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Between Victorian Women

Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England. Sharon Marcus. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. 356 pp.

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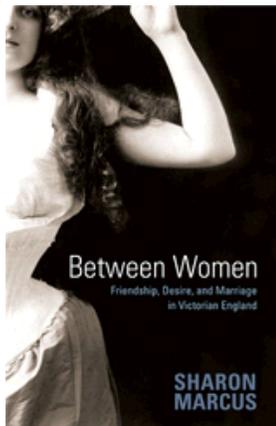
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<1>*Between Women* is a book of vast scope, but built of meticulous detail. To make the case that relationships between nineteenth-century women were more central, more varied, and more surprising than we knew, Sharon Marcus surveys an enormous canon of Victorian fiction and lifewriting produced between 1830 and 1880. Recentering exchanges between women in nineteenth-century culture, and recalibrating the lexicon of both feminist and queer theory, Marcus invites us into her argument by simply *showing* us the range of relationships she theorizes. She shows us, for example, the author of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” poetically comparing her late-life affection for her friend Mrs. Mackintosh with “the gathering of the last ripe figs” (32), and actress Fanny Kemble fervently wishing for an acquaintance’s gown to “slip entirely off her exquisite bust” (60).

<2>*Between Women* is a study of mostly mainstream representational practice, but it shows how capacious that mainstream is. Like Eve Sedgwick’s *Between Men* (1985), Marcus shows that “one does not have to go outside the canon” to find examples of same-sex relation (81). Marcus, too, emphasizes that the female friendships and relations that absorb her attention are by no means marginal, both in the sense that they are found in canonical texts and that they are central to the plots and narratives of those texts. We may object that the Victorian novel is, above all, defined by its devotion to the (heterosexual) marriage plot. But Marcus retorts that in the Victorian novel, heterosexual marriage and friendship, or even sexual passion, between women are by no means mutually exclusive. They are, rather, mutually enabling. It is, Marcus argues, contemporary literary criticism that “has set female development in opposition to marriage, arguing that while the hero of a bildungsroman realizes his ambitions when he chooses a spouse, the heroine relinquishes hers when she consents to wed” (99). Contemporary literary critics might suppose that marriage is an antifeminist fate, but Marcus urges that “in many Victorian narratives, female friendship is a vector of both marriage and feminism; it bolsters the female self and this ensures that a heroine’s marriage follows from her strength, not her weakness” (99). One of the most interesting side effects of this critique of current queer and feminist theory is that it brings older lesbian-feminist criticism back into view. *Between Women* encourages us to revisit the writings of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Adrienne Rich, and Lillian Faderman as well as Martha Vicinus’ early work. Elizabeth Freeman and others have recently argued that lesbian feminism, with its paradigms of continuums and communities, is often cast as the “big drag” on supposedly newer, sexier, bendier queer theory.⁽¹⁾ We need to revisit, not revile, lesbian-feminist work and should claim it as an important part of our critical heritage: Marcus provides a platform from which to do that.

<3>The most seemingly dramatic example of the interrelation of marriage and same-sex love is the marriages between women, which Marcus demonstrates were taken in stride by many Victorians. But drama, Marcus argues, had little to do with it. She shows that these women’s marriages were alluded to freely, casually and without commotion. She carefully situates these marriages in the context of many other intense relations between women—“friendship, mother-daughter dynamics, and women’s investment in images of femininity.” Marcus identifies what she calls “the plot of female amity” (82)—in which female friendship furthers the heterosexual marriage plot. Women help each other marry men, and then remain each other’s friends and helpmeets during and after those marriages. Women are, in this picture, tireless mediators. The actively mediating role that Marcus describes leads me to hear that preposition “between” quite differently from the “between” in *Between Men*. In Sedgwick’s study, the woman is between men primarily as an interference, enabling a homosocial structure of feeling that is generated by the



men who benefit from it. In the social formations Marcus describes, women are the energetic go-betweens, working to enable structures like heterosexual marriage. Marcus does not push the point of how much work this entails. Female friendships may sustain and be sustaining, but are they also quite literally exhausting? Questions of service and labor go unposed and unanswered: is a woman's work never done?

