

## Introduction

# A Kind of Enchantment

The Victorian debate about marriage and the changing place of women in a male-dominated society has been well documented. Feminist critics have gone on to analyse the importance of female friendship in terms of the ‘woman question’ and the ambivalent status of unmarried women; accepted behaviour in the context of friendship has informed work on masculinity, for instance by Richard Dellamora and Matt Cook; further studies of both male and female relations in the period have discussed the significance of ‘romantic friendship’ as a euphemism or perhaps displacement for what we would now term homosexual or lesbian feeling. In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Sedgwick insightfully qualifies such a view, commenting: ‘What counts as the sexual is ... variable and itself political’ (15). But long before the upsurge of gay and lesbian studies, the nineteenth century itself had hosted a long-running debate about the nature and role of friendship in its own right.

Given the segregation of male and female youth in particular, it is hardly surprising that friendship between members of the same sex should have assumed a high degree of importance. Much of the discussion put forward by writers and journalists concerned with the subject takes friendship between the young as its focus. Equally predictably, the question of moral influence at such an impressionable time is the basis of ongoing concern. Significantly, writers on the subject return again and again to the passionate impulsiveness of youth and the dangers inherent in such undirected passion. But equally, not all friendships are assumed to arise from youthful ardour, nor does writing on the subject confine itself entirely to the young. It is helpful to consider the range of expression permitted – and considered appropriate – to various types of friendship, often associated with different life stages.

Within this context, I am specifically concerned with the phenomenon of romantic friendship and its perceived relationship to friendship in general, as an ideal that enjoyed a high, although sometimes ambivalent, cultural status for most of the nineteenth century. This form of friendship depended on both strong feeling and what may now seem startlingly rhetorical expression. Friends could describe their response to each other in terms of love and mutual dependence, in language that initially appears, at least by later standards, to have been uncircumscribed in the extreme. Elizabeth Mavor, author of the biography of the Ladies of Llangollen, has described romantic friendships as ‘Edenic’, at least:

before they were biologically and thus prejudicially defined. Depending as they did upon time and leisure, they were aristocratic, they were idealistic, blissfully free, allowing for a dimension of sympathy between women that would not now be possible outside an avowedly lesbian connection. Indeed, much that we would now associate solely with a

sexual attachment was contained in romantic friendship: tenderness, loyalty, sensibility, shared beds, shared tastes, coquetry, even passion. (Mavor, xvii)

But as John Rosenberg warns: ‘we would be naïve to assume that there were no worms in the pre-Freudian sexual garden, or that the Victorians failed to spot them’ (Rosenberg, 305). Social approbation was granted only on certain terms, a proviso which could initially have acted as a strength. We are accustomed to locating greater personal freedom within the more liberal social value systems of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But it is plausible to suppose in this context that a less permissive society, such as Victorian England, could actually contain greater freedom, in its very strictures and the rules governing expression. Where the limits of expression are carefully considered and generally acknowledged, the threat of ambiguity or misinterpretation is correspondingly less. A widespread knowledge of what is acceptable and what is not informs nineteenth-century writing on romantic friendship, and allows it a range of expression within the limits established (the interest shown by essayists and writers of conduct manuals belies the supposition that proponents of intense friendship were guided solely by their own emotional dictates). It is ironic, then, that by the end of the century, the image of ‘unconscious innocence’ that romantic friendship had successfully promoted emerged as the very ground on which its claims could be attacked.

By the 1890s the theories of sexologists had come, irreversibly, to locate a specifically sexual tendency in the intensity and self-sufficiency of romantic friendship. As Havelock Ellis was to put it in 1897 in his famous study *Sexual Inversion*:

... conventional propriety recognises a considerable degree of physical intimacy between girls, thus at once encouraging and cloaking the manifestations of homosexuality.

These passionate friendships, of a more or less unconsciously sexual character, are certainly common. (Ellis and Symonds, 85)

In the same work, Ellis warns that ‘A woman may feel a high degree of sexual attraction for another woman without realising that her affection is sexual ...’ (80). This assumption that intense emotional responsiveness necessarily implied a sexual force, whether or not it was fully recognised by the subject herself, has been a persistent one. But this reading of romantic friendship as sexual actually reinforces an already present fear of the intrusive elements that it claims to be responsible for locating. Insisting that women had not hitherto questioned the appropriateness of their own responses, Ellis claims authority to interpret those responses, supposedly for the first time, within the framework of socio-medical discourse.

