What Kind of Relationship Is This?

Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature. Carolyn W. De La L. Oulton. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007. 167 pp.

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<1> Oulton's book appears in Ashgate's Nineteenth Century Series, which examines literature, history, and their authors. The series aims, in the words of its general editors, "to cut innovatively across such parameters as those suggested by the designations 'Romantic' and 'Victorian'" (vii). This contestation of parameters in another context is precisely what Oulton aims for and achieves in her book. She investigates male and female friendships and/or romantic or sexual relationships, and her wide-ranging material includes novels, poetry, conduct manuals, periodicals, and religious treatises. The focus is on texts from the mid-nineteenth century to the *fin de siècle*, the moment when, Oulton claims, romantic friendship first came under attack.

<2> Oulton's introduction, "A Kind of Enchantment," concisely sets up the debate, both historical and contemporary, over friendships and their cultural and sexual status. She examines the "significance of 'romantic friendship' as a euphemism or perhaps displacement for what we would now term homosexual or lesbian feeling" (1) and positions her argument in contrast to that of Lillian Faderman in *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (1980). Oulton locates her readings between different yet intersecting schools of thought, queer theory and feminist criticism: "The difference is predominantly one of emphasis […] [b]ut both approaches allow for an unproblematic convergence," she claims, "between expressions of emotion and same-sex desire" (5). Works such as Faderman's *Surpassing the Love of Men* and *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (1992), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Martha Vicinus' *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (2004), and Lisa Moore's *Dangerous Intimacies: Towards a Sapphic History of the British Novel* (1997) are her reference points, and Oulton offers a very comprehensive bibliography of both primary and secondary sources. Her argument builds on yet revises the scholarly pattern by stating that, as the century advances, romantic friendship increasingly inspires cultural anxiety, a thesis that Oulton develops in subsequent chapters.

<3> A contemporaneous treatment of similar yet drastically divergent concerns is visible in Sharon Marcus' book, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007).(1) Marcus' study is radical in that it dissects the codes of gender and sexuality, and, as her first chapter title suggests, self-consciously considers the "play of the system." Even her book title, deliberately punning on that of Sedgwick's foundational study, reworks what has come to seem familiar territory. While Sedgwick discusses predominantly canonical masculine texts, Marcus interprets the canonical in a new light in her contention that feminine same-sex relationships are central to them. Oulton also takes Sedgwick as a departure point for her argument, investigating both male and female same-sex desire and relationships. But she uses the coded binaries and hidden, ambivalent trappings and readings that Marcus specifically rejects; Oulton instead sees the "status [of romantic friendship] as depending on a deliberate rejection of erotic elements" (3) and examines the representation of such regulation. While Marcus considers pornography, mainstream print representations, pictures and plates (including visuals in her book), dolls, and lifewriting, Oulton explores realism, satire, print sources, and their undercurrents. Taken together, we see the canonical and otherwise, forming a comprehensive view of both the manifestation and handling of gendered issues in many formats. Both Marcus and Oulton look at Anthony Trollope's writing, Marcus concentrating specifically on *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864-5); both, too, discuss Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), and Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1848-50). Marcus defines her period of study as 1830-80, with Oulton extending this by a decade up to the turn of the century. Oulton focuses on romantic friendship with its differing configurations and gender variants while Marcus interrogates specifically female relationships and their dynamics in myriad forms. Both approaches have much to recommend them, adding a good deal to contemporary discussions of same-sex relationships, but Oulton's more specifically focuses on changes in literary representation over time.

<4> In chapter 1, "Ennobling Genius: Writing Victorian Romantic Friendship," Oulton deals with the problematic definition of what constitutes friendship between men and women, woman and woman, male and male, and its ambiguous location. Literary examples include Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9), and *Little Dorrit* (1855-7); Wilkie Collins' *Armadale* (1866), *The Moonstone* (1868), *No Name* (1862) and *The Woman in White* (1860); and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Dispelled or displaced by heterosexual marriage or permitted to exist only in a constrained and controllable form, Oulton comments that "[r]omantic friendship, then, was regarded as separable from its more orthodox counterparts even at the time of its highest appeal" (9). She recognizes that "literary treatments tacitly acknowledge what is seen as a threat, and patrol the boundaries accordingly" (9). Exponents of these friendships are considered in the light of illness, moral character, the social structures of London, substitution or displacement, legal treatment of lesbian evidence, as well as the prevailing nineteenth-century debates concerning the status of romantic friendship itself. Such perceptions or articulations of friendship continually emerge in conjunction with the texts Oulton incorporates into her larger discussion.

