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Review: Friendship, Marriage, and "Between Women"

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BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Friendship, Marriage, and *Between Women*

RICHARD DELLAMORA

In *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, Sharon Marcus has impressively combined portions of two, or even three, books. Of these, the one that I find especially enjoyable is Part Two, “Mobile Objects: Female Desire,” in which she offers a witty parody, full of reversals and inversions, of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s 1985 book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. At its time of publication, Sedgwick’s book posed some major challenges to practitioners of feminist literary studies. With a few notable exceptions, feminist literary scholars of the preceding decade had focused on establishing a female literary canon. Sedgwick’s book was dramatically different, focusing as it did exclusively on works from the classic male literary canon. In addition, Sedgwick showed little interest in relations between women. Instead, she anatomized male homosocial desire—the rivalrous, potentially deadly attraction/repulsion acted out in the representation of desire triangulated between two men and a woman. Women’s agency was so diminished in this Sedgwickian model that in the key chapter of the book, a brilliant reading of Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), Sedgwick argued that Lizzie Hexam, the “courageous” (178) working-class female heroine, was reduced to the status of a “slave” by her marriage at the end of the novel (179).¹

In this forum, we invited Richard Dellamora, Laura E. Nym Mayhall, and Martha Vicinus to explore issues raised in:

Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England, by Sharon Marcus; pp. x + 368. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, \$65.00, \$19.95 paper.

Sharon Marcus was then asked to respond.

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Revisiting *Between Men* two decades later, in Part One of her book, Marcus reclaims female-female desire for gender and sexuality studies of the Victorian novel by arguing that the marriage plot of Victorian fiction has as much—or more—to do with fostering lifelong friendships between women as it has to do with successful courtship. In Part Two, Marcus focuses on material culture: first, in the exchange of female same-sex attraction and pleasure in the commodified world of female fashion; and second, in the sadomasochistic female same-sex fantasies that inhabit the world of doll literature. Marcus's gleeful pursuit of perversity in both of these contexts carries through to the main literary analysis that appears in this section, her counter-reading of Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860–61) as a narrative of desire triangulated not according to Sedgwick's model but between two women and a man. Marcus persuasively argues that Pip, the young male protagonist, learns opposite-sex desire by imitating Miss Havisham's desire for Estella.

While Marcus's reversals of Sedgwick are queer in their affirmation of sadomasochistic female same-sex desire, they also return feminist sex/gender studies to where it was before Sedgwick's advent: namely, to a focus on female gender and on desiring relations between women. In its interest in gender-crossing, transgender, and transsexuality, queer theory by Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and others has crucially revised this approach to gender studies. But while Marcus's Pip is a gender-crosser, "Mobile Objects" in the title of Part Two refers mainly to how female same-sex pleasure and desire circulate through a world of commodities designed for female consumption.

In Part One, Marcus sets the stage for this analysis by linking the study of female friendship (approached via many examples of female life-writing composed between 1830 and 1880) with what she describes as the plot of "female amity" in Victorian novels. In Part Three, she focuses on what she refers to as "female marriage" in the fiction of Anthony Trollope and in mid-Victorian anthropological and legal debates about the character of marriage as an institution. Despite this emphasis on female friendship and marriage, Marcus argues that her approach debunks classic 1970s studies of female intimacy by writers who tended to see close ties between women as subversive of male privilege. Marcus asserts instead that female marriages were accepted within middle- and upper-class society. This assessment is not in itself novel. Sally Cline, for example, says with regard to Radclyffe Hall's early infatuation with the singer Agnes Nicholls:

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Certain restrictions . . . were placed on these friendships. Should two women . . . wish to pursue their attachment by forming an established ménage, they had to remember three caveats: first, that if an eligible male appeared he must not be discouraged but must be integrated alongside the women's friendship; secondly, that two women in love were not expected to try and find employment to support their relationship; thirdly, that as such a relationship was not perceived [Marcus might say not declared] by the outside world as erotic, the two women concerned must take great care not to indicate that it was. Given these restrictions, intimate, exclusive, discreetly erotic relations between white middle and upper class women were perceived as "normal" and compatible with heterosexuality in Anglo-European culture. (41-42)

Marcus, however, makes the point in a memorably provocative fashion by connecting it with the struggle for women's legal and social rights within marriage law (193-94).

