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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

provide that book—one that will interest those who answer the last question in the affirmative, and one that takes to heart Sedgwick’s powerful precept that to understand any particular aspect of gender and sexuality we must draw equally on feminist and queer theories and histories.

In feminist and lesbian studies, the turn to queer theory inaugurated with the publication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* in 1990 led many to abandon the female world of the lesbian continuum for the project of undoing gender and sexuality categories altogether.²⁵ But few studies that address Victorian women’s bonds have incorporated the insights of queer theory, and most still argue either that women’s relationships were asexual or that women in the past anticipated current definitions of lesbians. Those seeking to restore lesbians to history portray their subjects as an outlawed minority defined by their exceptional sexual desire for women, their transgressive identification with masculinity, and their exclusion from the institutions of marriage and family.²⁶ Ironically, what all of these arguments share is an assumption that the opposition between men and women governs relationships between women, which take shape only as reactions against, retreats from, or appropriations of masculinity. The ongoing dominance of the continuum and minority paradigms is illustrated in the similarities between Lillian Faderman’s *Surpassing the Love of Men* (1981) and Martha Vicinus’s *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women* (2004), the latter a set of case studies that revisits many of the women Faderman first grouped together. Faderman argued that romantic friendships between women were accepted because they were asexual relationships.²⁷ Vicinus shows that many of the relationships Faderman studied were in fact sexual, but her decision to use the word “friends” in the title of a book about lesbians indicates her adherence to the continuum theory. Vicinus advances the continuum thesis by using the terms “women’s friendships” and “women’s erotic friendships” interchangeably and by arguing that both were “consistently marginalized as ‘second best’ to heterosexual marriage.”²⁸ She defines “intimate friendship” broadly, as “an emotional, erotically charged relationship between two women” (xxiv). But she makes that point in a section whose title, “Defining the Lesbian,” evokes the minority thesis, and argues throughout that lesbians posed a “threat to [the] social norms” (59) followed by most women, who are thus implicitly removed from the only nominally inclusive category of “women who loved women.” The minority thesis also surfaces in Vicinus’s claim that “gender inversion was the most important signifier of same-sex desire” (xxix). Although *Intimate Friends* shows that women in lesbian relationships “created metaphoric versions of the heterosexual nuclear family,” she emphasizes that such metaphors “failed when subjected to literal interpretation” (xxvii), thus reasserting a distinction between the lesbian minority and the heterosexual norm.

Because histories of gender, family, and marriage have focused on how women were defined relative to men, bonds between women have been analyzed primarily within lesbian studies. Lesbian studies put relationships between women on the scholarly agenda and produced exponential increases in knowledge, but its premises suggested that bonds between women mattered only to the history of women's resistance to heterosexuality, which to date has been far less common than their participation in it. The use of lesbian theory as a master discourse for understanding all relationships between women has thus made it difficult to conceptualize friendships between women who embodied feminine norms; to see the differences between female friendship, female marriage, and unrequited love between women; and to understand how friendship extended well beyond an isolated "female world." Literary-critical frameworks have also blinded us to the ways in which Victorian marriage plots depended on friendship between women. As my second chapter demonstrates, novels by men and women assigned female friendship so much agency that many narratives represented it as both a cause and effect of marriage between women and men. Idealized versions of the mother-daughter bond, which both Smith-Rosenberg and Rich posit as the origin of all bonds between women, have made it almost taboo to mention the eroticized aggression between mothers and daughters addressed in chapters 3 and 4. To understand how femininity was objectified and displayed for women as well as for men, the other topic of those chapters, we need to abandon the persistent assumption that erotic interest in femininity can only be masculine. Finally, in order to see that sexual relationships between women have been part of the history of the family and marriage since at least the nineteenth century, we need to abandon continuum and minority theories that define kinship as exclusively heterosexual and frame female couples in terms of their rejection of marriage or their failed appropriation of it. Many nineteenth-century women in what some Victorians called "female marriages" were not seen as challenging the conventions of kinship. Instead they saw themselves, and their friends, neighbors, and colleagues saw them, as a variation on the married couple. Even a traditionalist like Trollope was able to articulate the ground that female marriage shared with modern forms of marriage between women and men.

