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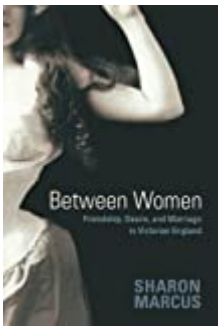

Sharon Marcus. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. x + 356 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-12835-1.

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Female Friendship and Lesbianism in Victorian England

If Radclyffe Hall raised eyebrows in 1928 in *The Well of Loneliness* by challenging the contemporary understanding of lesbianism in the Victorian era, then Sharon Marcus's *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* represents another important extension of this tradition as it attempts to re-institutionalize our entire understanding of the intricacy of Victorian society where lesbianism existed not as an uncommon novelty, but a social phenomenon that was decidedly more widespread than meets the eye. In many ways, Marcus's recent work can be regarded as a continuation of Martha Vicinus's pioneering book, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women* (2004), a groundbreaking work which utilizes modern theories developed in queer studies to analyze the relationship/friendship between Victorian middle-class women and draw attention to a probable sexual subcontext. However, as can be deduced from her rejection of Vicinus's usage of terms such as "women's erotic friendships" and "intimate friends," Marcus adopts a decidedly more radical and controversial approach. She reiterates, more than once, how such bonds between women should not be regarded simply as the presence of a subordinate and less important relationship that is marginal when compared to a woman's "normal" heterosexual marriage, but must, in fact, be interpreted as a relationship which mirrors that of a matrimonial union between same-sex couples, in spite of the fact that such institutions did not exist for same-sex relationship.

To substantiate her claim, Marcus divides her book into three sections and endeavors to make her point by providing readers with ample background information concerning middle-class Victorian women. Readers who are already familiar with the social and historical operation of Victorian middle-class society may find such meticulous re-elucidation unnecessary, but, according to Marcus, it is a crucial and necessary step towards the greater goal of helping us reconceptualize the male-female dichotomy of the entire nineteenth century, which in itself is crucial to the re-evaluation of lesbianism in the Victorian era. The first section of the book fittingly revisits the significance of female friendship in middle-class life. Drawing from an impressive pool of novels and life writings which readers may or may not be familiar with, the first few chapters are devoted to the dif-

ficult task of distinguishing between "legitimate" female friendship and relationship based on amorous love. However, because aside from rare and questionable publications such as Walter's *My Secret Life* (1888), sex remains very much a tabooed topic throughout the century, Marcus's hypothesis (which ultimately relies more on bold speculation than solid fact, in spite of the truth in her lamentation that "if firsthand testimony about sex is the standard for defining a relationship as sexual, then most Victorians never had sex" [p. 43]) inevitably remains circumstantial and lacks conviction.

In the second section of the book, Marcus supports her argument not only by discussing the familiar idea of the desirability of femininity, but by incorporating into it a lesbian perspective. Here, she aims to prove that feminine appeal not only attracted men, but often women themselves who were drawn to it in a sexual manner. By involving elements such as fashion plates into her study, the same problem which plagued the earlier chapters continues to surface here, in spite of the meticulousness of her research. The inclusion of the following passage in the beginning of the chapter, for example, illustrates the enormity of the task Marcus faces:

"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" (p. 111).

In spite of her carefully constructed thesis, to arrive at the conclusion that such passages demonstrate "Victorian commodity culture incited an erotic appetite for femininity in women" (p. 112) will strike many readers as simply too far-fetched. Although, by her own admission, "to say that a woman had an erotic relationship with a woman or an image of a woman does not mean that she wanted to have sex with that woman or masturbated to that image" (p. 114), the fact remains that her argument ultimately must rest upon her own elucidation of many such images and passages, because of the general lack of more solid evidence. Marcus's claim, therefore, retains a highly unsubstantiated and speculative impression, not because of the lack of scholarship or insight, but because there simply is not enough first-hand material to provide a more solid foundation for such a provocative assertion.

The final section of the book offers one of the most intriguing (and controversial) insights into the practice of female-female marriage in the nineteenth century. By drawing from well-documented as well as lesser known examples, such as those of Charlotte Cushman, Anne Listerm and Rosa Bonheur, Marcus is able to overwhelm our conventional understanding of Victorianism by challenging our preconceived notion regarding lesbianism as an impossible subculture within the austere social atmosphere of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, in spite of her carefully constructed demonstration, her argument must ultimately be judged not on the question of the possible existence of lesbianism in the nineteenth century. Whether it was as widely practiced and influential, to the extent of being able to persist as an unrecognized and uncategorized subculture within Victorian feminine society, as claimed by the author is debatable. On this note, it would perhaps not be unfair to conclude that Marcus successfully demonstrates how the distinction between Victorian female friendship and lesbianism is not as firm as is widely presumed. Yet her theory that the unique bond shared by women of the nineteenth century in their own domestic circle represented and may have even encouraged the development of lesbianism remains, at present, somewhat disputable. No one, however, is more aware of this fact than Marcus herself. In recognition of this, the author concludes her book by insightfully proclaiming: "in the past as in the present, marriage and family, gender and sexuality, are far more intricate, mobile, and malleable than we imagine them to be" (p. 262).

In this spirit, we must therefore assess the value of *Between Women*, not according to the validity of the theory it forwards, but the insightful glimpse it is able to offer into the previously presumed straightforward, but essentially complicated and ambiguous, world of Victorian domesticity. Moreover, the richness of sources incorporated in this work should be beneficial to any reader interested in the issue of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century.

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