che allora savio, non ne gli biasimerei, ché *certo quel fastidio loro*, hau! pur troppo è grande, che mai si possono atutare” (emphasis added). Rather than explicitly calling his wife a *fastidio*, as Watkins and Guarino imply,¹³ Buto is not speaking of a bother to himself at all. Instead, Alberti here employs an ambiguous possessive referring to one (or both) of the two third-person plural nouns in the preceding sentence, namely *savii* (wise men) or *femmine* (women), leaving the question open as to whether women inflict or suffer this *fastidio*.

The indefinite nature of Alberti’s language allows us to contemplate both possibilities. Perhaps Buto is arguing that it is wise men who are bothered by an unnamed *fastidio*, who cannot be blamed for “the annoyance they certainly do give” and who never “shut up.” This reading of Buto’s speech fits well with his final words on the subject – “Pertanto vi consiglio, credete meno a questi vostri che sanno dire bello, ma cose inutili” (1994, 279 [2004, 247: So here’s my advice to you, don’t put too much faith in the words of [these men of yours] who speak beautifully but to no useful end]) – as well as with his status in the dialogue as an uneducated servant. On the other hand, if we read Buto’s words on wise men and female friendship as an aside (as do both Watkins and Guarino), “certo quel fastidio loro” might well refer instead to the *fastidio* endured by *femmine* in general, and by his wife in particular. Working from this latter interpretation, we might ask precisely what “women’s nuisance” is. Put in such terms, it sounds like a euphemism for menstruation or childbirth; indeed Alberti’s choice of the verb *atutarsi* (“to calm or control oneself”) might imply that Buto, who gains rational knowledge of women and their secrets only after his marriage – “più che *allora* savio” (emphasis added) – cannot blame women for their actions because they are under the powerful control of nature and the body. Without straying too far from Buto’s own words, however, we might instead interpret “women’s nuisance” as their immense stupidity, about which Buto does not mince his words: “E non che un moggio di sale, ma e venti, così mi aiuti Dio, ivi non punto sarebbero assai. So io, la donna mia quanto più mangiava sale più era da ogni parte sciocca.”¹⁴

Despite Buto’s claim to wisdom and his contrasting depiction of women as particularly stupid, there is yet another possibility: the third *fastidio* in Buto’s tirade could well be Buto himself. Why else, we might ask, should a pleasant virgin girl become an

¹³ These are the two translations: “I don’t blame women anymore for the annoyance they certainly do give” (Alberti 2004, 247); “I am wiser now and know that women are real pests; you can never shut them up” (Alberti 1971, 258).

¹⁴ Buto’s use of the word “sale” (salt) in this passage echoes Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VIII.iii, discussed below) and Aristotelian Cicero (*De Amicitia*, XIX.67), who point to the eating of salt as a means of coming to perfect friendship; Buto’s words thus serve to reinforce the notion that friendship with women is impossible. In her translation of the passage, Watkins points to the Italian expression “dolce di sale,” meaning “dimwit,” as another source (2004, 247); this reading would have Buto doubly insisting upon his wife’s lack of intelligence. Guarino writes an interpretation with similar implications into his version by translating “moggio di sale” as “that measure of salt or *common sense*” (1971, 258; emphasis added). If we read the term “salt” intratextually, we find that the only other place in which it appears is in the (Book III) context of household management (1994, 207). Perhaps Buto is additionally suggesting that his wife is a failure in her role as household manager: no matter what he provides her – even twenty times over – she absorbs it with no profit to him, to the family or even to herself. My thanks to Michelle Marie Carroll, John M. Najemy and Scott Lerner for fruitfully connecting this passage to Aristotle, Cicero and Book III of *I libri*.

obsessive, nagging wife if not from provocation? Perhaps part of what makes Buto so clownish – “quel ridicolo” (as he is described by his indulgent patrons: 1994, 299) – is his claim to wisdom despite his obvious servantly ignorance. If his wife nags him as much as he says she does, the amused and knowledgeable Alberti may be thinking, clearly his ignorance even encompasses knowledge about appropriate husbandly behaviour.

The division of labor within the household, and the distinctions between male and female gender roles are both central themes of Alberti’s entire dialogue. Over the course of the four books, the wealthy upper-class Alberti family demonstrates time and time again that it possesses the theoretical knowledge necessary to run a family smoothly and that it knows, moreover, how to practically employ such knowledge to great effect. Nowhere is the difference between Buto’s lack of knowledge and the Albertis’ powerful epistemological combination of theory and experience more obvious than in a comparison between the senior Alberti Giannozzo’s perfect wife of Book III, and the lowly servant Buto’s disastrous life partner. Perhaps, then, at least from the perspective of the Alberti, both Buto and his wife are *sciocchi*, and Buto’s failure to recognize his own lack of knowledge is thus the ultimate cause both of his poor wife’s continual nagging and of the Alberti’s knowing laughter.

