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Sharon Marcus: *Between Women*

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INTRODUCTION

The Female Relations of Victorian England

IN 1844 A TEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL named Emily Pepys, the daughter of the bishop of Worcester, made the following entry in the journal she had begun to keep that year: “I had the oddest dream last night that I ever dreamt; even the remembrance of it is very extraordinary. There was a very nice pretty young lady, who I (a girl) was going *to be married to!* (the very idea!) I loved her and even now love her very much. It was quite a settled thing and we were going to be married very soon. All of a sudden I thought of Teddy [a boy she liked] and asked Mama several times if I might be let off and after a little time I woke. I remember it all perfectly. A very foggy morning.”¹ Emily Pepys found the mere idea of a girl marrying a lady extraordinary (“the very idea!”). We may find it even more surprising that she had the dream at all, then recorded it in a journal that was not private but meant to be read by family and friends. As we read her entry more closely, it may also seem puzzling that Emily’s attitude toward her dream is more bemused than revolted, not least because her prospective bride is “a very nice pretty young lady,” and marrying her has the pleasant aura of security suggested by the almost Austenian phrase, “It was quite a settled thing.” Even Emily’s desire to be “let off” so that she can return to Teddy must be ratified by a woman, “Mama.”

A proper Victorian girl dreaming about marrying a pretty lady challenges our vision of the Victorians, but this book argues that Emily’s dream was in fact typical of a world that made relationships between women central to femininity, marriage, and family life. We are now all too familiar with the Victorian beliefs that women and men were essentially opposite sexes, and that marriage to a man was the chief end of a woman’s existence.² But a narrow focus on women’s status as relative creatures, defined by their difference from and subordination to men, has limited our understanding of gender, kinship, and sexuality. Those concepts cannot be fully understood if we define them only in terms of two related oppositions: men versus women, and homosexuality versus heterosexuality. Our preconceptions have led us to doubt the importance of relationships such as marriage between women, which was not only a Victorian dream but also a Victorian reality; many adults found the idea of two women marrying far less preposterous than little Emily Pepys did. When activist and author Frances Power Cobbe published a widely read autobiography in 1894, for example, she included a photograph of the

house she lived in with sculptor Mary Lloyd. Throughout the book, references to joint finances and travels, to “our friends,” “our garden,” and “our beautiful and beloved home” treated Cobbe’s conjugal arrangement with Lloyd as a neutral public fact, one Cobbe expressed even more clearly in letters to friends in which she called Lloyd both her “husband” and her “wife.”³

Female marriage, however, is not the sole subject of this book, which also examines friendship, mother-daughter dynamics, and women’s investment in images of femininity, in order to make a fundamental but curiously overlooked point: even within a single class or generation, there were many different kinds of relationships between women. Often when I would tell people I was writing a book about relationships between women, they would assume that was a timid way of saying I was writing about lesbians. There are lesbians in this book, if by that we mean women who had sexual relationships with other women, but this book is not only about lesbians; nor is it about the lesbian potential of all relationships between women. Indeed, if we take “lesbian” to connote deviance, gender inversion, a refusal to objectify women, or a rejection of marriage as an institution, then none of the relationships discussed here was lesbian. Women like Frances Power Cobbe embraced marriage as a model for their sexual partnerships with women even as they sought to reform marriage as a legal institution. Female friendships peaceably coexisted with heterosexual marriages and moreover, helped to promote them. The hyper-feminine activities of looking at fashion plates and playing with dolls encouraged women to desire feminine objects, and mother-daughter relationships were rife with the same eroticized power struggles as those between male and female kin.

OVERVIEW

The first section of this book is about friendship. Chapter 1 uses lifewriting (memoirs, autobiographies, letters, and diaries) to show the importance of female friendship in middle-class women’s lives. Friendship between women reinforced femininity, but at the same time it licensed forms of agency women were discouraged from exercising with men. As friends, women could compete for one another, enjoy multiple attachments, and share religious fervor. This chapter also distinguishes female friendship from female marriage, as well as from unrequited love and infatuation between women. Chapter 2 surveys the Victorian novel and shows the paradigmatic importance of female friendship in courtship narratives, including *David Copperfield*, *Aurora Leigh*, and *Shirley*. It concludes with a reading of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* as an exception that proves the

rule, since its heroine rejects female friendship but also never marries. In these readings, I depart from theories of the novel that emphasize how homosexuality and female friendship have been repressed by heterosexual plots and can be retrieved only through symptomatic reading, which seeks to reconstruct what a text excludes. Rather than focus on what texts do not or cannot say, I use a method I call “just reading,” which attends to what texts make manifest on their surface, in this case the crucial role female friendship plays in courtship narratives. Female friendship functions as a narrative matrix that generates closure without being shattered by the storms and stresses of plot. A series of detailed analyses shows that female friendship was neither a static auxiliary to the marriage plot nor a symptomatic exclusion from it, but instead a transmission mechanism that kept narrative energies on track.