In the course of writing this book I have been asked certain questions over and over again. Weren't Victorians too invested in female sexual purity to admit that lesbians existed?²⁹ Didn't the conviction that women had no sexual desire run so deep that in fact women couldn't have ever had sex with each other? Granted that a handful of women were able to take the plunge—weren't they anomalies, cut off from mainstream society or so privileged they didn't have to worry about what people thought?

Didn't most people think of women who had sex with other women as deviants, almost a third sex, who had little in common with women who became wives and mothers? Weren't most women's lives totally governed by heterosexuality—by biological reproduction and by a sense of opposite sexes powerfully drawn to each other but also perpetually in conflict? As is already clear, my answer to these questions is “no”—not because I do not believe that Victorian women were deeply invested in men, nor because I think that secretly all Victorian women were really lesbians, but because I came to see the basic premises of these questions as anachronistic and misguided.

My belief that we should pose different questions comes in part from my engagement with contemporary queer theory. Queer theory led me to ask what social formations swim into focus once we abandon the preconception of strict divisions between men and women, homosexuality and heterosexuality, same-sex bonds and those of family and marriage. That skepticism about the transhistorical truth of gender and sexual categories owes a great deal to Denise Riley, Joan Wallach Scott, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler, who have all argued that woman, desire, sexuality, and kinship are not fixed essences.³⁰ *Between Women* makes a historical point about the particular indifference of Victorians to a homo/hetero divide for women; this is also a theoretical claim that can reorient gender and sexuality studies in general. Queer theory often accentuates the subversive dimensions of lesbian, gay, and transgender acts and identities. The focus on secrecy, shame, oppression, and transgression in queer studies has led theorists, historians, and literary critics alike to downplay or refuse the equally powerful ways that same-sex bonds have been acknowledged by the bourgeois liberal public sphere.³¹ Studies of same-sex practices of kinship and reproduction have undone the idea that the family must be heterosexual, but continue to detect and in some cases advocate for a basic conflict between the heterosexual family and its queer variants.³² *Between Women* shows, by contrast, that in Victorian England, female marriage, gender mobility, and women's erotic fantasies about women were at the heart of normative institutions and discourses, even for those who made a religion of the family, marriage, and sexual difference.

This book makes new arguments because it brings fresh perspectives to bear on familiar materials, but also because it draws on sources that have been relatively neglected in sexuality studies. The history of sexuality has depended disproportionately on trial records and medical sources that foregrounded pathology and deviance. Women were not included in the legal definition of sodomy and were less likely than men to be arrested for public sex acts, and thus have faded from view in work based on

police reports and state records. Studies that adopt Foucault's foundational account of sexuality as the production of desires, bodies, races, and classes through generative prohibitions and the manufacture of sexual identities have defined homosexuality in terms of deviance, secrecy, and subcultures. Women have appeared in those studies only to the extent that they illustrate the reach of medical discourses of difference. In reading over one hundred examples of women's lifewriting, however, I found almost no evidence that women incorporated medical definitions of femininity or sexual inversion into their understanding of their bodies or desires. In lieu of marginal and subversive identities, this book offers an alternative concept that makes it easier to place women in history, and that women themselves used to define their place in the world: the social relationship, which is not reducible to sex, power, or difference. Social relationships are the stuff of everyday life, and of historical documents such as women's letters, diaries, memoirs, and biographies, as well as of novels, fashion magazines, and children's literature. Historians of women and lesbians have studied those sources before, but they have almost always assumed the dominance of a heterosexuality whose evidence stems from the fact that it is all we have been trained to see. A different theory allows us to use these sources to make new distinctions—for example, between how women wrote about friends and lovers. It also establishes new connections—for example, between femininity and homoeroticism, or between female marriages and marriages between men and women.

HOW I CAME TO WRITE THIS BOOK

Having summarized this book's conclusions, I would like to end this introduction by recounting the process that led me to them. At many points in this book I show how other scholars have failed to realize that relationships between women are central to the history of gender, sexuality, marriage, and the family. I am not surprised that they did not see a fact supported by abundant evidence, because I had difficulty seeing it myself. Although this book focuses almost exclusively on England, it began with a comparative observation. Like many before me, I was struck by how differently French and British literature represented lesbians. French poets, novelists, painters, and social investigators were notoriously interested in sex between women. Baudelaire wrote about it, as did Zola, Gautier, and Balzac; Courbet and Toulouse-Lautrec painted it; and Parent-Duchâtelet wrote about its prevalence among prostitutes. By contrast, the only British discourse to portray explicit sex between women was pornography, although occasional references also appeared in medical texts. In researching an essay called "Comparative Sapphism," I found

that British reviews of French literature about lesbians proved that Victorians were capable of deciphering even very coded allusions to sex between women. At the same time, however, they dismissed sapphic characters as morbid, diseased, perverse, exotic, and abnormal, and linked lesbianism to adultery, sodomy, and incest, all unnatural realities too degraded to mention.³³