Though he is a valued and faithful servant, Buto’s description of his own marriage reveals that he is entirely ignorant of the most important knowledge Alberti’s text has to offer, knowledge that separates servant from master and successful family man from fool. It is for this reason – class difference – that Buto is referred to as “ridicolo e buono artefice di motteggiare” (1994, 278 [A funny man and one good at the art of jesting; translation mine]), and why his words provoke the laughter of the others: “A Ricciardo, Adovardo e Lionardo, uomini litteratissimi, questi e molti altri ridiculi, quali con assai risi di tutti e con gesti accomodatissimi Buto avea dolce recitati, furono grati” (1994, 279 [2004, 247: Ricciardo, Adovardo, and Lionardo, who were all well-educated men, thoroughly enjoyed these and other absurdities which Buto uttered amusingly and with appropriate gestures. He made them all laugh]). Although a foolish servant is particularly worthy of the interlocutors’ laughter, it is worth noting that Buto’s words about the trials of married life and Lionardo’s half-serious refusals to marry are always accompanied by smiles or laughter.

Marriage as Procreation; Marriage as Companionship

If Lionardo’s and Buto’s representations of married life are interpreted as humorous by the dialogue’s participants, we might ask what responses the other representations of marriage in *I libri* inspire. Are there any accounts of marriage in the dialogue that are taken seriously by the interlocutors? Is marriage necessarily a heavy burden, as Lionardo and Buto claim, or can it also lighten the load imposed on husband and wife should they practice expert household management (as Giannozzo outlines in Book III) or enjoy sympathetic spousal companionship (as Adovardo suggests in Book I)? As we have already seen, Lionardo describes marriage as “la società costituita da essa primeva natura, la procreazione de’ successori eredi, l’accrescimento e amplificazione della

famiglia” (1994, 36). This definition recalls Aristotle’s emphasis on marriage as the natural foundation of all society (1984, VIII.xii), but Lionardo’s attention (like that of Book I as a whole, which explores the relationship between father and sons) is fixed on marriage as the procreative engine which bountifully increases the family. In other words, Lionardo’s understanding of marriage in Book I is limited, or at least he chooses to ignore wise Adovardo’s insistence upon another vital aspect of the conjugal bond.

The very first mention of a wife in the dialogue is uttered by Adovardo, who mourns the fact that the majority of Alberti youths live not only without sons but “*solì senza compagna, non aver moglie*” (1994, 34 [Alone, without a companion, not having a wife; translation mine]). The notion of wife as *compagna* (and not exclusively as mother) comes to the fore in the second and third books of the dialogue.¹⁵ It is Lionardo himself in the second book who, having relinquished his subordinate role, takes the place of the wise elder and, using Adovardo’s words, makes this dual purpose of marriage explicit: “E stiagli l’animo a prendere moglie per due cagioni: la prima per stendersi in figliuoli, l’altra per avere compagna in tutta la vita ferma e stabile” (1994, 115 [2004, 115: Let him be minded to marry for two purposes: first to perpetuate himself in his children, and second to have a steady and constant companion all his life]). If children and companionship are indeed the two main goals of marriage, then it is worth noting that the Lionardo of Book I’s (mis)understanding of marriage is focused exclusively upon heirs (even in the face of Adovardo’s insistence upon companionship as equally important) while Buto’s marriage fails because of his wife’s continual nagging and cantankerous stupidity as well as his own lack of knowledge. In other words, each interlocutor exemplifies one of the two principal ways in which marriage – defined as the natural locus of procreation and male-female companionship – may fail: Lionardo has no *figliuoli* whereas Buto lacks a *compagna*.

Alberti’s choice of the word *compagna* (companion) – and, at times, *compagnia* (1994, 110-112) – to describe a wife and her companionship is significant. Originating from the Latin *cum panis*, the Italian *compagno/a* means “con pane,” or “one with whom bread is shared.” Thus are companionship and friendship first linked by *I libri*: in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle emphasizes the importance of eating together – sharing salt – as a means of coming to perfect friendship (1984, VIII.iii). In fifteenth-century Italian, *amico* and *compagno* have similar connotations, implying co-habitation, familiarity, and alliance. The medieval *compagnia*, moreover, was an association of citizens for purposes of defence and mutual protection; *compagnia* could also describe a *corporazione* or *consorteria*, terms which once again stress the social bonds among kin, friends and allies which medieval marriages were designed to initiate, maintain and solidify.