The second section focuses on femininity as an object of desire for women. In chapter 3, I show that hyperfeminine discourses about fashion and dolls shared with pornography a preoccupation with voyeurism, exhibitionism, punishment, humiliation, domination, and submission. The connections could be astonishingly literal, as when pornographic literature reprinted fashion-magazine correspondence debating the propriety of adult women birching adolescent girls. Fashion imagery and doll tales depicted women and girls in erotic dynamics with feminine objects; both represented those impulses as especially strong between mothers and daughters. The chapter makes a theoretical distinction between the sexual and the erotic in order to show that mainstream femininity was not secretly lesbian, but openly homoerotic. Within the realm of domestic consumer culture, Victorian women were as licensed to objectify women as were Victorian men. Chapter 4 is a close reading of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* in light of the argument in chapter 3. For Victorians, femininity depended as much on homoerotic as on heteroerotic desire, and Dickens explores what that might mean for men who desired women. His novel presents an older woman’s obsessive, objectifying desire for her adopted daughter as a primal scene for the hero, who learns to equate social status and erotic desire with being a woman’s pampered, fashionable doll. The female dyad’s overt contempt for him as a working-class boy leads him to reject his male body by using fashion to become feminine—that is, to become a woman’s object of desire.

The third and final section addresses marriage. Chapter 5 focuses on debates about marriage that followed the legalization of civil divorce in 1857. I show that many involved in those discussions were either women in female marriages or knew women in female marriages. Familiarity with those conjugal partnerships shaped feminist reformers’ vision of marriage as a plastic institution that could be reformed into a dissoluble contract based on equality, rather than an irrevocable vow that created a hierarchy.

The notion of marriage as contract made it possible for some social thinkers to define marriage in nonheterosexual terms and to posit increasing equality and similarity between spouses as progress towards modernity. I turn to early anthropologists such as Henry Maine, Johann Bachofen, and Friedrich Engels to show how their histories of the family accommodated forms of kinship that depended neither on sexual difference nor on biological reproduction. Chapter 6 is a close reading of Anthony Trollope's novel *Can You Forgive Her?* The chapter opens by establishing that Trollope knew women in female marriages, then shows how he gave that knowledge narrative form. Like the anthropologists, Trollope associated female marriage with egalitarian contracts between husbands and wives, but unlike most of them, he branded both contract and female marriage as primitive. Even so, he remained eminently Victorian in the value he accorded intimacy between women, for female amity remains the basis of all the successful marriages in his novel.

Each of this book's sections provides evidence that relationships between women were a constitutive element of Victorian gender and sexuality, and the force of that argument derives from the variety of relationships addressed. One could say that the first section is about the homosocial, the second about the homoerotic, and the third about the homosexual, but that terminology might falsely imply that the homoerotic and the homosexual lay outside the realm of the social. Instead, I address how each social bond differed from the other by virtue of its content, structure, status, and degree of flexibility.

The first section establishes that as an ideal, friendship was defined by altruism, generosity, mutual indebtedness, and a perfect balance of power. In a capitalist society deeply ambivalent about competition, female friendship offered a vision of perfect reciprocity for those who could afford not to worry about daily survival. In a liberal society that idealized self-development and sifting opinion through argument, female friendship epitomized John Stuart Mill's dream of subjectivity as dialogue.⁴ The object that epitomized friendship was the gift, which could represent the giver's body (a lock of hair), merge with the recipient's body (a ring), or be a body (a man bestowed by one friend on another). Novelists and deeply religious women articulated that reciprocal ideal most forcefully, while worldly women highlighted the ways that friendship introduced an element of play into the gender system, licensing women to be more assertive and spontaneous with their female peers than they were with men. Friendship thus had an elastic relationship to the Victorian gender system: it could temporarily confer a new shape on femininity without altering its basic structure.