The horror that British readers expressed at French literature about lesbianism initially puzzled me, because British literature was so much more invested than its French counterpart in representing intimacy between women. Steeped as I was in the theory of the lesbian continuum, I did not yet see that there was simply no reason to assume that female friendship or love between female kin had anything to do with lesbian sex. The intense physicality of British representations of female friendship and kinship only intensified my confusion. Here is Jane Eyre befriending schoolmate and moral paragon Helen Burns: “Resting my head on Helen’s shoulder, I put my arms round her waist; she drew me to her, and we reposed in silence.”³⁴ Dying of consumption, Helen invites Jane into bed with her: “[Y]our little feet are bare; lie down and cover yourself with my quilt” (113). Jane “nestle[s] close to her” in bed and before Helen dies, “clasp[s]” her “arms closer round” her as the girls exchange a last kiss (113–14). Half-sisters Marian and Laura in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860) offer another example of passionate devotion when one declares of the other, “I won’t live without her, and she can’t live without me. . . . I . . . love her better than my own life.” The night before Laura weds, she creeps into Marian’s bed, announcing, “I shall lose you so soon, Marian. . . . I must make the most of you while I can.”³⁵ In Christina Rossetti’s poem *Goblin Market* (1862), one character tells another, “Did you miss me? / Come and kiss me. / Never mind my bruises, / Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices / . . . / Eat me, drink me, love me; / Laura, make much of me.”³⁶ The fact that the speaker of these lines is a woman addressing her sister did not faze Victorian readers. Though in the twentieth century the poem has inspired lesbian tableaux in softcore pornography, Victorians included the poem in an anthology for schoolgirls.³⁷

As I thought about those examples, I realized that one clear difference between them and the characters in French sapphic literature was that in the British cases, a woman’s emotional and sensual connection to another woman helped unite her to a beloved husband, whereas the French lesbian canon highlighted the antagonisms between sapphism and bourgeois ideals of marriage. Even so, I wondered if such idealization of ardent bonds between women in England was confined to literature. Having combined historical and literary methods while researching and writing my first book about cities and domestic architecture, I welcomed a chance to delve into the archive again and turned to women’s diaries, letters, biographies,

and autobiographies. Some were manuscripts, some printed for private circulation only, others produced for the general public. Victorian women's lifewriting followed strict conventions, and putting friendship between women at the core of a life story was one of them. Women wrote to friends daily and kept in touch their entire lives. Whether writing about one another to third parties or directly addressing each other, their language was as romantic and gushing as that in any novel or poem. Prescriptive conduct literature presented a similar picture. When I reread texts by Sarah Ellis, whose publications set the tone for decades of Victorian domesticity, I found that she, too, made friendship a rule in women's lives. Although scholars who cite her today rarely remark on it, her works included entire chapters on female friendship. Calling on "woman to be true to woman," Ellis announced that friendship was as important an aspect of femininity as being a daughter, wife, and mother.³⁸

I then began to wonder whether the British focus on women's bonds might be an effect of literacy and writing. Perhaps the abstractness of language made it an acceptable medium for discussing bodily actions and sensations that were not socially approved. Perhaps the ways in which British novels and lifewriting emphasized sentiment and sympathy, or letters depended on distance, neutralized the intensity and the physicality of the relationships described. This was an easy hypothesis to test, since the Victorians were as prolific in their production of images as they were in their generation of texts. Paintings, photographs, and illustrated magazines showed, however, that female and male artists also treated the female twosome as a ubiquitous compositional convention. Portraits of women together usually focused on sisters, but friends often had themselves photographed together, and British fashion magazines portrayed women gazing at each other and touching, without identifying the relationship between them.