Companionship, like friendship, is a powerful term for Alberti – and thus one worth careful consideration by his readers – in part because its connotations coincide with those of marriage, the interpersonal bond at the root of both family and society in *I libri*. By

¹⁵ Alberti’s text describes women almost exclusively in relation to men: as, for example, *madre* (mother), *compagna* (companion) or *moglie* (wife). In *I libri della famiglia*, the term *compagna* is not restricted to women, however; husbands are also referred to as *compagni*. The notion of husbands and wives as companions was a common *topos* in Europe during the late Middle Ages. On this tradition in thirteenth-century France, see Kooper (1991). For a historical perspective on gender roles emphasizing male control and female negotiation in Renaissance society, see Zarri (2000).

means of its close association with the term *compagnia*, companionship suggests financial and political alliance between families: the chief social impetus behind fifteenth-century marriage (and thereby the primary mode of discussing Renaissance marriage in modern historical scholarship). Within the context of *I libri della famiglia*, as we shall see, companionship also implies partnership between members of the household as an economic unit, a notion which is central to Giannozzo's representation of married life in Book III; in addition, it signifies the affective, friendship-like bond between individuals which is foregrounded in Battista's Book II tribute to conjugal love.

Marriage as Partnership

If one of the recurring claims in Alberti's dialogue is that the spousal bond exists in order to produce children and to provide both wife and husband with a companion, it is in Book III that the relationship of each companion to the other is most thoroughly discussed. As noted above, Giannozzo's Xenophonian description of ideal married life, good management of the household, and the appropriate (gendered) division of labor is one of the best known parts of the dialogue, and is also one of the most influential descriptions of (ideal) Renaissance marriage for the purposes of scholarship in our own time. This section of the dialogue is known at least in part because of its misogynous tone (both Giannozzo – the practical elder – and his partner in conversation, Lionardo – once again representing learned yet inexperienced youth – pepper their speeches with misogynistic statements),¹⁶ yet over the course of the book Giannozzo develops the term *compagna* from a theoretical ideal, proposed by Adovardo in Book I, to refer to a wife who, if still highly idealized, has a concrete and specific role in household management.

Once Lionardo and Giannozzo have discussed the importance of thrift, defined the family, and described the ideal estate, Giannozzo begins to explain the way in which he set about instructing his new wife in the conjugal relationship and her role within it. Repeating back to Lionardo what he had told his wife years earlier, he first compares husband and wife to a pair of guards dutifully defending their city at night:

Se forse di loro qualcuno s'adormenta, costui non ha per male se 'l
compagno lo desta a fare il debito suo quanto sia utile alla patria, io, donna

¹⁶ Lionardo's and Giannozzo's comments about the slowness, untrustworthiness and stupidity of women rehearse a standard misogynous repertoire. Nonetheless, in the context of Book III, many of the 'negative' (by some standards) qualities attributed to women are in fact precisely what make women perfectly well-suited to their task of preserving the goods of the household: we are informed that their emotional fragility makes them nurturing mothers, for example, while their physical weakness makes them ideal candidates for quiet indoor living. Once again, Aristotelian biology intrudes into the social phenomenon of household management, thus making Giannozzo's division of labor both "natural" and necessary, relying as it does on the inherent qualities of men and women. This is, of course, a commonplace in (Aristotelian) Renaissance thought: as Thomas Laqueur writes of Aristotle and the *Economics*, "One sex is strong and the other weak so that one may be cautious and the other brave in warding off attacks, one may go out and acquire possessions and the other stay home to preserve them, and so on. In other words, both the division of labor and the specific assignment of roles are natural" (1990, 30).

mia, molto arò per bene, se tu mai vedrai in me mancamento alcuno, me n'avisi, imperoché a quello modo conoscerò quanto l'onore nostro, l'utilità nostra e il bene de' figliuoli nostri ti sia a mente; così a te non spiacerà se io te desterò dove bisogni. In quello che io mancassi supplisci tu, e così insieme cercheremo vincere l'uno l'altro d'amore e diligenza. Questa roba, questa famiglia, e i figliuoli che nasceranno sono nostri, così tuoi come miei, così miei come tuoi. Però qui a noi sta debito pensare non quanto ciascuno di noi ci portò, ma in che modo noi possiamo bene mantenere quello che sia dell'uno e dell'altro. Io procurerò di fuori che tu qui abbia in casa ciò che bisogni; tu provvedi nulla s'adoperi male (1994, 235)

(If one of them, by chance, falls asleep, he does not take it amiss for his companion to wake him up that he may do his duty for his country. Likewise, my dear wife, if you ever see any fault in me, I shall be very grateful to you for letting me know. In that way I shall know that our honor and our welfare and the good of our children are dear to your heart. Likewise be not displeased if I awaken you when there is need. Where I am lacking, you shall make it good, and so together we shall try to surpass each other in love and in zeal. This property, this family, and the children to be born to us will belong to us both, to you as much as to me, to me as much as to you. It behooves us, therefore, not to think how much each of us has brought into our marriage, but how we can best maintain all that belongs to both of us. I shall try to obtain outside what you need inside the house; you must see that none of it is wasted.) (2004, 211)

Although Giannozzo (and the other participants of the dialogue) emphasize at various times that the conjugal relationship is one in which wife is subordinate to husband, it is worth noting that in this passage, husband and wife are presented as equal partners in their defense and ownership of the household and its products, both material and human.