In a recent study, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women 1778–1928*, Martha Vicinus usefully analyses the ways in which a range of late nineteenth-century discourses sought to impose constraints on female self-definition:

By the late nineteenth century some number of social commentators, political and sexual activists, and sexologists were struggling to define both heterosexuality (and its essential corollary, marriage), and homosexuality (and its presumed loneliness). Their unattainable

goal was a stable sexual identity for everyone. Their psychomedical discourse gave lesbians a wider choice of vocabulary but a narrower choice of roles. (Vicinus, 173)

But again, this account foregrounds the sexual in its contention that a ‘stable sexual identity’ is unattainable. Certainly, the sexologists’ interpretations were characterised by a rigidity that could hardly fail to create feelings of anxiety, not only in women who would later term themselves ‘lesbian’, but also in those who had never before seen reason to view their own responses in this light. The vulnerability of intense feeling to just such appropriation becomes clear in the light of Gesa Stedman’s study of emotion in the nineteenth century:

Individuals (physically) experience emotions but they can never access them without first acquiring knowledge of the social relevance, and appropriateness of certain feelings; thus, the social can never be absent from any kind of emotional experience and its representation. (Stedman, 9)

In the course of this book, I will show how writers were already engaged in just such a process of interpretation and representation; romantic friendship had always been dependent for its survival on its capacity for self-regulation, and this is how it was initially able to combat the ‘findings’ of sexologists at the end of the century.

In common with all subsequent scholars in this area, I am indebted both to the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and to Lilian Faderman’s classic *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, although my own research into romantic friendship as a primarily heterosexual ideal accessible to both genders necessarily influences my reading of the phenomenon. Faderman’s central premise, as I read it, is that women’s romantic friendship would now almost certainly be constituted as lesbianism, but that this was either not available as an identity or would have been indignantly rejected by those involved. Such a rejection, according to Faderman’s line of argument, would depend on an appeal to a cultural ideal that was itself necessarily and by definition unselfconscious. As a result romantic friendship could not withstand the scrutiny of sexology because the fostering of anxieties about the nature of such feelings made them inexpressible in the previously ratified terms. In other words, it depended almost by definition on the absence of anxiety. According to this view, the separation between romantic friendship and what we would now term homosexuality becomes largely irrecoverable (even in retrospect by participants in romantic friendship themselves), but an acknowledgement of changes in what is considered appropriate can help to explain what now appears contradictory in nineteenth-century friendship ideals.

As I understand Faderman’s position, however, our post-Freudian collective consciousness means that interpretations of romantic friendship will inevitably be filtered through, or at least seen in relation to, current definitions of homosexuality; particularly if this is not seen as depending on a recognisably sexual responsiveness, the lines become very difficult to draw. My main divergence is in the establishment of a perceived pattern within which romantic friendship defines itself. Crucially, I see its status as depending on a deliberate rejection of erotic elements, not an ignorance or even unthinking denial of erotic potential – in my account, therefore,

not only can a level of anxiety be accommodated, but as the century progresses it becomes something like a necessary condition of romantic friendship. The claim that the subject is ignorant of her (or indeed his) own desire is in theory the most effective weapon that could have been brought to bear on romantic friendship at the end of the century. In her later book *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-century America*, Faderman notes a seeming paradox, in that romantic friendship gained ground (particularly in America) even as sexology attempted to pathologise it. She attributes this anomaly to the increase in economic opportunities for women at the *fin de siècle* – a career could provide reasonable justification for refusing marriage and provide the wherewithal for an independent life. Moreover, the creation of a lesbian subculture acted to counteract social pressure on women to seek heterosexual marriage. Faderman notes that:

For most women, who were of course socialized not to challenge their culture's ideology about acceptable behavior, with the turn of the century began the death knell of romantic friendship ... but it was also the beginning of a lengthy period of general closing off of most affectional possibilities between women. The precious intimacies that adult females had been allowed to enjoy with each other earlier – sleeping in the same bed, holding hands, exchanging vows of eternal love, writing letters in the language of romance – became increasingly self-conscious and then rare. (*Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 4)

But a further paradox, in English fiction at least, is that *fin de siècle* novels are persistent in representing female romantic friendship as a wholly orthodox form of expression. Some writers are careful to reinstate the heterosexual love plot with a marriage at the end of the text, or even the death of the heroine's friend. But others suggestively privilege the friendship of women over the prescribed marriage, which though it does take place, appears in a secondary or subordinate position in the text. Reviews of these novels as they appeared suggest an absence of anxiety that is surprising in the light of Faderman's discoveries. It is plausible to suggest that if sexology insistently conflated behaviour, gender identity and sexual object choice, then passionate women were less susceptible to attack if they displayed features and behaviour that had been designated as feminine (see *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*). But it is likewise a viable supposition that if female friendship in particular was resistant to the attacks of sexologists, then the ideal itself must have been predicated on a fairly sophisticated understanding of what could safely be accommodated and what could not.

Since Faderman's landmark study *Surpassing the Love of Men*, the continuing development of queer theory on the one hand and feminist criticism on the other has involved a corresponding interest in the nature of romantic friendship between members of the same sex. In these contexts, Faderman's assertion that same-sex romantic friendship was not necessarily sexual in nature has been contested by various critics, including Martha Vicinus, Lisa L. Moore and Emma Donoghue. Moore sees Faderman as 'dismissing sexuality from her account of romantic friendship' (Moore, 9) – in fact, Faderman's account allows for a high level of ambiguity and uncertainty in the experience and understanding of this type of relationship. Where these critics implicitly agree with Faderman is in their very blurring of the lines between what would now be constituted and expressed as sexuality and what at the time of writing

was formulated as an expression of friendship. In presenting romantic friendship as one aspect of the history of sexuality, such accounts necessarily suggest a kind of uniform progression towards self-identified lesbianism.

