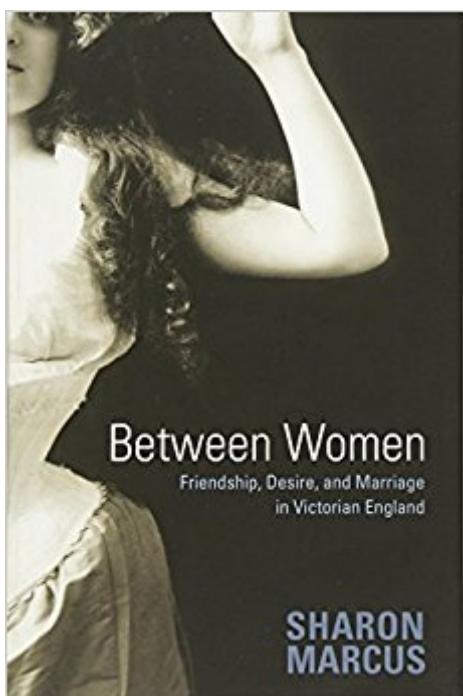


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# Between Women: Friendship, Desire, And Marriage In Victorian England



## **Synopsis**

Women in Victorian England wore jewelry made from each other's hair and wrote poems celebrating decades of friendship. They pored over magazines that described the dangerous pleasures of corporal punishment. A few had sexual relationships with each other, exchanged rings and vows, willed each other property, and lived together in long-term partnerships described as marriages. But, as Sharon Marcus shows, these women were not seen as gender outlaws. Their desires were fanned by consumer culture, and their friendships and unions were accepted and even encouraged by family, society, and church. Far from being sexless angels defined only by male desires, Victorian women openly enjoyed looking at and even dominating other women. Their friendships helped realize the ideal of companionate love between men and women celebrated by novels, and their unions influenced politicians and social thinkers to reform marriage law. Through a close examination of literature, memoirs, letters, domestic magazines, and political debates, Marcus reveals how relationships between women were a crucial component of femininity. Deeply researched, powerfully argued, and filled with original readings of familiar and surprising sources, *Between Women* overturns everything we thought we knew about Victorian women and the history of marriage and family life. It offers a new paradigm for theorizing gender and sexuality--not just in the Victorian period, but in our own.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Queen Victoria would not be amused. In this persuasively argued, provocative book, Marcus makes

the case that women in late 19th-century England engaged in intimate friendships— which "the Victorians... believed cultivated the feminine virtues of sympathy and altruism"— that often had a sexual component of visual objectification and even sexual intimacy. Marcus, associate professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia, probes a wide range of the period's culture— novels of Dickens, Trollope and George Eliot; women's fashion magazines; female children's literature; doll stories—to understand a Victorian culture that is not interpreted by "our present-day belief that heterosexual norms dominate all lives." Going against the current academic grain, Marcus maintains that images of women in fashion magazines did not turn women into passive objects but represented women's own "erotic appetite for femininity." Much of Marcus's material will be new to the common reader, and she presents it in plain, engaging prose. Many of her examples are marvelously intriguing: her critique of the conservative opposition to same-sex marriage is bolstered by her documentation of prevalent female-female marriage in the 19th century involving such noted women as Charlotte Cushman, Anne Lister and Rosa Bonheur. This is an important addition to the current literature on sexuality and gender. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Winner of the 2008 Barbara Perkins and George Perkins Prize  
Winner of the 2008 Alan Bray Memorial Award  
Winner of the 2007 Lambda Literary Award for best book in LGBT Studies  
Finalist for the Judy Grahn Award for Lesbian Nonfiction, Publishing Triangle  
"Sharon Marcus adduces a variety of evidence to make a compelling case that such relationships were omnipresent and, far from being framed in terms of envy and rivalry between women, or as dangerously and transgressively competing with women's relationships with men, they were conceived of as benign and desirable and contributing helpfully to the network of connections supporting heterosexual unions. . . . [T]his is an outstanding study of a neglected phenomenon."--Lesley Hall, Times Higher Education Supplement  
"The study's packed scholarly discourse will doubtless create new dialogue about these gender descriptions and their implications for the modern day. Abundant chapter notes and primary and secondary bibliographic entries make this a good research source."--S.A. Parker, Choice  
"Between Women is one of those books that instantly, radically, and convincingly alters your understanding of terrain you thought you couldn't know any better...Marcus powerfully revises more than a century's worth of theory, arguing persuasively that women are capable of objectifying women, that women possess the gaze, as well as the capacity for domination, and that women's homoerotic desire was fully compatible with heterosexuality and femininity.... Between Women has