The quality of this partnership is indicated first and foremost by Giannozzo's use of the word *compagno*, now appearing in the dialogue not in direct reference to the marriage relationship, but by means of an analogy in which vigilant, yet humanly fallible guards are responsible not only for their individual duties, but for their partner's tasks as well. The reciprocal duties of husband and wife are highlighted by Giannozzo's language, which is full of the first person plural (*noi, nostro*) and the expressions "l'uno l'altro" and "insieme" (which are used time after time throughout Giannozzo's teacherly lectures to his wife).¹⁷ Giannozzo's repeated insistence on reciprocal actions is particularly evident

¹⁷ Feminist historians and literary scholars have tended to view Book III of *I libri della famiglia* as a perfect example of patriarchal ideology at its most powerful, demeaning and restrictive. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that, just as Isomachus refers to his wife as a child in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, Giannozzo's wife is likely similarly young and inexperienced. According to Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, age differences between spouses in Florence during this period were significant: it would not have been uncommon for a housebound eighteen-year-old girl to marry a respectable businessman in his mid-thirties. Some of the ignorance and ineptness Lionardo and Giannozzo attribute to women (even idealized women),

when he translates the example of the guards into the husband-wife relationship (“se tu mai vedrai in me mancamento alcuno, me n’avisi...così a te non spiacerà se io te desterò dove bisogni”) and when he stresses the mutual ownership of all household capital (“Questa roba, questa famiglia, e i figliuoli che nasceranno sono nostri, così tuoi come miei, così miei come tuoi”).¹⁸

Although, at least in Alberti’s ideal domestic economy, husband and wife share mutual responsibility and ownership for the goods their marriage creates, their specific duties are quite different. As Giannozzo insists at the end of this speech to his wife, “Io procurerò di fuori che tu qui abbia in casa ciò che bisogni; tu provedi nulla s’adoperi male.” Earlier in the dialogue, this division of labor had been justified by innate, and therefore unavoidable gender differences: Lionardo and Giannozzo initially claim that women are naturally suited to the delicate and solitary tasks of childrearing and household management. At this point in Book III, however, Alberti turns from a model in which biological sex and innate qualities determine gender to an almost post-modern view of gender as governed by social conventions:¹⁹

Sarebbe poco onore se la donna trafficasse fra gli uomini nelle piazze, in publico, così a me parrebbe ancora biasimo tenermi chiuso in casa tra le femine, quando a me stia nelle cose virili tra gli uomini, co’ cittadini, ancora e con buoni e onesti forestieri convivere e conversare (1994, 230).

(It would hardly win us respect if our wife busied herself among the men in the marketplace, out in the public eye. It also seems somewhat demeaning to me to remain shut up in the house among women when I have manly things to do among men, fellow citizens and worthy and distinguished foreigners.) (2004, 207)

According not to nature but to society, in other words, men should not be shut up in the house in solitude, as is required of women; similarly, women should not be out and about, roaming the city streets, as is required of men. Husbands and wives are therefore partners in one sense, but the social constraints of honor and public opinion in concert with the natural order determining biological sex make the tasks they undertake necessarily unequal.

therefore, may at least in part be due to historical circumstance: a girl-bride is unlikely to have the skills, language or knowledge needed to run a household on the scale of the one described by Giannozzo without substantial teaching from her adult husband. On age differences in Renaissance Florentine marriages see Klapisch-Zuber (1985, 19-22 and 117-120); Cohn (1996, 1-15).

¹⁸ Alberti’s mention of equal property rights for husband and wife clearly describes an ideal rather than an actual historical situation. Thomas Kuehn reminds us, however, that women in Florence during the 1420s did have property rights (particularly with respect to their dowries) and were able to exercise some agency despite the constraints of a legal guardian (or *mundualdus*) and other restrictions on the public activities of women (1991). On female agency, power and wealth in Venice during the Tre- and Quattrocento, see Chojnacki (2000).

¹⁹ On gender difference and social convention, see Butler (2006).

Marriage as a Union of Souls

Adovardo and Giannozzo imply that husband and wife are companions as well as “unequal” partners linked in love, a combination which strongly recalls Aristotle’s notion of unequal friendship – precisely the category into which marriage falls in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1984, VIII.xii). While Alberti hints at the possibility of marriage as a kind of friendship by this indirect allusion to Aristotelian friendship, the link between marriage and friendship is made more explicit in *I libri* by a phrase which recurs throughout the dialogue and which defines both marriage and friendship.