As I leafed through the magazine articles that surrounded those fashion plates, I was surprised to see that for several years in the 1860s, letters to the editor of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* focused on topics like forcing young women's unruly pubescent bodies into corsets, or the rectitude of adult women using corporal punishment to discipline daughters, wards, or pupils. It is well known that Victorian pornographers were obsessed with flagellation, but the scholarship I had read insisted that birching was a strictly masculine affair, that only men wrote or read about such things and that men were always the central figures in beating scenarios. Here, however, were women engaging in precisely the same fantasies; indeed, many of the letters published in women's magazines resurfaced in pornography, either reprinted verbatim or cited in Victorian bibliographies of erotic literature. In a magazine directed at middle-class housewives, interspersed with recipes, household hints, and news about

the latest Paris fashions, were dozens of letters like this one from an “English Mamma”: “I made her take off her trousers [underpants] in order that she might feel the chastisement properly. I then put her across my knee in ‘the old-fashioned style,’ and gave her about twenty sound strokes with the birch.”³⁹ Some correspondents accused women who punished girls of prurient motives; others wrote in asking where they could buy a birch rod or recommending slippers as a more ladylike instrument for punishing disobedient daughters.

Mothers in fashion magazines were a far cry from the dead maternal angels of Victorian novels or the idealized figures of conduct literature and lifewriting.⁴⁰ Annie Besant, commenting in her autobiography on the “idolatry” she felt for her mother, generalized that “[a]ll girls have in them the germ of passion. . . . I had but two ideals in my childhood and youth, round whom twined these budding tendrils of passion: they were my mother and the Christ.”⁴¹ Besant’s adoration for her mother was echoed across the century in the lifewriting of women such as Edith Simcox, Frances Power Cobbe, Ethel Smyth, and Augusta Becher.⁴² The diverse sexual lives of these women as adults (Besant was a sexual radical, Simcox lived for her unrequited love for a woman, Cobbe married a woman, Smyth had numerous affairs with women and a few men, and Becher married a man) shows that the homoeroticism of the mother-daughter bond did not have any fixed relationship to what we would now call sexual orientation. Nor did interactions between mothers and daughters always take the idyllic form typically found in women’s memoirs. Fashion magazines presented mothers and daughters as *objects* for one another and showed women indulging with remarkable freedom in public fantasies about exposing, humiliating, and punishing girls.

Fashion necessarily draws attention to bodies, however, and so even though the fashion magazines were family publications that reproduced middle-class values, it seemed important to see whether their interest in cross-generational objectification and aggression was unique. I turned to children’s literature, reasoning that it was defined by its integration into family life. Rather than focus on canonical works, I decided to cast a wider net and concentrate on literature written mostly by women for girls. During the period I was examining—the 1830s to the 1880s—school stories were not the dominant form they became later in the century, but dolls were a remarkably popular topic in literature for children and young adults. The dynamic between women and girls found in fashion magazines turned out also to structure stories about girls and their dolls, who could represent beautiful ladies for girls to worship, or disobedient subordinates for them to punish. Lady Seraphina, the doll who narrates *The Doll and Her Friends* (1852), declares: “I belong to a race the sole end of whose existence is to give pleasure to others [of] the female

sex.” She underscores the power the female sex exercises over dolls who are “mere dependents; some might even call us slaves . . . forced to submit to every caprice of our possessors.”⁴³ Tale after tale described dolls as the love objects of girls who were both adoring paramours and harsh, fickle mistresses.

I had begun by wondering why the British were so hesitant to discuss lesbianism in print, and so hostile to it when they did, given how interested they were in other forms of intimacy between women. The more I read, the more I realized that although I saw a necessary relationship between lesbianism and other types of bonds between women, Victorians did not share my assumption. The issue was certainly not that they could not imagine sex between women or even girls. British pornographers represented a full range of sexual acts between women, and like the nineteenth-century medical writers studied by Thomas Laqueur, recognized the importance of the clitoris to female sexual pleasure.⁴⁴ In *The Romance of Lust*, for example, a woman writes a letter to another woman, a former lover, bragging about her “clitoris. You know, by experience, what an excitable one it is.”⁴⁵ In 1846, feminist and art historian Anna Jameson warned that letting a girl share a bedroom with her governess might result in “mischief,” and doctors cautioned mothers that girls who slept together or with teachers or servants ran the risk of “exciting the passions.”⁴⁶