The second section of the book focuses on desire—not as an antisocial force but as a deeply regulated and regulating hierarchical structure of

longing.⁵ The female worlds of the fashion magazine and the doll tale revolved around differences in rank and power between image and viewer, woman and girl, punisher and punished, fashionable and lowly, mistress and doll. At stake in this section are erotic bonds between women and objects: images, toys, girls, and femininity itself. Where the ideal of friendship equated femininity with an ethic of spiritual coalescence and balance, fashion magazines and doll tales depicted femininity as a set of violent fantasies about the female body: its containment, explosion, display, or magical transformation. Female objectification was invested in binary divisions, but ironically, it was also the most mobile type of bond between women. The definition of fixed poles—object and owner, viewer and viewed, arrogant and abject—promoted the desire to shuttle back and forth between them. Dolls come to life, women become captives, and girls and boys change into ladies. Gayle Rubin famously identified men's traffic in female objects as the central dynamic of patriarchal culture; this chapter identifies an equally strong current in Victorian consumer culture, a female traffic in feminine objects displayed and sold for women's enjoyment and exploitation.⁶

The third and final section focuses on marriage as an institution that was mutating in the Victorian present, inspiring competing visions of what it had been in the past and might be in the future. Reform exposed the contradictions within the norm of happy hierarchical marriages, and divorce trials revealed the differences between the ideals embedded in the law and the complex reality of marriage as a lived institution. Those familiar with female marriages and their contractual principles of formation and dissolution had an extra-legal vantage point from which to reform marriage law. As social thinkers registered that marriage could accommodate variations such as divorce and same-sex unions, they became aware of the institution's plasticity, its ability to change without undergoing the kind of radical ruptures that yield completely new forms.

HISTORICAL AND DISCIPLINARY BORDERS

Why focus on England from 1830 to 1880? Those decades lie at the core of the Victorian period, which continues to be a touchstone for thinking about gender and sexuality, not least because the Victorian era has the remarkable capacity to seem both starkly different from the present and uncannily similar to it. The general public continues to see Victorians as terribly repressed, while specialists have by and large accepted Foucault's assertion that our own contemporary obsession with sex originates with the Victorians.⁷ Having selected Victorian England for its canonical status in the history of sexuality, I stayed within the years from 1830 to 1880

because those years constitute a distinct period, especially with regard to gender, the family, and same-sex bonds between women. During those decades, the belief that men and women were opposite sexes, different in kind rather than degree, took hold in almost every class, and the previous era's concerns about female sexual voracity shifted to a view of women as either inherently domestic, maternal, and self-restrained, or susceptible to training in how to be so.⁸ Marriage and family underwent corresponding changes. Historians of kinship argue endlessly about exactly when it first became common to think of marriage as the union of soulmates, but most agree that by 1830 that ideal had become a norm. Before the 1830s, certain classes of people did not valorize companionate marriage: workers often did not legally marry; aristocrats were openly adulterous; and Romantics and revolutionaries challenged the very bases of marriage. By the 1830s, companionate marriage was the standard for measuring alliances in all classes. Finally, the lesbian was not a distinct social type during the years 1830 to 1880, although male sodomy was a public and private obsession.⁹ In the eighteenth century, it was possible to name the sapphist or tribade as an explicit object of satire, but by the 1830s new codes of propriety meant that only doctors and pornographers wrote directly about sex between women.¹⁰ The figure of the sapphist came to seem less and less embedded in the social world of domestic conjugality, and therefore less and less related to women who lived in couples and adopted features of legal marriage.

Women, sexuality, and marriage began to change dramatically in the 1880s. Eugenics shifted the meaning of marriage from a spiritual union to a reproductive one that depended on heterosexual fertility and promoted racial purity. New Woman fiction and doctrine criticized men's oppression of women in ways that sexualized marriage, or rather heterosexualized it, by comparing it to prostitution and rape.¹¹ A new sense of heterosexuality, as a distinct sexual orientation formed in diametrical opposition to homosexuality, made marriage and the family the province of male-female unions.¹² In the 1890s, a discourse of lesbianism began to emerge in Edward Carpenter's homophile writings, Havelock Ellis's sexological studies, and women's responses to them.¹³ Awareness of sex between women also increased after two well-publicized trials raised issues of sapphism and female inversion: the Maud Allan trial of 1919 and the Radclyffe Hall trial of 1929.¹⁴ Women in female couples continued to use marriage as a model for their relationships—think of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas—but many female couples began to identify either with an ideal of pure, sexless love, or with a bohemian modernism that rejected marriage and monogamy as patriarchal institutions.¹⁵