In Book IV, the practical but learned Adovardo complains bitterly of the ancient philosophers, whose advice he finds lacking because it is purely theoretical and does not help the seeker of friends to “travagliarsi in pubblico fra l’uso e costumi degli uomini” (1994, 302 [2004, 206: Live in the world...and deal with the actual ways and habits of men]). Nonetheless, in his brief summary of ancient theoretical wisdom on friendship, he mentions what he calls an Aristotelian notion: “l’amicizia ha due corpi, una anima” (1994, 301), or “friendship has two bodies, one soul” (translation mine). Towards the end of the fourth book, this ‘two-in-one’ notion is restated, this time in reference not to classical friendship but to Christian marriage:

Poi a me qui parrà similitudine attissima, quanto si scrive appresso de pontefici, che ‘l matrimonio sta legato di due in prima notissimi vincoli: l’uno fu primo vincolo di que’ due animi, quali in uno così insieme volersi con onestà convenirono.... Ma quell’altra coadiunzione insieme ad una opera per procreare figliuoli (1994, 331).²⁰

(Now I think that we may properly draw an analogy here with marriage. The priests say that in that relationship there are two essential bonds: one is the bond of two souls that seek to be virtuously united in one.... The other bond that unites two persons in marriage is the work of procreation) (2004, 290).

Here again we see a definition of marriage that includes the production of children as well as a kind of friendly companionship: the union of two souls in one.²¹

²⁰ After having explained, very briefly, which of these conjugal bonds may be broken and why, Adovardo continues with his comparison, adding “Così in amicizia niuno stimi essere non quasi religione servare in sé la benivolenza quanto si può eterna” (2004, 331 [1971, 299: Similarly, in friendship we must consider it a duty almost religious in nature to retain our benevolence eternally, in so far as it is given us to do so]). On the indissolubility of marriage according to the *pontefici* (especially Innocent III) who rewrote canon law on the conjugal state around the turn of the thirteenth century, see Ch. 2 of D’Avray (2005).

²¹ On the notion of unity as a framing process for both marriage and friendship see Furey (2011). It is worth observing that Alberti’s emphasis on the coming together of two souls into one (rather than two bodies into

Since he is specifically citing *pontefici*, a rare occurrence in this decidedly secular text, it is somewhat surprising that Alberti here echoes the Aristotelian definition of friendship with its mention of the single resulting soul, rather than quoting the scriptural equivalent “two in one flesh” (*erunt duo in carne una*) with its emphasis on the physical union of marriage.²² Although the sexual union between husband and wife is foregrounded in Alberti’s dialogue because of his emphasis on children as one of two main aims of marriage, in his use of the Aristotelian-Scriptural friendship-conjugal phrase “two-in-one,” he never fails to emphasize the union of souls. As Lionardo explains, it is precisely because marriage is not merely a union of the flesh, according to both civic and religious law, that it cannot be dissolved as it was in ancient times:²³

Ma oggi e’ costumi civili, le religiose costituzioni le quali affermano el matrimonio essere non congiunzione di membra tanto, ma piú unione di volontà e animo, e per questo statuiscono sponsalizio essere sacramento e legame religioso, però vetano che quegli e’ quali sono così per divino sacramento congiunti mai si separino per volontà umana. (1994, 132).

(But the civil law today and the religious authorities as well declare that marriage is not so much a mating of bodies as a union of will and of mind, and for this reason consider marriage a sacrament and a religious tie.) (2004, 128)

one flesh, discussed below) differs from the ways in which unity is conceptually exploited by the authors of the sixteenth-century marriage treatises explored by Furey.

²² This particular Biblical phrase is stated several times (at Ephesians 5:31 and Mark 10:8) after its initial appearance at Genesis 2:24, which reads “quam ob rem relinquet homo patrem suum et matrem et adherabit uxori suae et erunt duo in carne una” (For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and they will become one flesh; translation mine). The scriptural emphasis on flesh rather than soul is underlined most explicitly, however, in its restatement at 1 Corinthians 6:16: “Quoniam qui adheret meretrici unum corpus efficitur erunt enim inquit duo in carne una” (He who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body, for it is said that the two will become one flesh; translation mine). Here Paul takes this by-now standard description of marriage out of its conjugal context and into the sinful realm of sexual union outside marriage.

²³ The notion of two-in-one is also stated in Book I by Battista, who links it not to marriage but to the relationship between lover and beloved, saying “troppa divina forza adunque sarà questa, se amore potrà in uno volere solo infiammare, e in un petto solo contenere due anime” (1994, 95; emphasis added [2004, 99: This force is divine indeed, if love can *fuse two spirits* into a single will *and enclose them in one breast*]). Erotic love is later denounced by Lionardo as the lowest form of love (which he calls infatuation), but in Battista’s tribute to love, he elevates what Lionardo sees as lustful, physical desire to the high moral level of both friendship and marriage by suggesting that it is yet another human bond through which a union of souls may take place. This elevation reminds interlocutors and readers of the potentially dangerous proximity of (erotic) love, marriage and friendship, all and any of which may bring two souls close together in a union of love and affection. Of course, nowhere in Renaissance literature is the potential (both base and divine) inherent in the act of merging two souls into one made clearer than in Book IV of Castiglione’s *Il libro del cortegiano*.