important things to say, not just to Victorianists, literary critics, feminists, and queer theorists, but to all of us."--Rebecca Steinitz, *Women's Review of Books*"Every once in a while a book comes along that, in offering readers an in-depth and provocative assessment of an archive, promises to change--irreversibly--a field or two. *Between Women* is such a study."--Carla Freccero, *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*"This is a provocative exploration of the relationships between Victorian women, which should make historians rethink the paradigms within which they address both female friendship and gender and sexuality. . . . In displacing the 'lesbian' from its field of view, this book is a powerful shining example of what 'becomes thinkable' if contemporary identity categories--even identity itself--are set aside. In effect, Marcus kicks out the conceptual foundations on which 'lesbian and gay studies' rests."--Matt Houlbrook, *American Historical Review*"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."--Isaac Yue, *H-Net Reviews*"The history of gender and sexuality becomes much more interesting, difficult, and subtle after [reading] *Between Women*. Reading the love and affection of nineteenth-century women now requires a new level of care and historical self-consciousness that may be painful to possess, as it will remind us of our own losses--of the affection, eroticism, attachment, encouragement, and tremendous fun between the ordinary women--real and fictional--Marcus has so valiantly reimagined, recovered, and recorded."--Elaine Freedgood, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*"*Between Women* offers the satisfactions of a major intervention; it is sure to become canonical in Victorian studies, feminist literary criticism, queer studies, and studies of marriage, the family, and the novel."--Heather Love, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*"*Between Women* is a compelling and innovative study that reveals the centrality of women's relationships in mainstream Victorian life. . . . Marcus's new book is a rich and exciting addition to scholarship on gender, sexuality, and relationships. . . . It is significant scholarship and a very pleasurable read."--Jill Rappoport, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*"*Between Women* is a real achievement, one of those landmark books that exposes to us a different past from that to which we had been accustomed. It is likely to generate a long and lively debate, and to reshape the field of family, gender and sexuality studies."--Victoria E. Thompson, *English Historical Review*

For me, the most surprising thing about this book is how easy it is to read. Despite the fact that it is making important and challenging theoretical and historical arguments, it is nonetheless so well written that the arguments are easy to follow. Unlike so many serious books, I found this book a pleasure to read. This book is important in that it challenges both common and scholarly conceptions of the Victorian era in ways which open some possibilities for rethinking our conceptions not only of

that time, but of our own selves, and of the time in which we live. Anybody who is interested in current debates over gay marriage, what it means to be a woman (or a man), or identity politics in general will likely find this book both interesting and valuable. Anybody who is a fan of Victorian novels will likely find this book fascinating. Anybody who is immersed in contemporary Continental philosophy will find this book powerful. However, I am confident that you will find this book to be clear and easy to read even if you have never read any Continental philosophy (or don't even know what that term means). Finally, please see the other reviews for more details about the arguments of this book.

Excellent service, as usual. I am thrilled with the service provided by and its vendors and will buy books only from these sources.

I read this with my teen daughter who wanted to learn more about Victorian England. We both found the book absolutely mind-blowing. That women married in Victorian England, and it was accepted and even lauded gave us both a new perspective on current gay marriage debates. And the details of Victorian women's 'discipline' for their sons was also incredibly thought provoking. I recommend this for moms and daughters interested in discussing sexuality and marriage, relationships and values. Learning how incredibly differently Victorians viewed sexuality opens a window into the variable ways societies construct human relationships. A fabulous read.

Sharon Marcus's "Between Women" is that rare academic book - utterly readable and absorbing and juicy. It not only re-casts Victorian literature in a new light, by examining the roles that women characters have in securing the marriage plot, but ushers the reader into a new way of understanding women's surprising power in Victorian society. The book argues that women and female friendship wielded considerable influence in Victorian society - in novel plots and in the work of marriage reform thinkers and leaders. Her work on "the plot of female amity" has been called ground-breaking and I can see why. Sharon Marcus's pages on "Great Expectations," for example, are just amazing, bringing the reader along, at every step, as this brilliant, clear mind details the charged interactions of Miss Havisham, Estella, and Pip. "Between Women" uses a fascinating array of source materials - not just novels, but pornographic magazines, fashion magazines, and treatises of social reform movements. She points out that sometimes female friendship meant friendship and sometimes it meant lesbian relationships. John Stuart Mill, for example, modeled his marriage reform ideas on the equitable dynamics at play in contemporary lesbian couples. The

book's exploration of how mothers and daughters, and daughters with their dolls, were depicted in illustrations, often with sado-masochistic overtones, is pretty unforgettable and quite persuasive. It was fascinating to read how the language of fashion magazines and the language of pornographic journals were often the same. The writing in "Between Women" is wonderful and the research well-organized, diverse, and accessible. It is true that Sharon is a great friend of mine, but please know that it is also true that I would not write these sentences if I did not believe them. I read and adored this book and I hugely recommend it, to academics and non-academics (which I am), alike.

This book is an absolutely brilliant, lucid, beautifully written, engrossing exploration of the relationships between women in Victorian England. Marcus' arguments are fresh and deeply surprising -- revolutionary, really -- yet somehow manage to feel utterly inevitable after the fact. I love the breadth of sources -- novels, diaries, fashion magazines, pedagogical manuals, pornography -- Marcus draws upon, and the stunningly diverse modes of relatedness she portrays as available to Victorian women. I rarely find myself reading academic books, yet for me "Between Women" was a real page turner. I recommend it very highly.

--according to the London Review of Books, the London Times, the BBC, and me! Marcus is smart, engaging, thorough-- and makes dazzling use of a vast array of primary sources. She asks (basically), "What if we re-read the Victorians as if women's relationships were important to one another?" Looking through this lens at diaries, letters, conduct manuals, law cases, anthropological writings, fashion plates, doll stories, and pornography, Marcus reveals a world that leaps off the page with life and immediacy. Go read it.

The Victorians were never the prudes our English teachers made them out to be. I will never look at an 1800s fashion plate the same way again.

Meh, what I've read, author focuses too much on the fine nuances of women "birching" each other and how they got off on it. Kind of feel like the author thinks that's sexy. I don't. But then, I am an anomaly to the human race and sexuality in general.

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