I have chosen 1830 and 1880 as my temporal borders because they constitute a distinct period in the history of marriage and sexuality, but

I also recognize that much of what we consider Victorian can be traced back to the eighteenth century and persisted long after 1880. The Victorian era was neither the first nor last to value a variety of bonds between women. What was historically specific were its ways of doing so. At the same time, it is also notable that four of this book's six chapters concentrate on one decade within that broader time span—the 1860s. It is not surprising that a “fast” decade of feminist activism, avid consumerism, and obsession with the bold and showy “Girl of the Period” coincided with debates about marriage and with a rising number of publications revolving around feminine display and aggressive female fantasies.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the broader temporal framework still holds. Throughout the period, society encouraged women to cultivate female friendships, and a variety of people acknowledged female marriages without demonizing them. The conventions of fashion imagery and doll tales remained more or less the same from the 1840s through the 1870s. The liberal feminist agenda of marriage reform that coalesced in 1857 first took shape among utilitarians and Unitarians in the 1830s and retained the same basic contours until Socialists and New Women radicalized the issues in the 1880s. Though the anthropological texts and individual novels I discuss are pinpointed very precisely in time, their scope extends well beyond the years in which they were composed and published. Dickens's novel of the early 1860s reflected back on the Regency period, and Trollope and the anthropologists looked to the primitive past in order to define the present.

As in my previous book, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London*, I have here combined the practices of several disciplines without making any one method the key to all mythologies. If one can identify the core method of any discipline, then the method of theory is the critique of existing assumptions; the method of history is generalization based on immersion in the largest number and widest range of sources possible; and the method of literary and visual criticism is interpretation based on close reading. Each chapter in *Between Women* uses theory to identify and examine the often unstated assumptions of previous scholarship. My training in literary studies is evident in my drive to unpack the meaning of linguistic and visual details, but I do not believe that one can exclusively use literary critical methods and fictional texts to make historical arguments. For that reason, only two chapters focus on a single novel. The majority of the chapters in this book use a large number of sources to make generalized claims for their place and era and to outline the parameters within which many individual lives took shape and from which a smaller number took flight. Rather than concentrate on change over time, *Between Women* follows the model of historical studies that delimit a period and then explore its internal complexities. I have

made every effort to ground my claims in sources that recorded daily life (journals, letters, memoirs, biographies) or texts that aimed to mold it (conduct books, fashion magazines, children's literature). I draw on popular sources, written by men and women, and read in large numbers (conduct books, fashion magazines, novels), as well as on texts that were less widely read but reflected on laws and policies that affected many people (legal arguments, anthropological studies, debates in the periodical press).

Why focus on literature at all, and why on the texts that I do? The nineteenth-century novel was one of the most important cultural sites for representing and shaping desire, affect, and ideas about gender and the family. Since nineteenth-century novels consist almost entirely of accounts of social relationships—bonds between individuals and the ways that communities respond to those bonds—novels have an important place in this study. The second chapter draws on numerous texts to argue that the formal properties of the marriage plot defined the novel as a genre during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The fourth and sixth chapters are devoted to close readings of individual novels, not because I consider novels more valuable than other sources, but because carefully composed, formally intricate, and technically complex works require and reward closer attention than brief children's tales and hastily written journals that yield more meaning in the aggregate. I have chosen *Great Expectations* because it is one of the most widely read, taught, and discussed Victorian novels and one of fiction's most sustained explorations of how bonds between women affect men. Although Trollope was and remains a widely read author, and *Can You Forgive Her?* is recognized as one of his major works, it is included here less for its representativeness than for its uniqueness: it is one of the few Victorian novels to coordinate female marriage, female friendship, egalitarian marriage, and hierarchical marriage within a single narrative.

Between Women makes historical claims that can be best assessed by specialists in Victorian studies, but it also makes broadly applicable theoretical interventions in queer studies, women's studies, and the theory of the novel. Those who approach this book expecting to learn about Victorian lesbians may initially be puzzled by the extended discussions of fashion, dolls, and marriage between men and women; those who pick it up to learn about "women" implicitly defined as heterosexual may find the pages devoted to female marriage and homoerotic desire between women irrelevant. I hope, however, that by the end of this book, both sets of readers will be convinced that lesbian lives are best studied as part of the general history of women and the family, and that heterosexual women's lives can only be fully understood if we attend to their friendships with women and their relationships to female objects of desire.