Here Lionardo describes marriage as an “unione di volontà e animo,” recalling the words he spoke only a few moments before about the rarest of relationships: true friendship, in which two ideal friends are “due persone, una anima” (1994, 102) – two people, one soul (translation mine).

With friendship and marriage so closely associated in the dialogue through the frequent invocation of the union of two souls, what are Alberti’s readers to make of Buto’s tirade against friendly marital relations at the opening of Book IV? Buto’s speech in fact begins with a mocking iteration of the “two-in-one” theme, which he links explicitly to both friendship and marriage: “Diceano che a ben fermare l’amicizia convenia che due in uno si congiungessero, e bisognarvi non so io che moggio di sale” (1994, 279 [2004, 247: They said, for one thing, that good friendship requires the union of two persons so that they become one. For that you need more salt than I can tell]). The humorous account of Buto’s nagging wife follows this statement in an apparently unsurprising leap straight from friendship into marriage. Friendship once again interrupts his diatribe on marriage only a few lines later, when he suggests that perhaps friendship between a man and a woman is in fact impossible: “Forse que’ vostri savii, quali scrissero quelle belle cose dell’amicizia, poco si curavano in quella parte amicarsi femmine, o forse così a tutti stimorono essere noto che con femmina si può non mai contrarre certa amicizia” (1994, 279). It is these words, and the passage which precedes them, that provoke laughter in the Alberti men. Once again, we are challenged to expose the reasons behind the humour of Buto’s speech. Why are Buto’s words on marriage and friendship so worthy of laughter?

One possible explanation has already been put forward: Buto becomes a laughingstock because of his lowly servant’s status and his ignorance about family affairs. There are other possibilities, however: are the Alberti commiserating with him (we all have wives like yours, so all we can do is laugh together about the stupidity of women)? Are they thus sympathetic to his tale of a marriage decidedly lacking in companionship? Are they laughing at even the merest possibility of friendship with women? Or are they once again amused at the simple Buto’s ignorance: his inability to recognize that, if both friendship and marriage involve a union of souls, marriage is precisely the place in which a woman could be her husband’s friend and a man his wife’s companion?

Robert Grudin argues that, although “it is customary to equate laughter more or less uniformly with mockery and lightness” in the modern world, the Renaissance dialogue employs laughter as a means of uncovering “very serious matters” (1974, 199). In other words, he writes, “men of the Renaissance laughed at matters like politics, love and death precisely because they were serious, so serious as to be perpetual sources of frustration” and, one might add, potential sources of danger and upheaval (ibid.). Marriage, in Alberti’s text, is one such source: as we have seen, Alberti describes the conjugal state as the foundation of society. If marriage, family and state are linked together by an unbreakable bond, as *I libri della famiglia* suggests, then the potential collapse of marriage proposed by Lionardo’s refusal to marry and by Buto’s failed marriage is sublimated by the laughter of the Alberti men, which exposes yet controls the risk of social instability failed marriages imply. In the language of Freud, if we view Buto’s words as a “tendentious joke” (2002), the laughter of the Alberti males successfully diverts them from the censored risks associated with failed marriages.

In another Renaissance dialogue – Baldassare Castiglione’s *Il libro del cortegiano* – laughter serves a double purpose, Grudin argues. Men laugh at things that are “evil,” he writes, and they do so in order to console themselves: “The phenomenon of laughter is circular. It fixes on life’s uglier aspects and at the same time seeks to ease the annoyance which these aspects (‘noiose molestie’) otherwise might cause. [Castiglione] seems to prescribe laughter as an antidote to the uncomfortable awareness of these vices” (1974, 201). Grudin further claims that Castiglione’s text balances the evils of the world with an ideal view of the court so that “the palace and the jests modify each other without contradiction” (ibid., 202).

