



Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England

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Women in Victorian England wore jewelry made from each other's hair and wrote poems celebrating decades of friendship. They pored over magazines that described the dangerous pleasures of corporal punishment. A few had sexual relationships with each other, exchanged rings and vows, willed each other property, and lived together in long-term partnerships described as marriages. But, as Sharon Marcus shows, these women were not seen as gender outlaws. Their desires were fanned by consumer culture, and their friendships and unions were accepted and even encouraged by family, society, and church. Far from being sexless angels defined only by male desires, Victorian women openly enjoyed looking at and even dominating other women. Their friendships helped realize the ideal of companionate love between men and women celebrated by novels, and their unions influenced politicians and social thinkers to reform marriage law.

Through a close examination of literature, memoirs, letters, domestic magazines, and political debates, Marcus reveals how relationships between women were a crucial component of femininity. Deeply researched, powerfully argued, and filled with original readings of familiar and surprising sources, *Between Women* overturns everything we thought we knew about Victorian women and the history of marriage and family life. It offers a new paradigm for theorizing gender and sexuality--not just in the Victorian period, but in our own.

Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England Details

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Just A. Bean says

Bit of a mixed bag, but the good far outweighed the tedious. I loved the insights into Victorian society's view and use of female bonds and relationships. Some of the early novel analysis was great, as was the fashion section and the first part of the female marriages.

The author is right, I really hadn't heard a lot of these relationships discussed before, especially not in a platonic context, and her points are well made and clear, to the point of seeming obvious once you've read them.

A few chapters, namely the ones on *Great Expectations* and *Can You Forgive Her?* tended to drag for me.

Elvis says

Oh man, this is the 19th century scholarship I love - lesbo interest, academic, good times. I haven't finished this book, but if it were for a class in school I'd be all up in its grill. see quotes below...

"I went with Emily to the skating on asphalt at Princes in Hans place. I never saw a prettier sight - some 200 young women all in more or less graceful motion and dressed in all manner of print dresses with most astonishing and picturesque hats. The beauty of the girls was something to make one scream with delight. The older I grow the more slave I am to beauty."

- from the 1874 diary of Lady Monkswell, married Englishwoman

"Today, a woman so susceptible to another woman's attractions would be obligated to qualify her screams of delight by explaining whether she was or was not a lesbian...Nothing could be further from the world of Lady Monkswell, which never delineated a clear lesbian social type and thus accepted female friendship, female marriage, and female homoeroticism as components of conventional femininity. Precisely because Victorians saw lesbian sex almost nowhere, they could embrace erotic desire between women almost everywhere. Female homoeroticism did not subvert dominant codes of femininity, because female homoeroticism was one of those codes."

(my underlining)

p. 113, "Between Women - friendship, desire, & marriage in Victorian England" by Sharon Marcus

Gayla Bassham says

I didn't *quite* finish this because I haven't read the Trollope novel she writes about at the very end and I didn't want to spoil myself.

I found the first third of the book insightful and useful, the rest less so. My perspective may be colored somewhat by the fact that I am reading for research purposes and the first third was much more relevant to

what I'm working on. The final section, about female (same-sex) marriage in the Victorian era, was interesting and definitely piqued my curiosity because I didn't really know anything about it, but I felt that her treatment of it was a bit scattershot.

Molly says

Is there anything more written about yet less understood than the desire(s) of the Victorian woman? After Foucault, we no longer see the Victorians as entirely sexually repressed, yet the ways in which those desires are articulated and performed remains problematic. Marcus enters the discourse with a discussion of relationships among females (friendly, maternal, and sexual), which are ubiquitous in Victorian culture and 19th-century marriage plot novels, yet overshadowed by an emphasis on heterosexual coupling.

Marcus shows how this emphasis, predicated on the belief that Victorian women found value and identity solely in heterosexual and heterosocial relationships, may be misread. Using Victorian lifewriting, novels, and fashion plates as her evidence, she argues that women of the 19th-century were primarily focused on their relationships with other women and that for a woman to have her emotional needs and erotic desires met by another woman was not an aberration but rather a cultural norm.

There are some fantastic leaps in logic here, and too great a reliance on Freudian interpretation of texts. The idea that a foot protruding from underneath a skirt in a fashion plate is intended or perceived by anyone to represent an erect clitoris is laughable, for example. Yet Marcus does, at the very least, open a discussion of friendship among Victorian women (and men), and invites more analysis of the many varied meanings indicated in the word "friend," especially in the context of the traditional marriage plot.