Scholars had written about Victorian women’s friendships, about fashion images and the corporal punishment debates, and about the importance of doll play for girls, but none grasped how typical each was of a normative femininity that could not be understood solely in terms of women’s submission to men.⁴⁷ Historians and literary critics viewed female friendship either as an education in chaste passivity or as a rebellion against marriage and men. But Victorian narratives took a wider view of female friendships, and in fact considered them crucial to realizing marriages between men and women. Women’s lifewriting showed that wives preserved the friends of their youth and made new ones, often with the approval of their husbands, parents, and ministers. Interpretations of nineteenth-century fashion imagery assert that it objectified women for men, but nineteenth-century fashion imagery was all about women’s beauty being displayed for women’s enjoyment. Most studies of dolls celebrated or denounced them for teaching girls to be passive playthings for men, but Victorian children’s books depicted girls having their way with dolls and actively subjecting these literal playthings to their wills.

As I mused over the gaps between contemporary paradigms and the evidence of the past, the problem became more and more clear: contemporary definitions of femininity presume that heterosexuality and lesbianism are opposed and mutually exclusive positions. Judith Butler has shown

how psychoanalytic theories of desire and kinship depend on what she calls the “heterosexual matrix of gender,” in which to be feminine is to be the opposite of masculine and to desire to be desired by the masculine.⁴⁸ According to the logic of this matrix, any relationship between women that is not confined to pure identification lacks psychic and cultural coherence; it exists outside the bounds of femininity, the family, and the social, in the shadowy, denigrated realm to which the middle decades of the twentieth century relegated lesbians and gay men. This clarified why scholars were so intent on placing female friends in a separate, parallel universe: a conceptual system that posits women as the opposites of men also assumes that women’s relationships with one another must oppose those they have with men. It also explained why so many argued that fashion imagery required the women who made and viewed it to assume a masculine perspective. They had assumed that desire for women was exclusive to men and to lesbians, which made it impossible to see that women who were not lesbians could also eagerly consume images of desirable femininity.

Like many others, even as I sought to go beyond the heterosexual matrix of gender, I had remained caught in its terms when I thought that British commentary on French sapphism was the relevant context for understanding relationships between women. Without meaning to, I had assumed that all relationships between women had to refer to lesbianism and be external to male-female desire. As a result, I sought to define relationships between women solely in relation to sexual desire, the glue that binds masculine to feminine in the heterosexual matrix. My assumption that relationships between women must oppose dominant heterosexuality had made it seem like a contradiction that people who were repulsed by lesbian sex in French literature encouraged and praised other intimate bonds between women. There was really no reason to think, however, that one had anything to do with the other, once I let go of the notion that all bonds between women functioned as the antithesis of heterosexual relations. Heterosexual gender itself no longer seemed an adequate concept for understanding the Victorian past. The sole thread connecting sapphic characters to magazines for housewives, lifewritings about female friendship, and girls’ books about dolls was the term “woman,” and only an unduly impoverished definition of the term could posit it as meaning the same thing in each instance.

This realization raised a final question, however, and answering it helped me to clarify my argument. I now grasped that our contemporary opposition between hetero- and homosexuality did not exist for Victorians, and that Victorians were thus able to see relationships between women as central to lives also organized around men. It seemed unlikely that the middle-class female majority who wrote adoringly of their

friends or enjoyed reading about adult women whipping teenage girls were actively engaged in sex with women. But what of the small but real number of Victorian women who did have sexual relationships with other women? Did Victorians who were not themselves in such relationships see them as nothing but chaste friends or recognize them as sexual, and if so, how did they characterize them? Did they treat women in same-sex couples with the fear and contempt that British reviewers directed at the sapphic characters they saw less as women and more as diseased monsters? Or did they accord them the same respect, admiration, and encouragement as female friends? Did they consider women in female couples to be masculine, hyperfeminine, or divided into male and female roles?