Because Marcus believes that female same-sex desire, pleasure, and relationships were, in effect, normal features of Victorian sexuality at mid-century, she rejects the use of the word "lesbian" to refer to the relations that she studies (257-62). In view of this fact, it is surprising to find her describing mid-Victorian women as heterosexuals. A world without lesbians is also a world without heterosexuals. Why? Because heterosexuality is usually understood to be a modern form of sexuality defined in terms of the homosexual/heterosexual binary.² Writers such as Michel Foucault, Lynda Hart, and Jonathan Ned Katz regard the concept of heterosexuality as an effect of the invention of the clinical perversions in late-Victorian sexology (see, for example, Katz 19-32). If, however, one assumes that female sexual dissidence does not occur before 1880, what in this context does the word "heterosexual" mean? Marcus's choice of this word opens a conceptual space that remains to be theorized. One example of a current attempt to do so occurs in Kathy Psomiades's argument that anthropologists and novelists were busily involved in the cultural invention of heterosexuality from the 1860s onward (93-118).

Another significant methodological issue raised by *Between Women* concerns whether the desire referred to in the title is psychoanalytic or not. Marcus's declared methodology of "just reading" (3) suggests that it is not, but the sadomasochistic fantasies that she locates, for example, in illustrations to Clara Bradford's *Ethel's Adventures in Doll Country* (1880) indicate otherwise (150-51). Here Marcus might well put to use Sedgwick's insight into Freud's view of the historicity of sexual categories: "What counts as the sexual is, as we shall see, variable and itself political. The exact, contingent space of indeterminacy—the place

of shifting over time—of the mutual boundaries between the political and the sexual is, in fact, the most fertile space of ideological formation. This is true because ideological formation, like sexuality, depends on retroactive change in the naming or labeling of the subject” (15).

My own particular interest focuses on the first term of the subtitle, *Friendship*, both because Marcus makes a contribution to friendship studies that could prompt significant new work in the area and because the direction of *Between Women* toward what she refers to as a “theory of the social” (259) may benefit from insights into friendship writing developed since the advent of queer theory. As a result of Marcus’s study, it is clear that the ethics of friendship are significant in relation to the political valence of both female friendship and female marriage, then and now. The potential implications of this for the study of the Victorian novel are considerable. Consider, for example, Anthony Trollope’s novel, *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864–65), to which Marcus devotes her concluding chapter. Feminist criticism of the novel has tended to focus on the topic of marriage, and Marcus does so as well, arguing at the end of the chapter that two important female relationships in the novel constitute female marriages (251–55).³ These friendships, however, do not meet the criteria by which Marcus earlier defines marriage.⁴ One might argue instead that Trollope is as much or more interested in the ethics of female friendship as he is in opposite-sex courtship and marriage, whether male-female or female-female. Looked at in this light, Alice Vavasor’s series of four engagements with two men may matter less in itself than in the fact that it demands a scrupulous response from female friends.

In recent years, the ethics of friendship has been a focal point for scholars such as Alan Bray and several others, myself included.⁵ Concluding with studies of the intimate lives of Anne Lister and John Henry Newman, Bray’s book, *The Friend* (2003), traces the significance of elite same-sex friendship in England from late medieval times to the end of the nineteenth century. As the title of his earlier *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (1982) indicates, Bray’s more recent book widens his chronological range while shifting his attention from male homosexuality—an anachronistic term in reference to early modern culture—to the friendship tradition. In doing so, Bray moves from questions about sexual identity and practices that preoccupied the gay rights movement of the 1970s to concerns about ethics, affect, and temporality. Bray also engages the rhetoric of friendship in both political and religious practice.

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In *Friendship's Bonds* (2004), I part ways with Bray by arguing that the values upheld in the male friendship tradition continued to be significant in the lives, writing, and political practices of elite men in England during the long struggle for the extension of voting rights. If the classical tradition of male friendship did, in fact, play an important part in Victorian elite male culture, it is also the case that female writers and intellectuals would have adapted it to their own needs and objectives. I explore this appropriation in a chapter on *Daniel Deronda* (1876) as well as in a subsequent essay on Vernon Lee, a writer outstanding in her ability to evoke the psychological complexities of both male and female same-sex friendship (*Friendship's Bonds* 127–52; “Productive Decadence”). From *Between Women*, I have learned that the combination of autonomy and equality demonstrated by members of female marriages—for example, by Frances Power Cobbe and her partner, Mary Lloyd—helped feminists in their efforts to advocate for civil divorce in England.⁶ These two norms, autonomy and equality, are central to the friendship tradition. In this respect, the expansion of women’s civil and social rights required the integration of friendship into both same- and opposite-sex marriages.