Pam Rosenthal says

I'm no professional, but this may be the best book of academic literary criticism I've ever read. It's definitely one of the most delightful. She writes like a dream -- with a wonderful knack for piling on the info and reasoning and then giving you the summary point as a well-formed witty, simple sentence.

Drawing upon a formidable depth of what she calls life-writings of Victorian women, interspersing it with fine, deft readings of Victorian novels -- and (this is really the fun part) digging into magazine writing, advice columns, fashion plates, porn, "doll fiction" (who knew?) -- Marcus takes a generation of late 20th century feminist scholarship, writing and feminist agendas about women's relationships during the Victorian era, gives it a good shake, and comes out with a reasoned, reasonable, convincing view of a set of complex dynamics.

Going beyond agendas while respecting the importance of agendas, she helps us see ourselves as well.

I'm not doing it justice. But I'll probably be back to try again.

Mariana says

A nice, informative book about how victorian women saw other women and how they interacted with each other, as friends, family and lovers (or maybe all three -- it happened). Though, the book is much more dense than it sounds like, and I didn't like that the author took so much space to explain something i.e. how anthropology sees marriage, to then later explain the actual point of the chapter. Like, I'm studying anthropology and I can take it but I see some people might tire.

Anyway, as much as it was informative and interesting all I got was that every woman is a lesbian at heart, including Reggie's mum.

Cory Blystone says

Odd enough, this gay guy rather enjoyed this lesbian slash dominatrix slash feminist slash can't-tell-the-difference-between-children's-literature-or-a-lady's-home-journal-article-or-pornography-because-they-pretty-much-all-read-the-same book that explores the underbelly of women in Victorian society.

Eileen says

Super interesting and very well done. It took some effort for me to readjust to reading serious academic writing, but once I was in, I was in. I may have to actually buy a copy.

- "Counseled to be passive in relation to men, women were allowed to act with initiative and spontaneity toward female friends, and friendship enabled women to exercise powers of choice and expression that they could not display in relation to parents or prospective husbands." p. 56.
- "In Victorian lifewriting, passionate references to hearts on fire and burning with love are a sure sign that a woman is about to discuss Jesus." p. 63.
- "In Victorian fiction, it is only the woman who has no bosom friend who risks becoming, like Lucy Snowe, one whom no man will ever clasp to his heart in marriage, a friendless woman who remains perpetually outside the bosom of the family." - p.108, ref. Villette.
- "Victorian commodity culture incited an erotic appetite for femininity in women, framed spectacular images of women for a female gaze, and prompted women's fantasies about dominating a woman or submitting to one. Victorian society accepted female homoeroticism as a component of respectable womanhood and encouraged women and girls to desire, scrutinize, and handle simulacra of alluring femininity." p. 112.
- "Fashion, often associated with a sexually charged inconstancy, becomes a respectable form of promiscuity for women, a form of female cruising, in which strangers who inspect each other in passing can establish an immediate intimacy because they participate in a common public culture whose medium is clothing." p. 121.
- Corporal punishment is where pornography, usually considered a masculine affair, intersects with fashion magazines targeted at women. [...] Other pornographic publications actually reprinted verbatim material first published in fashion magazines." p. 140.
- "Like a mythical figure, the doll simultaneously embodied opposed states: adult and child, husband and wife, slave and mistress, adoring and adored, punisher and punished, subject and object." p. 165.
- "Having acquired a girl of her own without submitting to a father or husband, Miss Havisham turns that girl into a phallus. [...] Another way to put this is that Miss Havisham turns Estella into a dildo, a surrogate appendage 'mould[ed] into the form that her wild resentment, spurned affection, and wounded pride, found vengeance in' (394). [...] Like a dildo, Estella is endowed with the power of the woman who wields her but

has no sensation of her own. [...] Put differently, Estella is Miss Havisham's fashion plate and doll, trained to toy with men." p. 174-5, ref. Great Expectations.

- "Forced by necessity to construct ad hoc legal frameworks for their relationships, nineteenth-century women in female marriages not only were precursors of late twentieth-century 'same-sex domestic partners,' but also anticipated forms of marriage between men and women that were only institutionalized decades after their deaths." p. 206.

- "For marriage between men and women to be equal, feminists argued, single women had to be able to lead practicable and pleasurable lives. The demand to reform marriage began as a quest to make it more equal and more flexible, then evolved into a demand to make it less obligatory. To change the quality of life for the unmarried would alter marriage itself." p. 208.