Though *I libri* was written a century before the *Cortegiano*, we might make a similar case for laughter in Alberti’s dialogue, which deals with the ideal family rather than the ideal court. Both Castiglione’s and Alberti’s texts are fraught with anxiety and do not propose cohesive ideologies or comprehensive social ideals. If laughter, in the Cinquecento, “is a uniquely civilized response” to the evils of the world, in Alberti’s Quattrocento text the evils against which laughter can protect involve marriage and the family (Grudin, 203). In the context of marriage, laughter serves the purpose of easing the interlocutors’ minds when faced with the potential failure of the family and the collapse, as a result, of both marriage and the state. Furthermore, if laughter is indeed “civilized,” it is significant that those laughing are the Alberti, not Buto. Alberti thus inserts another class distinction into his dialogue: Buto is both too ignorant to control his own marriage (as the Alberti clan – in Book III – has most fervently attempted to show it can) and too uncivilized to laugh at his own conjugal misery. Through their superior knowledge and wisdom, the Alberti men recognize that Buto’s humorous description of his anti-*compagna* barely conceals an evil threatening not only the servant class but civilization as a whole, namely the failure of marriage. Being civilized, however, they are able to laugh at Buto’s plight, simultaneously revealing and commenting upon his failure, even in the face of the potential social disintegration his words imply.

Marriage as True Friendship

By exposing the fragility of any conjugal bond, Buto’s marriage threatens social stability and provokes the laughter of his masters. Where then, if at all, does Alberti propose a stable alternative to marriage as rejected by Lionardo or reviled by Buto? At the outset of Book II, Lionardo chastises the recently departed Adovardo for being “troppo di affezionato” (too affectionate; translation mine) in his discussion of paternal love but suggests that Adovardo’s argument, though somewhat inappropriate, should not be shunned entirely because it was made “per affezione più che per ragione” (1994, 87; Out of affection more than by means of reason”; translation mine). Rather than argue from a position of emotion, therefore, the young Battista asks to play devil’s advocate to his elder’s claim that friendship, not paternal love, is the most powerful form of love. Battista’s hope is to learn about argumentation, he claims, by using Lionardo’s own rational techniques of debate against him to argue, as an exercise alone, he insists, for the omnipotence of erotic love.

In the midst of Battista's speech in support of passionate love, however, Alberti inserts a remarkable passage which situates the marriage relationship within the bounds of both love and friendship, proposing an alternative to Lionardo's Book I representation of burdensome and dutiful marriage as well as Buto's Book IV depiction of a decided lack of conjugal bliss:

Puossi l'amor tra moglie e marito riputar grandissimo, però che se la benivolenza sorge da alcuna voluttà, el congiugio ti porge non pochissima copia d'ogni gratissimo piacere e diletto; se la benivolenza cresce per conversazione, con niuna persona manterrai più perpetua familiarità che colla moglie; se l'amore si colega e unisce scoprendo e comunicando le tue affezioni e volontà, da niuno arai più aperta e piana via a conoscere tutto e dimonstrarti che alla propria tua donna e continua compagna; se l'amicizia sta compagna della onestà, niuna coniunzione più a te sarà religiosissima che quella del congiugio. Aggiugni che tutt'ora crescono tenacissimi vincoli di voluttà e di utilità a contenere e confirmare ne' nostri animi infinita benivolenza. Nascono e' figliuoli, e quali sarebbe lungo dire quanto e' siano comune e firmissimo legame a colligare gli animi a una volontà e sentenza, cioè a quella unione la quale si dice essere vera amicizia. Non mi stendo in raccontare quanta utilità si tragga da questa coniugale amicizia e sodalità, in conservare la cosa domestica, in contenere la famiglia, in reggere e governare tutta la masserizia, le quali tutte cose sono in le donne tali, che forse alcuno stimarebbe per esse essere l'amore coniugale sopra di tutti gli altri interissimo e validissimo.²⁴ (1994, 93-94)

(We may consider the love of husband and wife greatest of all. If pleasure generates benevolence, marriage gives an abundance of all sorts of pleasure and delight: if intimacy increases good will, no one has so close and continued a familiarity with anyone as with his wife; if close bonds and a united will arise through the revelation and communication of your feelings and desires, there is no one to whom you have more opportunity to communicate fully and reveal your mind than to your own wife, your constant companion [*continua compagna*]; if, finally, an honorable alliance leads to friendship, no relationship more entirely commands your reverence than the sacred tie of marriage. Add to all this that every

²⁴ Although Battista's words arise, somewhat oddly, from a discussion of erotic love, by the end of this passage we realize that he is in fact contrasting the marriage relationship with the desire of lover and beloved: his next line is "Ma pure, non so come, non raro si truova a chi più piace uno strano amante che il proprio marito" (1994, 94 [2004, 98: Yet somehow, I do not know why, it happens not infrequently that a woman prefers a lover to her own husband]), a statement that serves to support his own thesis that in fact erotic love is stronger even than true friendship. Battista's exclusive attention to female infidelity also points to a historical reality, however: while unwilling husbands could perhaps find emotional (and physical) satisfaction elsewhere, women were restricted by the strong link between female honor and chastity in Renaissance society.