Marcus says that individuals in female marriage modeled the sorts of changes necessary in conventional marriage. In addition, feminists’ arguments for reform of marriage law tacitly affirmed the validity of female same-sex marriage (211). A double translation is thus at work as the same-sex relationship encourages a new gender situation in marriage and a new conception of the institution of marriage itself, which in friendship tradition had always been characterized as capable only of a secondary form of friendship, one determined by domestic utilities. In light of this, it is not clear whether Cobbe’s political efforts proved to be effective because they shifted marriage to the basis of a dissoluble contract entered into by equal partners, as Marcus argues, or because they infused institutionalized pair-bonding with the values of primary friendship. Does marriage have priority in this context, or does friendship? It seems to me that both contentions are equally plausible: one can say that either marriage or the transformation of marriage by friendship is key. Marriage needed to be imagined and lived differently in order for legal changes to become practicable. Both elements were necessary to Cobbe’s efficacy.

Although extrapolated from nineteenth-century examples, this argument is not merely a historical one. Marcus sees the expan-

sion of desiring relations across the lines of modern sexual identities to be ethically valuable as well (262). And her historical analysis of Victorian female marriage offers support to current efforts to expand the marital rights of LGBT subjects. Questions, however, do remain. One is prompted by Marcus's observation that members of female marriages were influential in establishing the concept of the legal dissolubility of marriage. Not all proponents of female marriage, however, accepted this proposition. Radclyffe Hall, for example, affirmed the indissolubility of the tie at considerable personal cost. Although her letters and late fiction, published and unpublished, demonstrate the impossibility of sustaining this position on an individual basis, her thinking is consonant with the ethic of friendship, which envisaged primary friendship as a lifelong commitment. How is one to reconstrue this ethic in the light of modern living arrangements? And is friendship more relevant than marriage to the contemporary experiments in queer living that Judith Halberstam, for instance, canvasses in the introduction to *In a Queer Time and Place*?

Bray points out that lifelong commitments between the friends he studies did not involve the legal sharing and distribution of property, which was instead disposed of, within the system of alliance in early modern culture (Foucault 106-07). If friendship—and marriage based on friendship—is to be affirmed as either *a* or *the* major form of life-bonding desirable among LGBT subjects, are these norms consistent with arrangements of property that focus marriage values on affirming, securing, and enhancing the couple and its immediate adherents but that do not radiate outward toward concerns about social benefit? Autonomy and equality are necessary in classical friendship writing, but equally so are virtue and reason. Aristotle and many after him, Victorians included, believed that the proper exercise of virtue in personal friendship and in the personal ties that linked participants in government could both moralize and sustain democratic practices. The ethic of friendship makes demands on friends not only in their personal lives but in their public lives as well. Although marriage can be and is being democratized in countries such as Canada and Spain, will it take forms that are consistent with the demand for social justice (Goldberg, "A Wedding" A21)? This question accords with an important line of thought which considers the legalization of marriage between LGBT subjects to be contradictory to the objectives of queer activist politics (Warner 81-147).

In an effort to bring her Victorian examples into conversation with these kinds of contemporary issues, Marcus argues that Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) "belongs to a canon informed by twentieth-century definitions of subjectivity and gender identity, a worldview in which desire between sexes tellingly called 'opposite' was conceived as a battle between the sexes" (80). But Brontë saw the role of property in personal relations as foreclosing the possibility of either friendship or love in marriage for both Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff. In her novel, Brontë draws on the rhetoric of friendship to link this function with expressly public issues of slavery, racism, the abuse of industrial labor, and colonial maladministration (Dellamora, "Earnshaw's Neighbor"). Is it possible, within a minority rights movement, to make marriage function as a fulcrum, lever, or motor for the expansion of rights for members of one's own and others' minorities? To a degree, yes. Marcus, however, leaves unsketched the connection that she would like to see theorized between marriage and "the social."

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NOTES

¹In contrast to this, Marcus later offers a nuanced account of the legal and cultural situation of women in England after the passage of the 1857 Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act (204–12).

²The interest shown by the conclusion of Marcus's book in moving our understanding of human sexual diversity beyond the limits of the heterosexual/homosexual binary recalls Vicinus's *Intimate Friends*, which has extremely interesting things to say about the variability of the terms of intimate relationships between women (109–42). See also Vicinus's subsequent essay on the triangulated relationship that existed between Katharine Bradley, Edith Cooper, and Bernard Berenson ("Sister Souls").

³For a classic feminist reading of Trollope's novel, see Flint xv–xxx.

⁴"The Victorian middle class defined marriage in terms of shared households, financial support, bequests of wealth and property, the care of the body in life and death, and vows and practices of exclusive commitment and unique spiritual communion" (230).

⁵Because the topic is underdeveloped in Victorian studies (relative to early modern studies), students of same-sex desire with an interest in friendship will want to avail themselves of important work at the nexus of same-sex desire, friendship, and classical friendship rhetoric. I have in mind work by authors such as Masten, Shannon, Traub, and Jonathan Goldberg.

⁶Hamilton makes a similar argument; see 25–94.

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