- "If nineteenth-century Europeans did not uniformly assume that the union of man and woman was the only civilized form of marriage it was due in part to the antic heterogeneity of public opinion about what form the institution should take. The 1850s and 1860s were defined by arguments, not agreement, over what constituted marriage and family, and same-sex marriage informed those debates." p. 225.

- "Like most middle-class Victorians, Trollope valued intimacy between women as a component of normative femininity and hence as a basis for marriage. Female marriage perturbed Trollope because of its links to a troubling innovation in marriage between men and women -- the feminist reform of marriage into a dissoluble and egalitarian contract. [...] To narrate the triumph of hierarchical marriage and female amity, however, Trollope must acknowledge the existence and attractions of contractual and female marriage as viable social forms legible within the realist novel's social order." p. 228 , ref Can You Forgive Her?

Abigail says

I really liked this. Smart and full of interesting information.

Libby says

Reading the whole book vastly enriched the assigned chapter but ... I'm not completely sold. Really nicely written though.

Miriam says

This is a really wonderful book. I was especially impressed with the way that Sharon Marcus combined historical and literary analysis, and "just reading" is a real breath of fresh air in the field. I must say that I was quite surprised at many of her findings, but very positively so. I recommend this book most strongly to anyone looking to learn more about women's relationships in Victorian England.

Milo says

En cuanto a libro, le doy cuatro estrellas. Bien contrastado, argumentado y con numerosos ejemplos. Las tres estrellas son porque respecto a lectura se me ha hecho algo pesado, ya que la autora es profesora de literatura comparada e incide demasiado en obras concretas analizando a sus personajes en vez de ceñirse más al

contexto histórico.

Andrea Blythe says

In *Between Women*, Sharon Marcus aims to disprove the misconception that female friendship, desire, and marriage were not contrary to heterosexual relations in Victorian England, as well as to show that "the asexual Victorian woman able only to respond to male advances is a myth -- not a Victorian myth, but our own."

She presents three forms of female relationships. The first is female friendship, which was considered to be an important aspect of a woman's education in femininity. It was important in the Victorian era that a woman maintain friendships with other women, friendships that were intimate and passionate (but nonsexual), otherwise she may be deemed unwomanly by her lack of such friendship. In fact, Marcus shows how female friendship was vital to a successful marriage instead of opposed to it, and presents several novel plots in which the happy marriage at the end would not have been possible without female friendship.

The second form of relations involves female desire, namely in the eroticised figures of fashion plates and dolls. Marcus presents evidence that rather than being simply an objectification of women for male desires, fashion plates and dolls were meant primarily to represent and avenue for female enjoyment and pleasure.

The third relationship form she looks at are female marriages, in which two women merge their households, will their property to their partner, and behave in the same way as any married couple. Marcus shows these marriages were not the antithesis of heterosexual marriage, but an acceptable alternative to it. Women in female marriages were not outcasts, but for the most part accepted as couples in certain circles of society. And in fact it was partially the example of female marriage as contractual that aided in the reform of heterosexual marriages.

This book was a fascinating reading, opening my mind to new perspectives about Victorian England. Looking back on the past, it is easy to generalize, often to the result that some aspect of history and culture gets ignored in trying to define it. This book is a reminder that one should not assume that everyone behaved a certain way in the past, and that culture is as infinitely complicated as in our every day lives.

I would certainly recommend this book to anyone interested in Victorian history.

Nicole says

Parts of this book were interesting, but a lot of it was too academic for my tastes. There were large sections on analyzing novels and I came into this wanting to read about real people not fictional people. The first few chapters were very interesting though!

Christi says

Here are notes I made on a scrap of paper as I read. I'm putting them here so I can remember my impressions of the book after I toss the scrap of paper:

* I love the close-readings, especially Marcus's attention to language, syntax, rhythm, order, etc.

* Marcus is able to make any novel fit into her theory, even when a given plot line appears to contradict it: i.e., "This novel is an exception that proves my argument is the rule." Her ability to craft an answer for everything that challenges her model is both amusing and impressive.

* I was prepared to roll my eyes through the "Just Reading" chapter, in which she proposes and theorizes the radical critical approach of taking novels at face value rather than searching for subversive meanings or implied content. However, the chapter is actually very good.

* Marcus's reading of *Shirley* is a bit uncomfortable because it argues that Caroline's mother essentially proposes marriage to her own daughter.

* I'm not sure I understand how Marcus is defining the erotic (p. 114). Is she conflating the erotic with desire?

[end of paper scrap]