The difference is predominantly one of emphasis – where Faderman suggests that many women who experienced intense but possibly chaste friendships with members of their own sex would have readily defined themselves as lesbian in a later age, later critics have often insisted on a higher level of self-awareness on the part of the women themselves, suggesting that they deployed the rhetoric of female chaste attachments as a necessary survival strategy, successfully fooling a proportion of the social commentators who then wrote about them in terms of approbation. But both approaches allow for an unproblematic convergence between expressions of emotion and same-sex desire. For instance, in her analysis of predominantly pre-nineteenth-century passion between women, Donoghue conflates romantic friendship with women's elopements and their marriage to each other where one of the parties was disguised as a man:

Many writers do not seem to have understood what they were writing about; they offered the facts of a case in isolation, having no conceptual framework about passion between women to help them interpret the story. And finally, many women and some men wrote about love between women in the lofty terms of romantic friendship, admitting no connection between this and sexual passion. (Donoghue, 9)

As Donoghue's work suggests, Victorian narratives include a surprising number of instances where women appropriate traditionally male roles. Notably in Elizabeth Gaskell's story 'The Grey Woman', the luridly named Amante ('beloved') rescues Anna from her villainous husband and disguises herself as a man, and the two women escape to a life in hiding as supposed man and wife – once a suitable male replacement has been found, Amante is conveniently murdered and the traditional order is more or less restored (Anna's remarriage is not exactly legal, although it is justified on the grounds that she could have obtained a divorce, but needed to sustain the illusion that she was dead). But the transgression of gender rôles may be detailed, even necessarily punished, as is arguably the case here, irrespective of any obvious erotic response. Female-authored texts such as George Eliot's *Romola* support the substitution of woman-centred relationships for the marriage tie where that has failed, and this often takes the form of a pseudo-marriage. In Eliot's novel, Romola redeems her husband's sin in persuading the naïve Tessa that they are married, giving her a lock of her own hair as he has already done, and ultimately taking her to live with her, and even educating her children when Tito is murdered.

While I would acknowledge the potentially erotic nature of many female-centred (or male-centred) relationships, I would contend that such a focus on awareness or ignorance tends to preclude the more difficult question of how feeling might be safely regulated. The complexities of romantic friendship in fact offer a framework within which the question of sexuality can be treated in some depth. In this context, homo-eroticism is not an anomaly that may or may not be recognised by the subject – in a range of literary texts it is presented as a threat to social stability that must be

shown to be rejected by an initially too trusting victim, or where the friendship is upheld, outlawed by the loving friends themselves.

In her study of homosocial desire among men, Eve Sedgwick notes the importance of intense male friendships in Victorian fiction, observing that they are similar in:

the lack of remark surrounding their union and in the shadowy presence of a mysterious imperative (physical debility, hereditary curse, secret unhappy prior marriage, or simply extreme disinclination) that bars at least one of the partners in each union forever from marriage. (*Between Men*, 174)

She interprets these homosocial pairings as subtly indicating, although not necessarily acknowledging, an erotic element in male friendship models of the time; such friendships are not fully differentiated from the accepted sexual experiments of the educated male middle class, who she claims ‘operated sexually in what seems to have been startlingly close to a cognitive vacuum’ (173). But a distinction needs to be drawn between the confused rhetoric of the middle-class gentleman who attempts, however unsuccessfully, to rationalise or reject his youthful sexual aberrations, and the carefully structured outlines of same-sex friendship. The very point she makes about the inability of one character in a text to marry suggests the way in which romantic friendship needs to justify celibacy as an alternative to marriage – this justification does not preclude the presence of an erotic undertone, but it does show writers’ awareness of the issue, and their efforts to pre-empt suspicion. I would apply Lisa Moore’s analysis of female relations to friendships between either sex, in her identification of the ‘tension between “romantic friendship” and female homosexuality ... as a basic, if sometimes unstated, cultural assumption’.

In the introduction to her study *Intimate Friends*, Martha Vicinus makes a conscientious attempt to historicise female relationships and identities; taking up Faderman’s point, she reminds us that ‘The various *representations* of same-sex love exhibit significant continuities throughout the period under discussion, but their *significance*, as well as *attitudes* towards them, show considerable variation’ (xxiv). She is careful to acknowledge at the outset that:

identity history can be limiting: more interesting and difficult questions can be asked about friendship, intimacy, sexuality, and spirituality than who had what kind of identity when. ... [she is convinced that] all categories and definitions must remain provisional. (xxviii)

But despite this creditable attempt to remain objective, Vicinus’s work is largely concerned with identifying an erotic element in women’s responses to each other, and in tracing the means by which this experience is encoded through an appeal to established ideals (such as mother–daughter love). The ‘who had what identity when’ itself tends to suggest an inevitable progress towards some form of lesbian identity.