HOW THIS BOOK ENGAGES SCHOLARLY DEBATES

Studies of Victorian women have focused on how they both accepted and contested belief systems that defined women in terms of male standards, desires, and power, but have paid relatively little attention to how relationships between women defined normative gender. Scholars have dismissed nineteenth-century dolls and fashion as mere tools for teaching women to become objects for men. Writing on contemporary fashion photography and Barbie dolls has drawn attention to their lesbian dynamics and queer erotics, but no one has used that work to explore how Victorian dolls and fashion iconography encouraged girls and women to desire images of femininity, without marking such desires as queer or lesbian.¹⁷ Studies of nineteenth-century marriage, particularly by literary critics, have explained how it was never only a bond between men and women, but the focus has been on how marriage formed alliances between men, often at the cost of ties between women.¹⁸ Women are at the center of histories of the nineteenth-century family, but primarily in relation to husbands, fathers, and brothers. The links between women within the middle class have thus been remarkably ignored in some of the most important scholarship on gender. Consider *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, a major work by Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall that continues to be a reference point for nineteenth-century studies. Under the category of “femininity,” the index lists “brothers’ influence,” and its “see also” rubric directs the reader to “division of labour by gender,” “domesticity,” and “motherhood.” “Femininity,” however, does not include friendship, sisters, or even mother-daughter relationships. The entry for “family” directs us to “see also friendship,” but friendship between women takes up only a few sentences in the book. The authors note the “passionate” language used between female friends, then throw up their hands: “There is no way of speculating the exact emotional, much less physical meaning of such relationships.” They briefly mention male “homosexuality” on the same page, remarking that it was regarded with “outraged horror,” but the concept has no place in their index.¹⁹

The implicit theory here defines family and marriage as institutions that govern relationships between men, and between men and women, but not between women. The massive increase in scholarship about the history of same-sex relations since the publication of *Family Fortunes* has done little to challenge its view of the family, for much of that research has similarly assumed a basic opposition between lesbians and gay men on one side and marriage and the family on another. Studies of the family and femininity do not consider bonds between women to lie within the

purview of their analyses, while work on female bonds situates them either outside the family or in a separate compartment within the family.²⁰ Female friendship and lesbian love, the two relationships between women that have received the most attention, are conflated as essentially feminist alliances that helped women to subvert gender norms and rebel against the strictures marriage placed on women, or that flourished only because they were sequestered within what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg called “the female world of love and ritual.”

In 1975 Smith-Rosenberg contended that before the invention of homosexuality as a pathological form of deviance, sensual and emotional intimacy between women were accepted elements of domestic family life.²¹ A few years later, Adrienne Rich proposed the idea of a lesbian continuum in which all forms of female intimacy would be related by their common rejection of “compulsory heterosexuality.”²² In contrast to Smith-Rosenberg, who characterized the female world as secure and serene, Rich underscored that women who placed women at the center of their lives risked stigma, ostracism, and violence. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Esther Newton, Lisa Duggan, Terry Castle, and others mounted powerful critiques of the continuum theory and the concept of the female world.²³ They cited evidence that some nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans did see women’s bonds as deviant or pathological.²⁴ They showed that both paradigms desexualized lesbianism by equating it with asexual friendships and with mother-daughter bonds purged of the alienation, exploitation, and conflicts inherent in male-female relations. They argued that to define lesbianism as a repudiation of men and masculinity left no room for mannish lesbians and the women attracted to them.

As many readers will recognize, my title alludes to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), which drew on Rich’s notion of a lesbian continuum to speculate briefly that women might not have experienced the panic around boundaries between homo- and heterosexuality that men did (2–3). My response on first reading that suggestive proposition, and on rereading it many times in later years, has always been, “Yes, but . . .” Yes, homophobia was less powerful between women than between men, but was that because all forms of love between women were essentially interchangeable, as the continuum theory suggests? Yes, women’s relations were less violently policed than men’s, but are they therefore less interesting? Yes, women had more latitude with one another, but aren’t we beginning to see that some relationships between Victorian men enjoyed the fluidity Sedgwick considered the monopoly of women? Yes, relationships between women were different, but don’t we need at least an entire book to explore that—a book that engages Sedgwick’s wise insight that homo- and hetero- are inherently interrelated? Without presuming to have succeeded, I have aimed to