<4>But if labor is swept under the carpet, leisure and play are more generative terms in this study, in part because it is middle-class structures that Marcus takes under her lens. And one of the most inventive chapters in this book, a chapter called "The Feminine Plaything," turns its attention directly to the representational world of playing women. Like Marcus' first monograph, *Apartment Stories* (1999), this chapter is a detailed analysis of domestic commodity consumption. It is also a chapter that links sadomasochistic pornography, women's fashion plates, and stories about dolls. Marcus powerfully challenges the assumption that pornography is the "underbelly of culture," arguing instead that "pornography and mainstream culture share an erotic repertoire" (114). Fashion, dolls and pornography shared lexicons of display and discipline and "all three thrived on the tension between limitless desire and finite satisfaction in modern consumer culture" (114). The crux of these interrelated discourses is that they involve women looking at—and caressing—women. Marcus performs wonderful readings of numerous fashion plates that "evoke a female world saturated by a tactile sensuality represented through carefully rendered drapery and studied contrasts between the soft, curved folds of clothing and the hard angularity of objects" (127). Her analysis of the materialities of gender expression uses different idioms from those of much contemporary queer theory: "performativity" and "drag" are not terms you will find here—they give way to analysis of gesture and texture.

<5>From dolls, Marcus moves on to living dolls and the notion of women and girls as accessories. Reading, for example, *Estella* as Miss Havisham's erotic plaything, Marcus sees a likeness between this Dickens novel and lesbian pulp fiction of the 1950s (169). The strength of this reading truly refreshes, given that queer takes on Dickens have shown distinct male bias, and usually focus on the figure of the young, effeminate boy. A venerable body of work—including that of Terry Castle, Amy Villarejo and Patricia White—has drawn our attention to the spectral, recessive or catachrestic character of lesbian representation. Marcus, too, helps make the lesbian signify—this time out of the excesses of materiality.

<6>"Just as the 'homosexual' is a recent invention, so too is the opposition between marriage and homosexuality" (194). Marcus is set against oppositional, dyadic models. Her description of the modes of address used between women who considered themselves married to each other is thick with other forms of relation. I particularly appreciate Marcus' refusal to thin out or smooth over these relations—I concur that nineteenth-century same-sex expression is often found cross-hatched with passions and erotics that may seem less legible or attractive to our generation.

Marcus takes care to show that if we are writing of nineteenth-century "lesbian" marriage, we must also write about how these women compared and conflated their love for each other with love for daughters, nieces, mothers. If a culture is big on family, Marcus reminds us via Foucault, it will be big on incest, too (199). She does not make the connection, but her refusal to "tidy up" (262) the complexities of marriage, gender, sexuality and family actually fits in with the priorities of a new generation of queer scholarship, which argues that in our search for homosexual subjects and narratives, we must not orphan the odder and more irregular features of nineteenth-century relation that often came along for the ride.

<7>The sheer range of Marcus' material, and her dedication to preserving its textures and idioms plays a key role in making this book so rich a resource. Fashion magazines, anthropological texts, diaries, memoirs, trial records, gifts and doll stories take their place alongside canonical fiction. Marcus takes a generous cross-section of these materials from 1830-1880—a period that, she explains, is distinct because marriage and gender differentiation had become established norms, but the category of the lesbian had not yet emerged (6). Marcus studiously counters "master discourses" (12) through an encyclopedic examination of all things "mistress."

<8>Marcus refutes accounts of the nineteenth century that insist, however variously, on positing men and women as diametric opposites. Contemporary critical discourse is oftentimes, she shows, more taxonomical, more segregating than the Victorian culture it is used to study. This failing has made, she argues, unlikely bedfellows of sexist, feminist and queer readings. This study quietly but firmly insists: men and women are not each other's opposites. Following the logic of this model, Marcus finds herself wondering whether her observations about the difficulties of theorizing friendship and love, might—Sedgwick's *Between Men* notwithstanding

—be applied to men too.

<9>At the end of this book Marcus observes that “consumer culture” and “normative femininity” continue to provide space for same-sex relations. Clearly the inverse is also true: same-sex relations have increasingly been recognized by a mainstream consumer culture that sees homosexuals as a brave new marketing opportunity. This opens the question: if normative social structures and consumer culture have long incorporated same-sex relation, how should we narrate political change around sexual subjectivities alongside that long history? In the meantime, Marcus’ conclusion asserts that women-centered study is a necessity not because of current critical and political dedications, but because it is historically fitting: “Family life incorporated friendship between women; consumer culture was saturated with female homoeroticism; and multiple social networks included women in marital relationships with other women” (259).

Endnotes

(1)See Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” *New Literary History* 31 (2000): 727-744.(^)