<5> Chapter 2, "Extraordinary Reserve: The Problem of Male Friendship," focuses on masculine relationships. Oulton begins her discussion by establishing that "romantic friendship was a product of class and education" (33) and that masculine romantic friendship is interconnected, for the most part, with both the public perception of and experiences stemming from an Oxbridge

education. From here, she goes on to consider Benjamin Disraeli's *Coningsby* (1844) in light of Etonian schoolboy friendships, claiming that "the narrator endorses the accessibility of romantic friendship to the middle classes" (33). Further texts considered are Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) and its 1861 sequel, *Tom Brown at Oxford*, and a sensation novel by Henry Jackson, *A First Friendship* (1863). Taking up representations of Christ and Greek ideals of love between men, Oulton specifically focuses on *David Copperfield*, Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-2). Oulton ends this chapter with a paradoxical conclusion which emphasizes the doubleness in the representations she examines: the uncertainty of gender roles, the fear of nervous collapse and illness, and an ambiguity which is "either retrospective or predicated on absence" (69). She argues that these masculine-centered texts are contingent for their closure on death.

<6> Chapter 3, "A Right to Your Intimacy: The Ends of Female Friendship," shifts the textual focus to female bonds examined in major works: *Shirley*, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1864-5), *Bleak House, Aurora Leigh,* and Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla" (1872). Oulton here unpicks the "erotic *potential* in the conventions of romantic friendship" (105). In contrast to the focus on death in her earlier discussions of masculine friendship, the feminine body is here subject to illness. In relation to female relationships, however, illness is, in her chosen texts, curiously seen to present tensions and inadequacies rather than an intensified togetherness. The masculine and feminine chapters are connected in this sense as Oulton too comments in a comparable vein on the undermining of male friendships.

<7> The interchange of ideas and anxiety is taken up and extended in the next chapter, "Tenderest Caresses: Romantic Friendship and the Satirists," which explores the satirical relation between *Armadale* and William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48) and *Pendennis* (1848-50). Oulton uses a definition of satirical accounts and their dual function to draw a distinction between gendered responses, with the masculine variants and their expressions of male-male passion being more rigorously policed. Her interrogation of satirical accounts of romantic friendship revolves around a comparison of forms, both gendered and literary: realist satire versus Collins' sensation fiction. These forms are interconnected and the romantic messages they convey are permitted to exist by overlaying them with an ostensible image of transparency. These bifurcated issues inevitably lead up to the tensions inherent in relationships that, as Oulton suggests, culminate at the turn of the century.

<8> Her fifth and final chapter is aptly titled "Sinister Meaning: Crisis at the *Fin de Siècle*." Central to this chapter are Ethel Arnold's *Platonics* (1894) and Mary Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage* (1899), and it also touches on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strangle Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) as well as a range of New Women fiction. Here Oulton considers the issues and conflicts considered so far in *Romantic Friendship* and extends them. The *fin de siècle*, which Oulton sets up as being generally perceived as an historically nostalgic time, is shown to be fraught with disconcerting undercurrents. Wilde's problematic homosexuality and the emergence of the New Woman exemplify the destabilization of traditional Victorian mores and cultural positions. However, Oulton contends that "paradoxically, women's friendships could provide a certain freedom even in the closing years of the century" (139-40). The texts, like the period in which they are written, are riven with fissures and fraught with challenges.

<9> Ultimately, Oulton leaves the reader with a sense of complexity: she condenses her argument in the statement that "[a]s an ideal in literature, romantic friendship is deeply flawed by contradictions" (156). It is these contradictions and their various representations within nineteenth-century literature that Oulton comprehensively and minutely interrogates within her text, and so advances our understanding of the broader cultural field in which these representations operate.

Endnotes

(1)See Kate Thomas' review of *Between Women* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007) in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 4.1 (Spring 2008).(^)