moment brings further ties of pleasure and utility, confirming the benevolence filling our hearts. Children are born, and it would take a long time to expound the mutual and mighty bond which these provide. They surely ally their parents' minds in a union of will and thought. This is a union, indeed, which one may well call true friendship [*vera amicizia*]. I will not lengthen my discourse by describing all the advantages stemming from this conjugal friendship and solidarity. After all, it preserves the home, maintains the family, rules and governs the whole economy.) (2004, 98)

In this immensely rich passage, Battista proposes that the bond between husband and wife is a love relationship in which husband and wife are not enemies (as in the case of Buto) and not mere partners (as described by Giannozzo), but friends, whose potential for pleasurable, intimate, communicative, familial, moral and economic bonding may exceed all earthly forms of association. In his tribute to marriage as “vera amicizia,” Battista essentially summarizes most of what is said about marriage in *I libri della famiglia* as a positive contribution to society and the family in the remainder of the dialogue. He links marriage to love, to the Aristotelian categories of friendship, to Scriptural views of marriage as sacrament, to Adovardo's model of wife as *compagna*, to both his and Lionardo's emphasis on children, to Giannozzo's attention to good household management and finally to marriage as true friendship.

Battista's emphasis on “vera amicizia” recalls Lionardo's earlier statement that true friendships are the strongest of all love relationships. It is in the context of marriage, therefore, that Battista ceases to argue against Lionardo. Instead of associating marriage with erotic love – as we might expect given the topic of the speech surrounding this passage – Battista recasts marriage as the *locus* of true friendship. He is here in agreement with Lionardo that “vera amicizia” is the strongest of all relationships, but he argues, radically, that the site of true friendship is marriage.

Constance Jordan (1990) discounts this proposal by pointing to the way in which it is qualified by Battista himself, who follows his discussion of marital friendship with the remark that some women would rather take a lover than remain faithful to a husband.²⁵ Battista's words are further undermined, she argues, by Lionardo's later emphasis on male-male friendship and the exchange of women. By means of his own and Lionardo's words, therefore, Battista's idealized conjugal friendship is transformed from friendship between husband and wife (man and woman) to friendship between men as owners of female exchange-objects: “[W]omen are the conduits through which male members of a

²⁵ Battista's mention of female infidelity is yet another example of the anxiety inherent in Alberti's text. That women seek lovers rather than remaining with their husbands begs the question of what is lacking for women in the institution of marriage. What, to put it simply, do lovers have to offer wives that husbands do not? Here the dialogue also exposes a potential weakness in the patriarchal institution of marriage as arranged alliance. Arranged marriages without concern for the individuals involved may fail, Battista's words imply, and that failure, as we have already seen, is a threat to individual marriages, to the family and, most troubling, to society and the state. In his treatise *De re uxoria* (*On Wifely Things*, 1510s), the Venetian Francesco Barbaro (1390-1454) makes this same argument even more pointedly, suggesting that the stability of marriage, the very foundation of society, may in fact depend upon individual choice and mutual love (Barbaro 1987, 196-201).

family must pass generationally...: the friendship [Lionardo] has extolled is an emotion felt by men primarily for men, and it is expressed by agreements about how women are to be shared and exchanged. In practice, it has nothing to do with feelings that a husband and wife have for each other” (Jordan 1990, 49).

While Jordan’s analysis convincingly outlines the two extremes implicit in Alberti’s text: marriage ruled by lust (in which case women become adulteresses) and marriage ruled by male homosocial friendship (in which women, by definition, cannot participate), I would argue instead that to discount entirely Battista’s ideal vision of marriage is to diminish the real complexity of Alberti’s text. I propose that the above passage outlines a middle way, a path between one kind of male-female relationship (erotic love or lust) and another kind of male-male relationship (friendship). By situating marriage within the context of erotic love, Battista exposes the very real dangers of uncontrolled passion to the family and to society; by insisting upon friendship between husband and wife, he redefines it as a viable male-female bond, suggesting a means through which erotic desire might be productively redirected. As John M. Najemy has argued, Alberti’s *I libri* emphasizes the dangers of erotic love to the family and society even as it critiques the blanket repression and denial of passion advocated by civic humanism (Najemy 2008, 137). In support of this reading, I assert that Battista’s tribute to marital friendship seeks not to repress or to deny but to harness the power of erotic love through the theoretical ideal of conjugal friendship, so that lust, a potentially unstable social force, comes to serve and support the family, the state and society as a whole.

By means of Battista’s words on marital friendship, Alberti brings together Christian and pagan notions of love, friendship and marriage, proposing an idealized conjugal relationship that is informed by the secular philosophical vocabulary of Xenophon and Aristotle, as well as by the sacred language of Scripture. Battista’s notion of conjugal friendship thus promotes a utopian coincidence of marriage and friendship that seeks, within the conceptual framework of the early Quattrocento in Italy, to channel, tame and transform the wild madness of *disordinato amore*, or chaotic erotic love.

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