In pursuing answers to these questions, I was assisted by recent studies that have advanced lesbian history beyond endless debates about whether women in the nineteenth century ever had sex with other women. It is a ridiculous controversy, since if it were true that no women had sex with women in the nineteenth century, that era would turn out to be the only lesbian-free zone in recorded history. Preposterous as that may sound, it is a belief that people articulate all the time, either as a global proposition or on a case-by-case basis. By the time I wrote this book, however, Terry Castle, Lisa Merrill, Julia Markus, and Martha Vicinus had established that women such as Anne Lister, Charlotte Cushman, Rosa Bonheur, Harriet Hosmer, Emily Faithfull, Minnie Benson, Ethel Smyth, and Frances Power Cobbe all had sexual relationships with other women, after the eighteenth-century tribade had faded from polite discourse and before nineteenth-century sexology invented the invert.⁴⁹ As I read about those women and their lovers, I was struck that several were married to men, and even more by how many defined their longterm relationships with women as marriages. Furthermore, often both women in a couple identified interchangeably with the roles of husband and wife. They called each other “sposa,” “hubby,” “wedded wife,” “my other and better half,” described themselves as “married,” and were recognized as couples by men and women leading far more orthodox lives.⁵⁰

The question of whether or not women in female couples actually had sex became less important than the fact that they themselves and many in their social networks perceived them as married. The mere fact of both members of a conjugal unit being women was not sufficient to discount their relationship as a socially recognized form of kinship. British reviewers saw fictional sapphists like Nana and Paquita in terms of a reality too carnal, raw, and lawless to be countenanced, not simply because of their sexual acts with women, but because of their disregard for wedlock: Nana and her female lover are both prostitutes, and Paquita has sex with a man

because he resembles her married female lover. Women who established longterm relationships with other women, by contrast, saw themselves, and were seen by others, as placid embodiments of the middle-class ideal of marriage: a bond defined by sex that also had the power to sanctify sex. The French sapphist was an antisocial threat to family life, but women in female marriages had a place in the social order, as variations on its domestic ideal.

The ease with which women in female marriages were assimilated to conjugality helped me to refine the place of sex in what I now saw was my central preoccupation: the different forms of socially valued relationships between Victorian women. Friendship, infatuation, marriage, and women's objectification of women had to be differentiated, not measured in terms of a single sexual standard. Work in queer studies on same-sex families helped me to understand how, especially in the nineteenth century, marriage signified not only a private sexual bond but also a host of other relations: integration into social networks, the sharing of household labor, physical and spiritual caretaking, and the transmission of property.⁵¹ Having developed a definition of the erotic that helped to explain how important objectifying women was to the constitution of normative femininity, I now saw the importance of understanding how marriage was legitimated by activities other than sex.

CONCLUSION

Between Women offers a history of sexuality and gender that does not focus on power differences or oppositions between polarized genders and antithetical sexualities. Instead it explores what remains to be seen if we proceed without Oedipus, without castration, without the male traffic in women, without homophobia and homosexual panic. Unsettling commonalities emerge. Egalitarian affection turns out to be common to female friendships and marriages between women and men. Matrons, housewives, and ladies of fashion act in ways usually identified with heterosexual masculinity. Aggression, hierarchy, objectification, and voyeurism dominate representations of mothers and daughters, girls and dolls, and images of femininity designed for female consumers. Positing the existence of more than one kind of relationship between women leads us to recognize that many of those relationships worked in tandem with heterosexual exchange and patriarchal gender norms.

To find a fit between marriage, the family, and bonds between women is not to accuse women of complicity with gender and sexual oppression. Nor do my points about the elasticity, mobility, and plasticity of norms

and institutions suggest that they were equitable in the past or offer models for the present. Rather, my aim is to demonstrate their variability. Past theories and histories have seen the bonds between women as either the quintessence of femininity or its defiant inversion. *Between Women* shows that even in the past, in a society that insisted strenuously on the differences between men and women, there existed institutions, customs, and relationships whose elasticity, mobility, and plasticity undid even the most cherished and foundational oppositions.

So much of what Victorians had to say about conventional women exceeded the sexual difference model, yet so little of what we have detected in the Victorian past goes beyond the limits of our present-day belief that heterosexual norms dominate all lives, even those of people who self-consciously exist outside them. Gender and sexuality as defined by marriage and the family have been opposed to gender and sexuality as defined by same-sex bonds. This book proposes that we try to understand how they were intertwined in ways that make homosexuality and heterosexuality less than useful categories for dividing up the Victorian world. The power of men to define women's lives and the centrality of men in women's lives were both real and important aspects of Victorian society, and it is not my intention to demonstrate otherwise here. Our mistake has been to assume that those structural forces precluded the strong, complex, and socially acknowledged bonds between women that are the subject of this book.